

June 2023

Film Review: Silent Beauty: An Autobiography on Healing From Child Sexual Abuse

Mohosin Mandal
Aligarh Muslim University, India

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mandal, Mohosin (2023) "Film Review: Silent Beauty: An Autobiography on Healing From Child Sexual Abuse," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 4, Article 24.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss4/24>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Film Review: *Silent Beauty: An Autobiography on Healing From Child Sexual Abuse*

Reviewed by Mohosin Mandal¹

Film Information:

Title: *Silent Beauty*

Director and Producer: Jasmín Mara López

Release Year: 2022

Length in minutes: 87

Genre: Documentary

Original language: English

Educational Distributor: GOOD DOCS

Price: \$129.00



Photo Source: GOOD DOCS

Silent Beauty: Beauty in Breaking the Silence

Silent Beauty is an account of director Jasmín Mara López's personal experience of sexual abuse by her own grandfather at the age of ten. The movie explores the lasting effect of the abuse on child psychology. The harrowing incident left deep scars on her memory and turned her into a

¹Dr. Mohosin Mandal is an independent research scholar. He completed his Ph.D. at the Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India. His areas of academic interests include Feminist Film Studies, Dalit literature, Cultural Studies, and Gender Studies especially Indian Feminism. His Ph.D. topic was entitled *Female Positioning and Gender Polarization in Select Novels of Anita Desai*. He can be reached at mandalmohosin1@gmail.com.

sad and melancholic personality. The movie also recounts the gradual journey of healing for López and other female family members who participated in the process of breaking the silence.

The journey begins when López sees the picture of her niece with her abuser grandfather, and painful memories of her own childhood sexual trauma surface. Her personal, distressing experience prompts her to imagine her niece to be the possible prey in the hand of her abuser grandfather. She gathers the courage to break the silence and confront her grandfather after 24 years. With this act, her healing process begins simultaneously.

The narrator of the movie recounts her childhood experiences, her relationship with other female members of different generations, and their individual traits which help us formulate ideas about their characters. López and her grandmother Maria had great yearnings for freedom and adventure. Her mother Sandra was paradoxically rebellious and funny. López never had a good relationship with her mother and they could not embrace one another. Rather she was very close to her siblings and was closest to her grandmother, with whom she had more of a mother-daughter relationship. Her parents departed when she was just five years old. While she was in fourth grade her mother moved to Northern California for a job, and López stayed with her grandmother. For many years she believed her grandparents' house to be the happiest and safest place, until her grandfather shattered that belief.



Photo Source: GOOD DOCS

In her work on perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse, Karen Kinnear, a paralegal and freelance writer, writes that we live in the misconception that children's safety is hampered by strangers. Whenever we think of a child abuser or a child abductor, the image of a dirty old man in trench coat appears to our imagination, but “the truth is that children who are sexually abused are most likely to be abused by someone they know and trust, including parents, siblings, teachers, Day Care operators, priests or coaches. Sexual abusers come from all walks of life, all races, and all socio-economic levels” (5).

López's grandparents' house reflects the patriarchal structure which perpetuates male domination, by giving total authority to men and narrow spaces to women. American feminist theorist and activist Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* reveals the relationship between the patriarchal state and family: "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (33). The family itself can be viewed as a patriarchal state on a microcosmic level. In patriarchal families, the father has the sole authority over all the family members, as "traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the power of physical abuse and often those of murder and sale" (Millett 33). López's grandfather was the patriarchal father in her house. He had rules for everything, from what to eat to how to dress for every family member. In this practical structure of the home, girls don't enjoy the same freedom as boys. Girls are trained to follow instructions from men in every sphere of life. López developed the feeling of being a deserted child that nobody loves or understands. Her childhood memories had been clouded by the trauma she had to undergo. She tried to forget her past, the horrific incident, and her grandfather, but she couldn't because he was such a giant figure present in every aspect of her life. For a long time, she believed that she was the one at fault. After overcoming these emotional doubts, she decides to tell her family members about the incident and confront her grandfather.

In the most penetrating scene (13:52-14:52) López confronts her grandfather over the telephone. The screen goes black, and only their voices are audible. This private conversation forms the nucleus of the narrative and explores the composite dynamics of sexual abuse. The abuser grandfather bluntly refuses the allegation of sexual abuse, ridicules her memory, and tries to prove her a liar. Conte, a psychoanalyst, suggested six clinical characteristics that provide a framework to identify abusers and the first characteristic is "denial" which is evident in the response of the abuser grandfather. The other traits are "sexual arousal, sexual fantasy, social skills, cognitive distortions, and other psychological and social problems" (Conte 6). In the case of child sexual abuse, it is very difficult to prove when there are no visible wounds because the abuser could be a very "respected" or "powerful" family member and the child is often termed a liar and is accused of "false memories" (Champagne 167).

When López informs her mother of the incident, it was utterly shocking for her to imagine that her Baptist minister father could have committed such a heinous crime. She was perplexed and heartbroken; she went to an angry dark space. Within a moment, the most respected person in her world turned out to be the most hated person. She reflects the dark traditions prevailing in society that if a girl or a woman experiences sexual abuse or other forms of violence, instead of standing beside her, her society engages in victim-blaming and character assassination. This journey of breaking the silence brings the mother and daughter in the film closer than ever before. It helps both of them, making them mother and daughter in the real sense of those words.

The revelation to her mother was a part of the therapy to López, to all the female family members, and to every woman around the globe who watched the movie. In this movie, one very beautiful aspect is that all the female characters share a strong sense of sisterhood. All of them have gone through the same or similar types of experiences, so they can identify with each other.



Photo Source: GOOD DOCS

In the movie, the director López employs several movie techniques to investigate multiple dimensions of relationships, the existing power structures in society and at home, and the complexities of human psychology. She didn't present graphic accounts of violence, but rather calmness prevails over the movie which enables the audience to enter into López's personal space. With the help of the grandfather's archival Super 8 family films, she recreates her childhood. On the surface, it seems as if everything is happy, with everyone laughing and children playing, but then she describes how her childhood has been plagued by her grandfather. Water imagery is used metaphorically multiple times; dark water images symbolize pain and trauma. López also uses the technique of dream imagery. In her dream she sees she and her cousin are drowning, and she is trying to save her but in vain. The dream represents their vulnerable personal worlds. Fear of plunging into the depth of the ocean represents a sense of insecurity.

Cinematic Representation of the Gaze and Child Sexual Abuse

Silent Beauty challenges mainstream film, destabilizes the male gaze, and creates a female viewpoint. According to Laura Mulvey, mainstream movies provide visual pleasure and cater to the male gaze only. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey, one of the pioneer feminist film critics, theorizes the passive role of women and argues that "the institution of cinema is characterized by a sexual imbalance of power" (White 119). Molly Haskell expressed a similar idea while developing the "Reflection Theory" in *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream*. Haskell mentions that "the film industry maneuvered to keep women in their place" (3). *Silent Beauty* is a kind of "counter cinema," which is a term coined by Claire Johnston in her 1973 essay "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema." Johnston felt the necessity of developing the type of cinema that will challenge the subordinate position of women and counter male hegemony. *Silent Beauty* is a film directed, acted, and produced by women and for the women who refuse to be prey to the patriarchal tradition of silence.

The movie deals with the sensitive issue of child sexual abuse which has taken the form of a global epidemic. Feminist theorists, psychologists, and international health organizations provide several definitions of child abuse. Brian G. Fraser states that sexual abuse is “the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult” (58). In her introduction to *Child Sexual Abuse: Feminist Perspectives*, Emily Driver provides a wider definition of child sexual abuse as “any sexual behavior directed at a person under 16 without that person’s consent” (Driver 3). There are several cinematic representations of this issue but many are aimed at the male gaze; for example, the popular movie *Lolita* depicts an unequal and unnatural relationship of a middle-aged man with a 12-year-old child, but on the screen, it has been romanticized and the girl victim has been portrayed as a seducer. *Silent Beauty* is an effort to counter that tradition by representing child sexual abuse from a woman’s perspective.

Conclusion

López’s prime interest was to protect children from perpetrators, to make the world a safer place for children, to enable them to ask questions, and to talk to them openly about such issues because she believes kids are more perceptive than adults assume. When López is healed of her childhood trauma, the heavy cloud over her memory starts dissolving, and she can see the good things that happened in her childhood—her mother’s tender love towards her and the joy and love she enjoyed with her cousins. The movie justifies its title. It unravels the beauty of breaking the silence. The movie will give courage and strength to all the women who are silently bearing pain. It gives a message to the victims that they are not all alone; there are thousands of women who are undergoing the similar type of experiences, and the beauty lies in breaking the silence, in denying and challenging patriarchal structures of home and society. The movie is significant from the perspective of direction and narration as well. It shows one does not need vivid descriptions and many resources to present a viewpoint and reach out to the audience. Through face-to-face conversations, a few audio recordings and video clips from her personal archives, and a beautiful mix of sounds, López has produced a brilliant movie.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to GOOD DOCS Coordinator Linda Lu for providing access to the film link, and Professor Diana Fox for suggesting the film.

References

- Conte, John R. *A Look at Child Sexual Abuse*. National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1986.
- Champagne, Rosaria. *The Politics of Survivorship: Incest, Women’s Literature, and Feminist Theory*. New York UP, 1996.
- Driver, Emily. “Positive Action.” *Child Sexual Abuse: Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Emily Driver and Audrey Droisen, MacMillan Education, 1989.
- Fraser, Brian G. “Sexual Child Abuse: The Legislation and the Law in the United States.” *Sexually Abused Children and their Families*, edited by Patricia Beezly Mrazek, Pergamon Press, 1987, pp. 55-69.
- Gurkan, Hasan. “Feminist Cinema as Counter Cinema: Is Feminist Cinema Counter Cinema?” *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*. vol. 5, no. 3, July 2015.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. U of Chicago P, 1973.

- Herman-Davis, Lisa. *Investigating Child Sexual Abuse: A Feminist's Perspective*. B.A. thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2012.
- Johnston, Claire. "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema." *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*, edited by Patricia Erens, Horizon Press, 1979.
- Kinnear, Karen. *Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Reference Handbook*. ABC- CLIO, 2007.
- Mantziari, Despoina. *Women Directors in 'Global' Art Cinema: Negotiating Feminism and Representation*. Dissertation, University of East Anglia, School of Film, Television and Media Studies, 2014.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. U of Illinois P, 1990.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 7th edition, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford UP, 2009.
- White, Patricia. "Feminism and Film." *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford UP, 1998, pp. 117-131.