

Reflections of Gender Inequality and Female Infanticide in Indian Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

An important means of transmitting gender norms, cultural beliefs, and societal ideals to younger readers is children's literature. Focusing on the acclaimed work *Faces in the Water* by Ranjit Lal, this study examines how gender inequality and the problem of female infanticide are depicted in children's literature from India. The narrative's handling of patriarchal behaviors and the systematic devaluing of girls in Indian culture are the subjects of this research. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach by analyzing literature through the lenses of gender studies and the social sciences to investigate how books written for young readers could challenge long-held gender stereotypes and promote ethical thinking. In addition to reflecting current social situations, the article emphasizes children's literature's dual function as an instrument for transformation, encouraging readers to develop empathy and critical awareness. The research concludes that realistic tales are important for changing people's views on gender, fighting discrimination, and starting conversations about equality and social justice in India's cultural and social milieu.

Keywords: Gender, Female Infanticide, Indian Society, Literature, Young.

INTRODUCTION

The literary works written for children have always been a window into a society's moral, social, and cultural aspects. While children's books in India have always focused on moral lessons like respect, obedience, and honesty, there has been a marked movement in recent decades toward covering more nuanced and controversial topics. Particularly noteworthy among them are the pervasive patriarchal ideals that shape women's and girls' lives, as shown by issues like female infanticide and gender inequity. In an effort to teach young readers empathy, understanding, and critical thinking skills while also making them aware of the harsh truths of gender-based discrimination, Indian children's literature explores these subjects. The Crossword Best Children's Book Award-winning *Faces in the Water* by Ranjit Lal is a moving illustration of how writing can tackle weighty societal issues in a way that younger readers can understand and appreciate.

Female infanticide is shown realistically in *Faces in the Water*. This heinous practice is still practiced in certain regions of India even though there has been social and legal change in the last several decades. The narrative delves into the brutal tradition inside patriarchal houses, shedding light on the layers of silence and complicity via the eyes of its young narrator. Presenting readers with a moral conundrum that compels them to reconsider society conventions, Lal's book portrays the collision of infant innocence with the severity of gendered violence. By exposing young readers to ideas of social justice and moral duty, the decision to tackle such a serious problem via children's literature is strong and intentional. In a relevant and compelling narrative, the story's emotional depth promotes empathy and knowledge without being didactic, enabling readers to grasp the seriousness of gender-based injustice.

The novel's depiction of female infanticide goes beyond its literary context to provide sociopolitical criticism on the gender gap in India. Cultural and economic considerations, such as the value placed on male heirs, the dowry system, and the societal view of girls as financial burdens, have historically contributed to the practice of female infanticide. Lal's art reveals patriarchal ideals by putting them in a household context, where women play a double role as oppressors and scapegoats. For example, the story's grandmother personifies the internalized discrimination that keeps baby females victims of abuse in a vicious cycle. The narrative delves into the ways gender injustice is institutionalized and passed down through the generations via these people.

From a literary standpoint, Lal's story adds to the increasing collection of children's books in India that go beyond just pleasure to address important societal concerns. Young readers are able to understand complicated topics via the prism of commonplace experiences because of the realistic and emotionally nuanced way he writes. The story shows how

moral knowledge may change things by following the young narrator as he slowly starts to see the inequities in his world. As a symbol of the potential for change through empathy and bravery, the kid protagonist serves as a vehicle for challenging conventional wisdom. The larger goal of children's literature is to educate and change its readers, and this narrative approach reflects that goal. It has the power to inspire social awareness and ethical contemplation. Given that social conditioning in India often starts at a young age, the inclusion of gender disparity in children's tales takes on added importance in this setting. Little ones get their sense of self, authority, and right and wrong from the books they read. Novelists like Ranjit Lal, who include topics like female infanticide, question idealized portrayals of childhood that gloss over society's darker side. Rather, they provide room for young readers to critically engage with issues of fairness, equality, and citizen rights. Such stories can serve as a springboard for conversations about societal change and shared responsibility between adults and children. Reading becomes a moral teaching tool when they do this because they connect literature to real life.

There is a larger feminist debate in Indian literature that *Faces in the Water's* depiction of female infanticide fits within. Although Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Mahasweta Devi are adult feminist authors who have long tackled the oppression of women in society, Lal brings these topics to a younger readership. Instead of being openly radical or emotional, his method depends on narrative to make people feel something and think about something. The story's tone strikes a good mix of sensitivity and reality, making sure that young readers aren't scared off by the seriousness of the subject or blinded to its moral consequences. Lal shows that children's books may be a vehicle for social criticism while also appealing to their intended readers by maintaining this fine line.

The work is socially significant not just because of its literary merit, but also because of the impact it may have on the views of future generations about gender equality. Bringing attention to the oppression of women and girls, it challenges young readers to challenge patriarchal systems and envision more equitable and compassionate worlds. When the lines between fiction and social reality begin to blur, reading becomes a moral act in and of itself. Instead of being an observer, the young reader plays an important role in the narrative's ability to effect societal change. What this means is that it lines up with modern ideas of education that highlight how literature may help kids become more self-aware and empathetic.

Faces in the Water also shows how literature may reflect and criticize society via its multidisciplinary approach, which draws from sociology, psychology, and gender studies. The novel's portrayal of female infanticide reflects the socioeconomic and statistical facts of gender inequality in India and encourages readers to envision a more just society. By putting the problem from a child's perspective, Lal highlights how societal conditioning may taint even the most innocent of minds, implying that reform and understanding must start early. The narrative's portrayal of gender politics and childhood intersects to symbolize India's continuous conflict between modernity and tradition, ignorance and awareness, quiet and speech.

In the end, *Faces in the Water* shows how children's books may make people think about difficult societal issues and painful realities. Gender inequality and the moral lapses that sustain practices like female infanticide are confronted by both children and adults in this book. The book turns reading into a kind of witnessing and ethical participation via its truthful depiction of social injustices. It shows that books can teach kids about empathy, fairness, and equality, and that literature can be a moral compass. Within the larger framework of Indian children's literature, these works represent an essential transition—from stories that just teach to narratives that provoke thought and change. The tales we share with our children today have a profound impact on the values and awareness of the society we will be a part of in the future.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Gender Representation in Indian Children's Literature

It is beneficial to read literature in an interdisciplinary setting. "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 says. Sociology of literature "focuses its attention upon the relation between a literary work and the social structure in which it is created" and 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." Literature offers a more in-depth comprehension of a phenomena on a deeper cultural, philosophical, and psychological level, whereas the social sciences disclose the data, facts, and numbers related to the phenomenon. In doing so, it reveals truths that raw data cannot. A distinct branch of social science, sociology did not arise until the mid-eighteenth century, according to Jadhav. It was social philosophers, not social scientists, who dominated the field of social science up until the middle of the eighteenth century. Thus, literature is a significant social record because it provides context for comprehending and making sense of complicated social phenomena.

Literature, via its fictitious stories, captures the values, norms, and beliefs of a society in a given age. This "strong dissatisfaction with the present social, economic, or political order" is often expressed by literary authors via fiction and storytelling, as Epstein point out. So, fiction may be a tool to combat problematic and inflexible societal views. The gender problem of female infanticide in Indian culture, where females are abused in many forms, is addressed in one such tale, *Faces in the Water*. Examining the topic's gender portrayal in children's literature can provide light on its

social ramifications. Research on this topic questions conservative, long-held assumptions about gender norms and promotes a more expansive understanding of gender as a concept.

I. Understanding The Narrative Framework Of Faces In The Water

Female infanticide is the fictitious subject of *Faces in the Water*. It deals with the widespread societal problem of Indian society's preference for male offspring. Horrific societal ills, such as female infanticide and severe unfairness against females, result from this mindset.

In the story, we learn about the rich and successful Diwanchand family, who take great pride in two things. Two things are noteworthy about this family: first, they have never had a female member get ill, and second, they have only ever produced boys. Unfortunately, the family's ancient home is shrouded in mystery. Two things are related to this family home. Two things stand out about this family: first, they give birth in the farmhouse, which is highly unusual in this day and age when most babies are born in hospitals; and second, they attribute their good health and the fact that they have only sons to the magical properties of the water in the well at their ancestral house.

Young Gurmeet, also known as Gurmi, has the opportunity to spend a few days in their ancestral home while repairs keep their Delhi mansion closed. Gurmeet is the sole son of one of the Diwanchand brothers. Upon discovering that the three female figures he sees in the river are really his sisters, the long-lost secret of the Diwanchand family's illustrious line of son offspring becomes clear. They tell him that Gurmi had five additional cousin sisters, and that all three of them were females. Now these girls are good spirits that cleanse the well water so that the whole family may stay healthy. The water has magical healing powers because of this. The idea that the family continues to drink from the well after committing the heinous act of drowning their daughters makes him sick to his stomach.

Ranjit Lal skillfully weaves magical and fantastical aspects throughout the story, capturing the pure delight that the Diwanchand family would have experienced had their daughters lived. However, the story takes a sinister turn when Gurmi must not only stop the Diwanchands from perpetrating another terrible murder, but also help his family's elders see their error in judgment and get over their fixation with male children. Gurmi finds out very quickly that his mother is expecting a son, as that is the customary expectation of the Diwanchands. If the unborn kid turns out to be a girl, dad is terrified for their safety. The news that Gurmi's mother has given birth to twin girls confirms his worst fears. He makes up his mind and decides he would always look out for his younger sisters. As the family tries to drown the infants, he defies all obstacles to dive down the well and save them. As the rescuer of the infants, he triumphs against his family and becomes a hero. When his family attempts to deceive him, he confronts them and helps them see their error; he also asks them questions concerning the newborns. The father undergoes a metamorphosis and breaks family custom by announcing he would keep the newborn daughters. As Gurmi's father turns the ancestral house into a refuge home and school for female orphans, the Diwanchands undergo a dramatic change. This change is brought about by the departure of Gurmi's two uncles. Finally, the novel comes to a close, leaving the reader with a meaningful message and a surprising turn of events.

II. Understanding The Social Dimensions Of Female Infanticide

It is hard to put into words the complicated social position of Indian women, who are both revered as divine beings and seen as subservient to males. Many various ethnicities and castes in Indian culture have differing perspectives on how women should be treated. In this bleak world, women are powerless and seen as little more than a commodity by certain members of society. By implementing social changes, the progressive society seeks to address women's issues and achieve a balance. Nonetheless, being born into a male-dominated culture does not absolve women of the persistent harassment and inferior treatment they endure.

The intentional and purposeful killing of a female child within one year of its birth, either directly through the use of toxic organic and inorganic chemicals or indirectly through the willful neglect to feed the infant by one or more parents, relatives, neighbors, or the midwife, is one kind of harassment. The issue of female infanticide, which persists as a societal threat, is complex and involves several psychological and social factors.

Social acceptance is granted for the practice of female infanticide, despite the fact that it is completely savage. Rashmi Kapoor states that female infanticide is "an act of killing newborn female babies" and goes on to say that there are "socio-cultural and religious justifications" for individuals to easily commit crimes like this.

III. Indian Societal Factors Contributing To Female Infanticide

Discrimination against women is more prevalent in India for a variety of social, cultural, and economic reasons. "Preference for a son over a daughter" is a big part of Indian culture that makes people prejudiced toward women. "The reasons for such an attitude are more a result of socialization of traditional social expectations and appropriate social behaviors rather than a result of individual choice." Similarly, the Diwanchand family in *Faces in the Water* exhibits this mentality as they carry on the custom of having male children. They are afraid of how society would react if they defy their family tradition and have children of a different gender. "If Sushmaji has had girls again...the great Diwanchand tradition must be kept on..." Balvinder attempts to persuade Gurmi's father to kill the twin girls. What

unfortunate girls? So, what exactly are you stating? People will say what? We are unable to have females in our household. No females have ever been born into this family. All of society will look down on us. "How are we going to keep our dignity when we face them?"

The importance of having a male successor to the family fortune in Indian culture cannot be overstated. Kapoor points out that "many people may not be okay with the idea that girls can inherit family property but that the rights then go from their natal family to her family of procreation." In his unconscious prejudice, young Gurmi paints a realistic image of property inheritance when he describes his family's home: "Our bedrooms were along the 'Left Wing', the bedrooms on the 'Right Wing' and 'Rear Wing' belonged to my two uncles and their families." One possible explanation for the family's aversion to having daughters is the fact that, as we can see above, only men are considered property owners.

Females are categorized as a "economically expensive category," which contributes to the monetary motivations for wanting boys. Keeping females afloat is expensive in India because of the great expectations placed on girls' marriages and the huge dowries that are traditionally required. The female offspring is seen as a financial burden on her family, and dowry practices further degrade women, as pointed out by Alpna D. Sagar. There is a disturbing trend of female foeticide among affluent families that are able to support themselves without resorting to dowry. The true cause seems to be the social hierarchy that exists between households with and without sons. Both of these things are reflected in the Indian family's mindset in *Faces in the Water*. Surinder aunty shouts down Gurmi's mother, telling her, "Don't talk like that," as she expresses her wish that they had retained their previous sisters. For what reasons do you believe our community holds us in such high esteem and envy? We must safeguard this reputation. We are treated like royalty by everyone. The family takes tremendous pride in it. Furthermore, consider the sum of money that has been preserved.

It is already difficult for wealthy families like the Diwanchands to raise a daughter because of the expectations placed on them by society around dowry and marriage. In her conversation with women from Gujarat and Haryana, Leela Visaria discusses the dowry system and how it discourages having daughters due to the everlasting gifts that are expected from the day of marriage until death and beyond.

This means that sexism against women exists in India across all social strata. That "neither education nor affluence have brought about any substantial change in attitudes towards women" is something that Tulsi Patel accurately points out. When a well-off, highly-educated family like Diwanchand commits female infanticide, it reflects this clearly. The aunt, Surinder, is a highly-educated gynaecologist who lives up to the family custom of having sons by drowning female offspring in a well. The family is wealthy. This shows that there is still room for debate on the link between development and a healthy gender ratio. Women still face bias "not only in poorer communities but also in populations where women have taken the education, employment and achieved considerable social status."

Women in patriarchal societies are only considered valuable and respected when they are mothers. In such households, having boys is a guarantee of marital bliss and success. Because Gurmi's father considers females to be of lower social rank, Gurmi's mother struggles to get respect in *Faces in the Water*. Actually, he scolds Gurmi's mom and puts the responsibility on her. He then proceeded to accuse Mama and shout at her. It was a pity that she had just one son out of four children, he yelled at her. Furthermore, he found it hard to comprehend that a Diwanchand could... Forget about it. Therefore, it is often believed among Indian households that the birth of a boy is cause for celebration and that a woman's status is elevated upon giving birth. "There is gloom, no celebrations, no gifts and the image of the woman suffers badly" when a woman gives birth to girls.

In most cases, women do not have a voice when it comes to making decisions around having children. "The decision to abort a female foetus was almost entirely that of their husbands and/or mother-in-law," writes Leela Visaria, based on her interviews with women. Ranjit Lal continues to persuasively demonstrate that Gurmi's mother is unable to make a choice about the custody of her children in *Faces in the Water* as well. Even after giving birth to Gurmi, a son, she is compelled to abort her subsequent kid since she is a girl. Throughout, the decision-makers have been the father and Surinder aunty, and the mother has been unable to stop them. According to Nandini, "But no! The small creature was almost thrown to the ground by Surinder aunty. This time, Mama's sobs could be heard."

The idea that a boy would "provide an economic support and security in the old age of parents" is another reason why Indian culture prefers sons over daughters. The son is believed to remain a lifelong member of the family and provide assistance to the parents as they age. A large number of elderly parents in India share homes with their married children, the vast majority of whom are sons. The story is told from the perspective of a typical Indian household. Surinder, Gurmi's aunt, attempts to plant patriarchal views in his head by saying things like, "Those girls aren't worth anything, and then there's the hassle and expense of getting them married." Who will be responsible for our care in our old age? Our strong, handsome boys, of course! We Diwanchands aren't interested in daughters, nope. Can someone else have these, haina? Consequently, aside from monetary considerations, there is a greater expectation placed on boys, whereas daughters are seen as "paraya dhan" who would wed and live with their in-laws, meaning they are not responsible for taking care of their own parents as they age.

IV. PREVENTING FEMALE INFANTICIDE AND FOETICIDE IN INDIA

For generations, people have been killing baby females. In 1789, the British government began to take note of the problem of female infanticide. "In various districts of Rajasthan; along the western shores in Gujarat - Surat and Kutch; and among a clan of Rajputs in eastern part of Uttar Pradesh" was where the problem showed up. "Among the Jadeja (Rajput) families of Kutch and Saurashtra, female infanticide was so common that only five families were discovered not to have killed their 'new-born' daughters," the study states. "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," writes scholar Basumatary. "A regulation popularly known as Bengal Regulation XXI of 1795 was legislated firstly, declaring infanticide as illegal, which is equivalent to committing a murder," in response to the efforts of educated Indians and British authorities to limit the societal scourge.

This was followed a few years later in 1804, when India passed Regulation III of 1804. This statute made it a felony to murder female infants on a regular basis, and it penalized individuals who committed this crime harshly. Subsequently, in 1870, the Female Infanticide Prevention Act was enacted in British India with the purpose of outlawing the murder of female newborns. According to Section 7 of the Act, it was originally stated to only apply to Oudh, North-Western Provinces, and Punjab. However, the Act granted the Governor General the authority to extend the legislation to any other district or province of the British Raj at his discretion. Modern medicine and technological advancements have made sex-selective abortion and female foeticide the norm, displacing the more barbaric practice of female infanticide. Using technology like ultrasound, scans, and in-vitro sex testing, foeticide refers to the practice of determining the sex of a fetus and then killing the baby via abortion, according to Kapoor. The phrase "female foeticide" refers to the practice of aborting a pregnancy after using medical technology to detect the foetus's gender.

The Indian Penal Code (IPC), which regulated abortion laws up until 1970, was liberal and well-intentioned. However, these rules were abused and a high proportion of female babies were terminated once screening technology became easily accessible. The government of India took action in 1994 by passing the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PNDT), which outlawed the practice of determining the fetal sex. According to the PreConception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) (PCPNDT) Act of 2004, this legislation was further updated to make it possible to prosecute those who participate in sex determination and sex selective abortions. But illicit selective sex abortions persist even if these laws prohibit them.

The services are accessible, and parents are using the new technology of ultrasound to choose and have boys, even though sex determination tests are banned. Faces in the Water also makes note of this criminal sex determination procedure. The aunt of Surinder, a gynaecologist, engages in unlawful sex determination. According to her, the tests are no longer an option since her clinic is being closely monitored by the ignorant police. They're acting pretty suspiciously now. Having sent a dummy client, I was verged on being arrested. I'm unable to do patient testing or work nearly as much as before since they looted and sealed so much equipment. All they want is a reason to shut it down.

This demonstrates the desire for things to change in a way that reduces the need for sex screening. But society-wide shifts in perspective and improvements to women's standing are necessary for female foeticide to come to a close. The Diwanchand family learns the hard way the repercussions of their previous transgressions thanks to Gurmi's quick thinking and the well-wishes of the sisters in Faces in the Water.

The pleasure of their life has evaporated, and they come to the realization that they would have been happier and more joyous if they had retained their girls. After Gurmi's father changes their ancestral house into "a home and school for abandoned baby girls," the family undergoes a sea shift as a result of this understanding. Despite her remorse for her wrongdoing, Surinder aunty closes her clinic and becomes leadership of the shelter, where the children "call her 'dadi'" and worship her. That there is hope and that our community can transform via concerted action is shown here.

CONCLUSION

Lastly, by delving into female infanticide and gender inequity in Indian children's literature, we uncover the power of narrative to reflect society and inspire change. Faces in the Water, by Ranjit Lal, and similar works enable young readers to critically examine patriarchal practices and biases that perpetuate the devaluation of female children. Such stories promote empathy, consciousness, and moral contemplation by depicting, via a young perspective, the ethical dilemmas and emotional repercussions of gender-based discrimination.

In doing so, they broaden the educational and ethical reach of children's literature by touching on topics that are often seen as too complicated or upsetting for young readers. Stories for children that address sensitive topics, such as female infanticide, show how literature can challenge cultural standards and inspire young minds to make a difference. The importance of gender equality in Indian children's literature cannot be overstated. By addressing this issue in a way that is accessible to young readers, we may help bring up a new generation that is more aware of the need for social justice, equity, and human dignity.

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