



Female Victimization: The Issue of Female Infanticide in Children's Literature and the Indian Society

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Abstract— *Children's literature is one of the chief vehicles contributing to development of gender identity in children. It can be read as an important socio-cultural and socio-political document. This article examines the gender issue of female infanticide and the representation of gender relations in Ranjit Lal's 'Crossword Best Children's Book Award' winner Faces in the Water. The study focuses on the correlation between the societal gender issue and childhood. The narrative is analysed using an interdisciplinary approach to the aspect of gender issue addressed in the text in relation to Indian society and studies made in social sciences. Also, the prevalence of the serious gender issues in the realistic narratives and the position of children as readers of narratives with serious gender issues is analyzed.*

Keywords— *Female Victimization, Gender, Female Infanticide, Children's Literature, Indian Society*

INTRODUCTION

Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men (Fox, 1993).

Gender identity is one of the fundamental developments during childhood. Gender is not something innate but is acquired by through varied external stimuli. Gender differences are pointed out and gender roles are forced on children right from their early life until they adapt themselves in the desired stereotypical roles expected by society. Children are constructed to become girls and boys, women and men, much under the confined boundaries of heterosexuality and behave in a manner appropriate to their gender. Children are very often guided to adopt gender appropriate behaviour and stay within the framework of either masculinity or femininity. The roles adopted by beings are simply not result of sexuality but are structured through societal interactions in the form of parents, friends, media and other means. Through these social interactions, the children become constituted as boys and girls and exhibit gender stereotype behaviour which is desired by the society. Children's literature is one of the chief vehicles contributing to development of gender identity in children.

Literature has been used as a tool to promote prescribed gender roles for children.

Much emphasis is today given to the way in which gender is addressed in books for children. This has led to the analysis of gender in children's literature which has impact on the cognitive and emotional growth of a child. As the characters portrayed in children's literature are ideals for children, these characters come under scanner. The books and characters in children's literature guide and influence the thought and action processes of children. They learn and construct their gender identities through the reading of children's literature. As noted by the developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan, "By the time he is seven he is intensely committed to molding his behavior in concordance with cultural standards appropriate to his biological sex (1962)" (Hillman, 1974). Childhood is the time when children are involved in the process of gathering and assimilating information from external stimuli. Children's books not only play a vital role in enhancement of language skills but also "play a significant part in transmitting a society's culture. Without question, children develop gender-role identities during their early years, and one factor that influences this identity is the literature that children read or is read to them (Allen et al., 1993)" (Tsao,

2008). The reading of children's literature provides entry of the child into the cultural domain and the child relates situations, develops opinions and identifies oneself with the characters that display diverse behaviors in accordance with their gendered roles. Manjari Singh, observes that, "The manner in which genders are represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society. Sexism in literature can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they 'see and read the world,' thus reinforcing gender images (Fox, 1993). This reinforcement predisposes children to not question existing social relationships." (Singh, 1998). Thus, literature plays a vital role in the process of gender appropriation for children.

Interdisciplinary Reading of Gender Issues in Children's Literature and the Indian Society

Reading of literature in interdisciplinary context is useful. Bahou notes that "the time has arrived, when one may readily admit to having embraced the interdisciplinary approach without apology and with a firm belief that the extension of the frontiers of knowledge demand it" (Bahou, 1961). The sociology of literature which "focuses its attention upon the relation between a literary work and the social structure in which it is created" is "very useful to understand the socioeconomic situations, political issues, the world view and creativity of the writers, the system of the social and political organizations, the relations between certain thoughts and cultural configurations in which they occur and determinants of a literary work" (Jadhav, 2015). The social sciences reveal the data, facts and figures pertaining to a phenomenon, and literature provides an elaborate understanding of the phenomenon on a deeper cultural, philosophical and psychological levels. It brings to surface those realities which cannot be captured by raw data. Jadhav notes that "Sociology as an independent discipline of social science emerged only around the middle of the eighteenth century. Prior to the middle of the eighteenth century, the study of society was dominated by social philosophers rather than social scientists" (Jadhav, 2015). So, literature is an important social document that helps in understanding and interpreting a complex social phenomenon to gain deeper insight.

Through the fictional tales, literature reflects the social beliefs, customs and morals of a particular society at a specific time-period. As Epstein notes, "it is commonplace for literary writers to use fiction and narrative to convey their strong dissatisfaction with the present social, economic, or political order" (Epstein, 2002). So, fictional writing can be used as a corrective device for rigid social ideologies and its problems.

Faces in the Water is one such narrative which deals with the gender issue of female infanticide in the Indian society where females are victimized in one form or another. It aids to analyse the societal implications of the issue and its gender representation in children's literary text. The study of this issue encourages viewing gender as being an extensive concept and challenges the traditional, conservative societal expectations about gender roles.

Overview of *Faces in the Water*

Faces in the Water is a fictional story based on female infanticide. It addresses the much prevalent social issue of preference for a male child in the Indian society. Such mentality leads to heinous social evils like female infanticide and grave injustice towards girls.

The narrative reveals the life of the Diwanchand family which is affluent and prosperous and is extremely proud of two things. The first is that they have had only sons in their family and the second is that none of their family members have ever fallen sick. But a sense of dark secret surrounds the ancestral farmhouse which the family owns. There are two aspects connected with this ancestral house. One is that all the children of their family are born in their ancestral farmhouse which is very unusual in today's times when children are given birth at hospitals and second is that, that the family believes the waters of a well in their ancestral house has magical properties which is responsible for their good health and for having only sons in their lineage.

When their house in Delhi is shut because of renovations, the young 15-year old Gurmeet popularly known as Gurmi, who is the only son of one of the Diwanchand brothers, gets a chance to spend a few days in their ancestral house. The mystery behind the proud tradition of the unbroken chain of Diwanchand family's son progeny unearths before him when he finds out from the three girl faces in the water that they are his sisters. They disclose to him that all three of them along with Gurmi's five other cousin sisters were girls. These girls have now taken the form of good spirits, who purify the waters of the well to keep the family healthy and render it with such magical properties, that none of the family members ever fall sick. He feels disgusted at the thought, that the family after committing such a villainous crime of drowning girl children into the well, continue drinking the waters of the same well.

Rendering the narrative with the elements of magic and fantasy, Ranjit Lal artistically portrays the joy and happiness which would have been the part and parcel of Diwanchand family, if the girls in the family would have been alive. But a dark twist in the narrative comes as Gurmi is faced not only with the problem of making the elders of

his family realize their wrong ways and drive them out from their taste of male-child obsession, but also to prevent the Diwanchands from committing yet another heinous crime. Gurmi soon learns that his mother is pregnant and as per the tradition of the Diwanchands the new born has to be a male child. He fears the fate of the unborn if the child was to be a female. His fears come true and Gurmi finds out that his mother has delivered twin sisters. He finally resolves and takes upon himself to protect his little sisters under all circumstances. He fights all odds to lower himself into the well and catches the little ones as the family attempts to drown the babies. He emerges as the hero, becoming the savior of the babies and faces his family firmly. He questions about the new-borns and when his family tries to lie to him, he confronts them and makes them realize their mistake. Finally, a transformation comes over the father who declares that he would keep the new born girls and break the family tradition. In fact a great transformation comes over the Diwanchands as both of Gurmi's uncles leave their share of their ancestral house, which is converted by Gurmi's father into a shelter home with school for female orphans. Thus the story ends, rendering an important twist to the tale by giving it a happy ending, and a significant message to the reader.

The Issue of Female Infanticide

The status of Indian women in the society is difficult to explain as on the one hand a woman is given the status of being a 'Devi' or 'Goddess' and on the other hand she is considered a secondary being born at the mercy of men. Women in the Indian society are treated differently by varied communities and caste groups. In such a grim scenario, women do not know where they stand and a selected section of the society considers them as a liability and a commodity. The progressive society tries to strike a balance and deal with the problems concerning women through social reforms. However, women continue to be harassed in one way or another and treated to be less born in a male dominated society.

One form of harassment is the act of female infanticide which is "a deliberate and intentional act of killing a female child within one year of its birth either directly by using poisonous organic and inorganic chemicals or indirectly by deliberate neglect to feed the infant by either one of the parents or other family members or neighbours or by the midwife" (Tandon and Sharma, 2006). There are many sociological and psychological aspects involved in the escalation of the problem of female infanticide which continues to be a social menace.

Despite being utterly barbaric, the act of female infanticide is able to get social approval. As defined by Rashmi Kapoor, female infanticide is, "an act of killing

newborn female babies" and notes that people freely practice such heinous crimes like female foeticide and female infanticide "as it has socio-cultural and religious justifications" (Kapoor, 2007).

Indian Societal Factors contributing to Female Infanticide

There are a number of reasons associated with social, cultural and economic aspects that heighten female discrimination in the Indian context. In the Indian society, one of the major factor contributing towards a biased attitude towards female is the "preference for a son over a daughter" (Kapoor, 2007). "The reasons for such an attitude are more a result of socialization process of traditional social expectations and appropriate social behaviours and not a consequence of individual choice" (Kapoor, 2007). In *Faces in the Water*, the Diwanchand family displays a similar attitude, where the family is burdened to keep up their tradition of male birth. They feel threatened by the attitude of society, if they broke their family tradition and allowed the birth of females. Gurmi's uncle Balvinder tries to convince Gurmi's father to drown the twin girls:

" 'If Sushmaji has had girls again...the great Diwanchand tradition must be kept on ...' 'What poor girls? And what are you saying? What will people say? We can't have girls in this family. We've never had girls in this family. We'll be laughing stock of society. How will we hold our heads up to them?'" (*Faces in the Water*, 2010).

In the Indian society, a male heir is regarded as vital to safeguard the family property within the family. As Kapoor notes, "Girls can inherit family property but then the rights pass from their natal family to her family of procreation, which may not be acceptable to many people." (Kapoor, 2007). A true picture of property inheritance is drawn when young Gurmi speaks in an unconsciously biased manner about his ancestral house property, "Our bedrooms were along the 'Left Wing', the bedrooms on the 'Right Wing' and 'Rear Wing' belonged to my two uncles and their families." (*Faces in the Water*, 2010). Here it becomes clear that only males are the owners in property and that might have been one of the reason why the family never wanted females.

There are economic reasons also associated with the desire for sons as females are placed in an "economically expensive category" (Patel, 2007). In the Indian scenario, it is seen that maintenance of girls is costly

as there is demand of large dowries and fairly high expectations for marriage of girls as compared to boys. As Alpana D. Sagar notes, "Norms of dowry further devalue women and the female child is considered an economic drain on her family" (Sagar, 2007). Also, "Families that are well-off and do not have to depend on dowry to augment their income are also opting for female foeticide. The real reason seems to be the high status of families with several sons and the low status of families with no sons" (Bose, 2007). *Faces in the Water*, shows both these facts reflecting on the mentality of an Indian family. When Gurmi's mother shares her desire that she wished that they had kept their earlier born daughters, Surinder aunty silences her:

'Don't talk like that. Why do you think we are so respected and envied in the community? We have such a reputation to protect. Everyone looks up to us, like we were royalty. It's a matter of great pride and the family's honour. Besides, think of the amount of money that has been saved.' (*Faces in the Water*, 2010).

When, even for the rich families such as that of Diwanchands, a female child is a liability in the view of dowry and marriage, then for a poor family, raising a female child is even more challenging. Leela Visaria in her discussion with women in Gujarat and Haryana reveals that, "The menace not of dowry system, but of lifelong presents that have to be given to the girls from the day she marries to her death and also to her children, was a strong deterrent to having girls" (Visaria, 2007).

Thus, female discrimination is prevalent at all levels in the Indian society. Tulsi Patel rightly notes, "neither education nor affluence have brought about any significant change in attitudes towards women." (Patel, 2007). This is well reflected when an affluent and educated family like Diwanchand is involved in an act of female infanticide. The family is rich, and Surinder aunty is shown to be an educated lady, a professional gynaecologist, who goes to the extent of drowning female children in a well to maintain the family tradition of male progeny. This shows that the relationship between development and favourable sex ratio is still questionable. Thus, female discrimination takes place, "not only in poorer communities but also in populations where women have taken the education, employment and have achieved considerable social status" (Sekher and Hatti, 2010)

In patriarchal social structures, "women derive value and status only as mothers of sons. Then happiness

and social status in the conjugal homes is dependent on producing sons" (Patel, 2007). In *Faces in the Water*, Gurmi's mother is unable to procure a good reputation in her family as she gives birth to girls which the father regards as below status. He in fact blames Gurmi's mother and yells at her. " 'He yelled at Mama and blamed her. He shouted at her that only one out of four of her kids was a son and what a matter of shame that was. And that he couldn't believe that of a Diwanchand ...Just forget it.'" (*Faces in the Water*, 2010). Thus, it is a general attitude in the Indian families that there are celebrations at the birth of boys and status of a woman rises. But when a woman gives birth to females, "there is gloom, no celebrations, no gifts and the image of the woman suffers badly" (Bose, 2007).

It is generally found that women have no say in the decision making process about children. Leela Visaria in her interviews with women finds that, "The decision to abort a female foetus was almost entirely that of their husbands and/ or mother-in-law". (Visaria, 2007). In *Faces in the Water*, too Ranjit Lal rightly goes on to show that Gurmi's mother cannot take any decision about keeping her daughters. In fact, even after delivery of the male child Gurmi, she is forced to do away with her next child as she is a female. The father and Surinder aunty are the decision makers in the whole process which the mother helplessly had to accept. As Nandini details, " "But no! Surinder aunty virtually threw the poor little thing down. This time we could hear Mama weeping." " (*Faces in the Water*, 2010).

Another explanation for the son preference in Indian society is described to the notion that a son will "provide an economic support and security in the old age of parents. Sons are expected to stay with the family forever and help them in their twilight years" (Kapoor 234). "In India, a majority of old parents live with married children, who, to an overwhelming majority are sons" (Sekher and Hatti, 2010). This viewpoint of a traditional Indian family is reflected in the narrative. Gurmi's aunt Surinder tries to corrupt his mind with typical patriarchal ideas: " "They [girls] are quite useless and then you have to get them married and all that nakhra and expense... And who will look after us when we're old? Our fine, sturdy sons of course! Daughters...nah...not for us Diwanchands ...other people can have them, haina?" " (*Faces in the Water*, 2010). Thus, apart from economic reasons, the expectations from sons is more and girls are regarded to be "paraya dhan" who would marry and go to their in-laws and so cannot be expected to look after their own parents in their declining years.

Prevention of Female Infanticide and Foeticide

The practice of female infanticide has been continuing since centuries. The issue of female infanticide

first came to be noticed by the British officials in 1789. The issue surfaced “in several districts of Rajasthan; along the western shores in Gujarat – Surat and Kutch; and among a clan of Rajputs in eastern part of Uttar Pradesh” (Tandon and Sharma 2006). It is “reported that female infanticide was so widespread in Jadeja (Rajput) families of Kutch and Saurashtra that only five of such families were found who had not killed their ‘new-born’ daughters” (Tandon and Sharma 2006). According to researcher Basumatary “much occurrence of female infanticide during the 18th and 19th centuries CE existed in the north west of India, but later, it widely scattered into regions of India” (Basumatary, 2015). Due to the efforts of enlightened Indians and the British officials to curb the social evil, “a regulation popularly known as Bengal Regulation XXI of 1795 was legislated firstly, declaring infanticide as illegal which is equivalent to committing a murder. Besides this, after a few years in 1804, one more regulation known as Regulation III of 1804 was enacted in India. By this regulation, the systematic killing of female infant was declared as a crime and those people who indulged in it were treated as criminals and punished severely”. (Basumatry, 2015). Later, a legislative act to prevent the murder of female infants was passed in British India known as the Female Infanticide Prevention Act, 1870. “The Section 7 of this Act declared that it was initially applicable only to the territories of Oudh, North-Western Provinces and Punjab, but the Act authorized the Governor General to extend the law to any other district or province of the British Raj at his discretion” (Wikipedia). With the advent of technology and innovations in medical science, the age-old practices of female infanticide are now replaced by practices of sex-selective abortion or female foeticide. Kapoor defines it as, “Foeticide is the practice in which the sex of the foetus is determined with the help of ultrasound, scans and in-vitro sex testing and the foetus is killed through abortion. Female foeticide is, when with the help of medical technology, the sex of the foetus is determined and, if found to be female, aborted” (Kapoor, 2007).

Until 1970 the provisions contained in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) governed the law on abortion, were very much liberal and framed with good intentions. But with the easy provision of screening technologies available, these laws came to be misused and the female fetuses began to be aborted in large numbers. To prevent this, the Government of India passed the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PNDT) in 1994 which prohibited the determination of sex of the foetus. “This law was further amended into the Pre-Conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) (PCPNDT) Act in 2004” (Wikipedia) for prosecuting persons engaged in sex selective abortions and sex determination. However, despite these laws, the practice of selective sex abortions continues

illegally. Despite the ban on sex determination tests, the services are available making parents the consumers of the new technology of ultrasound which allows them to choose and bear sons. (Visaria, 2007). The reference of this illegal practice of sex determination is also found in *Faces in the Water*. Surinder aunty who is also a gynaecologist herself, is involved in illegal sex determination. She says, “I can’t do the tests any more – the stupid police are keeping a very close watch on my clinic. They’ve become very suspicious. I was almost arrested when they sent a decoy customer. They’ve raided and sealed a lot of equipment – I can hardly work any more, or do any tests on my patients. They just want any excuse to shut it down” (*Faces in the Water*, 2010).

This reflects a hope that the scenario is gradually changing towards curbing sex screening. However, the problem of female foeticide can end only when the mindset of the society changes and when the status of women in society is enhanced. *Faces in the Water* offers the same solution, where through the prompt action of Gurmi and the efforts of the sisters in the well, the Diwanchand family comes to realize the consequences of the crimes they have been committing in the past. They realize that they have lost the sweetness from their lives and that their lives would have been happier and blissful had they kept their daughters. This realization transforms them to change their ways and Gurmi’s father converts their ancestral house into “a home and school for abandoned baby girls” (*Faces in the Water*, 2010). Even Surinder aunty, who is repentant about her misconduct, shuts down her clinic to take charge of the shelter home where she is adored by the little girls who “call her ‘dadi’” (*Faces in the Water*, 2010). This shows that there is still light at the end of the tunnel and that the society around us can change if collective efforts are put in.

CONCLUSION: CHILDREN AS READERS OF NARRATIVES WITH CRITICAL ISSUES

The presence of problem novels or narratives with critical issues is not something novel. They have been in existence since long. However, this reality fiction with dark themes is nowadays expanding its readership rapidly by dispersion into the genre of children’s literature and young adult literature. “Teens are not afraid to analyze the world around them, and are often more open to reading about tougher subjects than adults give them credit for. Many of them are looking to liberate themselves from popular young adult trends, looking for topics that are relevant to their lives and the society that they are observing.” (Marchello, 2015). But the presence of critical issues in children’s literature is debatable. Adults are

anxious that these narratives badly influence the impressionable minds. They worry that these intense stories may damage the delicate minds as they are unfit to handle grave subject matters. They bemoan that these dark issues dealing with violence, rape, sexual abuse, suicide, depression, sex, drugs and other social problems may provoke unacceptable copycat behavior in children and spoil their habits as they will tend to become what they read.

However, many counter arguments can be made in support of the prevalence of tougher topics in children's fiction. Diana Hodge is of the view that "discussing life's tougher issues is not in itself pessimistic or disheartening" (Hogde, 2016). These narratives with serious themes not just provide the readers with the experiences of anguish, melancholy and loss but on the contrary prepare the children to face the traumatic events boldly. In fact, the serious themes addressed in children's literature, brings focus on these grave issues prevalent in our society and children many a time relate to the personal and social problems faced by the child protagonists in the narratives. It provides them an opportunity to share their own experiences and gather courage to overcome the obstacles, develop understanding and gain comfort and hope. Today fiction portraying dark themes of drug addiction, rape, violence, blackmailing and bullying is becoming increasingly popular among children and young adults because these are experiences that they can connect with in their everyday lives.

Also some adults worry that young readers tend to imitate behavior from these problem narratives. But then again this idea that children would indulge in risky behaviours is fanciful and lacks evidence. Adults themselves guide children to read newspapers and such other material which too depicts reality and address a number of serious issues. So, one can say that the presence of critical issues in children's literature helps them to cultivate an understanding of tougher subjects and thus creates an awareness to cope up with real life problems, boldly in the long run.

When children are introduced to literature subverting gender stereotypes in context of career aspirations, gender roles, sexuality, attitude and behaviour, power relations and decision making, skills and talents considered typical to boys and girls etc., it leads them to an awareness that gender is constructed and is not natural or inborn. They begin to challenge their preconceived notions of gender and thus become non-gendered. When narratives with gender issues form a part of curriculum, it is essential for educators to point out gender-bias, if any, in the narrative, so that children do not form stereotypes. Moreover, literature that is more inclusive in terms of

gender roles and sexuality should be a part of curriculum which could lead to the construction of a more egalitarian society.

Thus, the prevalence of the serious gender issue of female infanticide in the select realistic narrative provides an opportunity to the young minds to analyze the society we live in. It serves to be an eye opener as it portrays the harsh realities related to girls who suffer gender discrimination and abuse in diverse ways. The narratives like *Faces in the Water* can be adopted for classroom reading to make the children aware about gender issues. It can also aid them to get clarity regarding the laws and provisions available to deal with these issues. The study of the narrative thus, sheds light on various other social problems connected with gender and helps to assess the socio-cultural scenario in which they live and learn.

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