



## Gender bias: A study of the girl child in Indian fiction

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### KEYWORDS :

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was declared as the decade of the girl child. The paradox of the situation is that while women's issues are getting considerable attention, with feminists questioning the cultural paradigms and challenging the gender-bias, a significant link in the chain — the girl child — is relegated to the background. Commenting on invisibility of the girl child a critic points out that "as a character in literature and as a unique member of society, she has been largely invisible." However, in the last few years, researchers have shed their reticence with the female child and have focused on significant issues related to her.

The action-oriented researches in the field of sociology, social-psychology and other allied subjects, the government data available from time to time and our own observations of the changes in the society reveal that the position of the girl-child has not been static. Since independence, the government has taken steps for the enlistment of the female citizens. Attention is given to girls' education, also strong measures are taken to protect them against crime and abuse. Infanticide, child-marriage, sale-purchase of girls and other sexual offences are punishable. With the light of education spreading in their lives, the girls too are being aware of their rights and resent gender-bias.

These measures have wrought some changes and that go to the credit side of the government and the society. But the factual position has not changed much. Some over-riding questions still remain: has education changed a girl's position in her home and society? Is she as desirable as her male sibling? Have gender differentiation and victimization vanished? These and many other questions are disturbing and need to be probed.

The encouraging data notwithstanding, the girl child is a marginalised being in life, literature and society. The present paper seeks to read the stated subject using an inter-disciplinary and comparative approach to study of status of the girl child in Indian short fiction. Inter-disciplinary, because it proposes to study the girl child in the context of our psycho-socio-cultural milieu and comparative, because it aims at analyzing her position in contemporary Indian writings of both male and female authors to evaluate the changes in the attitude of the society with regard to the girl child.

Though the chosen works do not cover the Indian experience in its totality, they do give a comprehensive picture of modern Indian society. One question need be answered here: How can a study based on literary texts provide a reliable picture of gender roles in real life? After all, literature is a product of imagination and is prone to invention, whereas life and its problems are real, protean and unimaginable. Can literature substitute social sciences? In fact, as some Western critics assert, literary texts and life's existential realities are inter-connected. Literature is not written in a vacuum, nor is it a neutral artifact. Literary texts are written taking in view the prevalent ideologies and have to be read against that backdrop.

This study explores the position of the girl child in her society; it tries to understand her psyche and ascertain those factors that limit her situation in society. Though there are obvious changes in a girl's life today, the ingrained prejudices are still prevalent. The conflicts between traditional attitudes and modern ideas create rift in the inter-personal relations and damage girl's psyche irreparably. Following conversation from Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holders No Terrors* eloquently proves the point:

- (Mother) : Don't go out into the sun. You'll get even darker.  
 (Saru) : Who cares?  
 (Mother) : We have to care even if you don't. We have to get you married.  
 (Saru) : I don't want to get married.  
 (Mother) : Will you live with us all your life?  
 (Saru) : Why not?  
 (Mother) : You can't.  
 (Saru) : And Dhruva?  
 (Mother) : He's different. He's a boy (page 45).

The dialogue shows gender bias as well as the mother's traditional out-look.

In India girls are trained in household skills at an early age, even before they enter their puberty. They imbibe the virtues of care, nurturance and sympathy from the female members of the family. Thus by late childhood they are prepared to be "ideal" women. As Sudhir Kakkar points out, "Late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girl's deliberate training in how to be a good woman and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designed feminine roles. She learns that the 'virtues' of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in the various household tasks" (1981:62). This applies to almost all the sections of the society, as both men and women want the female members to inculcate the virtues of the respective class. Interestingly, many works of fiction portray how the family insists on training the girls as per the prescribed norms. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nector in a Sieve* (1955) the poor peasant family is keen to train their daughter Ira in feminine virtues, as also in Geeta Mehta's *Raj* (1989) where the Maharani insists that Jaya should be trained in feminine skills. When the Maharaja imparts training in riding and shooting to Jaya, the Maharani reacts sharply. According to her the masculine skills would be of no use to Jaya in her married life. The stress on making a girl an ideal female is so strong in the middle class Indian society. In teaching a girl to be a girl, the parents often impose norms whether they are acceptable to the child or not. The treatment meted out to and the lines drawn for the son and the daughter to follow often lead to resentment. Since a girl cannot and acceptably should not articulate, her protest keeps on seething within and may create psychological problems in later life. An eloquent example of a girl's protest is provided in Mrinal Pande's short story "Girls," her novel *Daughters Daughter* and also in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

In the vicious cycle of devaluation of a girl child one main reason for being unwelcome in a family is the dowry system, which literally impoverishes the parents. Its tragic manifestations are perceptible in infanticide and foeticide. This societal oppression though punishable by law is widely rampant in India and in many cases becomes the cause of psychological as well as physical torture. Having to "spend for her wedding" Saru is referred to as a "responsibility" which they "can't even evade" (144). This causes resentment and feelings of unworthiness in Saru though she does not give up. Saru's mother's concern over her marriage is not unfounded but guided by orthodox social custom. Ammu's marriage in *The God of Small Things* was delayed since "her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals comes Ammu's way" (38).

The hold of the traditional stereotypical image of women still has a strong hold on the Indian psyche and present-day Indo-centric approach to literature takes due cognisance of Indian social matrix to

deal with the representation of values in Indian literature. To grow up as a girl is different compared to growing up as a boy and it reflects the attitude of the society towards the female child. Indian literature, traditional as well as modern is canonical, replete with statements and images rejecting a girl child and showing craving for a male child. Meena Shirwadkar points out that in India from the days of the Atharva Veda (VI-2.3), the desire for a boy is manifest in words like "the birth of a girl grant it elsewhere, here grant a boy" and the birth of a girl is looked upon "with resignation, if not sorrow" (1979:24). Even the contemporary Indian English fiction reflects the social attitude. Women Writers conceptualise the trend to show its effect on their characters' psyche and record their resentment through the subversive actions of the characters. Indian fiction in English reflects the social trends.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* becomes "more important than Dhruva" only during the ceremony of 'Haldi-Kumkum' (56). She feels jealous of Dhruva who is given rides on the bicycle by her father perched on small seat "specially fixed" for him whereas with her he maintains a "reserve" which is "perhaps part of an old-fashioned attitude that daughters are their mother's business" (105). Her father's inattentiveness towards Saru makes her see Dhruva as her rival. She once tries "to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap" but fails (32). This jealousy between Saru and Dhruva is later discernible in her own children, Renu and Abhi. After her brother's birth Renu "retreated into silence", "never referred to the baby" and "ignored all reference to him" (72). Her happiness knew no bounds when her parents prepared him to go to the hospital thinking that they were "going to return him" (72).

Similarly when Mammachi in *The God Of Small Things* boasted that her son Chako was "one of the cleverest men in India" for one of the "dons at Oxford had said that in his opinion, Chako was brilliant and made of prime-ministerial material," Ammu's sibling jealousy made her laugh it away (55-56). For her own consolation she said aloud, "all Indian mothers are obsessed with their sons and are therefore poor judges of their ability" (56). Being a son he "was permitted excesses and eccentricities nobody else was" (38). "... In a society where the birth of a son has always been preferred to a daughter, where a daughter is considered a source of misery and trouble, and the son is the saviour and hope of the family, growing up for a girl child becomes an issue of survival" (Mathur 2000:21). However sometimes this marked affection for male children create in a girl child low self-esteem, depression and feeling of worthlessness besides the feelings of being wronged and hurt. the discrimination and feel less loved and cared for which is detrimental to a woman's development of self worth and generates conflict. The female experience of growing up in a patriarchal community which encourages them uphold the spirit of kinship, arrange their activities and lives centring around others without equal opportunity to develop their selves unlike the males, has a tremendous impact on their psyche and growth.

Gender discrimination in imparting education to a girl is conspicuous when Ammu has to discontinue her studies while Chako, her brother is sent to Oxford for higher education. Her college education was considered "an unnecessary expense" so sitting at home she "helped her mother with the house work" (38). Saru's further admission in the medical college is also seen as unnecessary by her mother who is been on getting her married.

Tinu and Dinu too in *Daughters Daughter* are being chiselled according to the traditional feminine. The undercurrent of gender bias reaches them. They are offended to find that their cousin, Anu is conferred great care and granted all wishes because he is a boy whereas the girls are taught to be endlessly giving and sacrificing. Dinu's refusal to give Anu the zari peacock she had found in the house ends up into a prolonged fight till the grandmother intervenes and urges her to give the peacock to Anu, to restore harmony in the house. Both the sisters are being taught to compromise, make sacrifices and be sharing, not to complain, but to maintain harmony in relationships. "Although we were being told not to do things alone and being given the example of seven brothers who even distributed a sesame seed

equally among themselves we know better than to surrender our treasure in this house to the son's children. We will never get it back" (32). Perpetual compromise and endless giving make them cry, feel sad and uneasy, generating within hurt feelings of injustice. Both the sisters paint their colour books with ear cleaning swabs, dipping their woolly ends in water whereas Anu who has "hoards of water colours, fine paint brushes" is never ordered to share or lend the two cousins their brushes. The girls' capacity for concentration in studies when praised by their tutor is overlooked whereas Anu's fidgeting is taken lightly. The aunts "smile or say something about boys being boys and about girls eventually needing skills only to roll out chapattis and boiling dal and rice" (48).

Gangadhar Gadgil's "The Lost Children" and Bhalchandra Nemade's "Mani's Dying." shows gender-bias. Mrinal Pande's "Girls" portrays the rebelliousness of the young heroine. There are Ajit Cour's little protagonists who appear mature for their years. In Kamala Das's 'A Doll for the Child Prostitute' we get a moving picture of a girl child sold as a prostitute before she can understand the meaning of man-woman relations. There are such numberless works that depict the plight of the girl child and give a realistic picture of the Girl Child, the mute victim of social injustices and help in raising social conscience. The authors, artists, educationists, reformers and activists will see the gaps required to be filled in and the activists will see the gaps required to be filled in the direction their movement should take. After all, realistic literature is closely linked with the existing society, the norms and values and hence an investigation of the nature of the present project is an invaluable help.

Literature, since time immemorial, has been an effective media to give voice to voiceless and awaken the society. The girl child belongs to that oppressed and down-trodden section of the society which will always require someone else to shout for her. The responsibility rests with the writers to depict the plight of the girl child, raise his/her voice against social injustice, cruelties and abuses she is subjected to, and thus sensitise the readers. Literature reaches more people through dramatization and through the media today, than does any other branch of learning; moreover, literature has the power to touch the inner core of the mass. It is, therefore, natural to call upon the literateurs to expose and censure this social evil and suggest ways and means.

Unfortunately, Indian literature -- classical, ancient, medieval, modern -- has not been much interested in the child character as such. The male child at least finds some representation but the female child does not exist for them except as a "mini woman". This anomaly has been removed to an extent in the contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Writers today do focus on the girl child as a child with a child's demands, pains and pleasures and successfully reveal their psyche. But, the question requires more delineation of the realities of their lives the crippling and insulting discriminations; the violence to their psyche and their person; oppression, sexual abuse and other cruelties toward them.

Today, we have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century but it is sad that one helpless section of our society -- The Girl Child -- is experiencing oppression and cruelties which are as real as they were two thousand years ago. As the society is becoming more materialistic the gap between the dominant group and the disempowered one is widening. A kind of revolutionary step is necessary to restore the "disempowered" girl child to her human dignity, worth and esteem. This is the joint responsibility of the enlightened sections of the society -- writers, artists, social scientists, activists and educationists, they have to go beyond their academic commitments and shake the society out of its complacency.

The present study gives a useful and due cognisance to the fact that our writers, reformers, educationists and social scientists need to feel the problem of the girl child from the heart and not at the intellectual or academic level. Society will benefit if we make a many sided attack on the issues concerning the girl child, awaken social conscience from its petrified silence and shake up its inability to respond, and thus give the girl child her dignity and self-esteem as a human being.

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