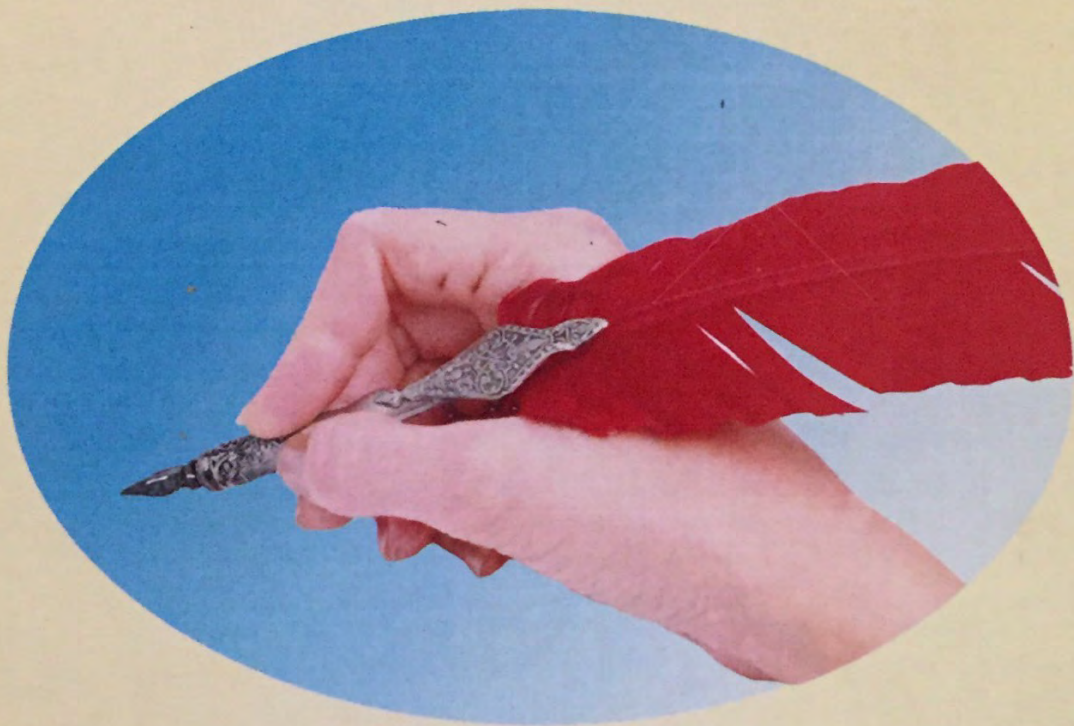


BLAZING TORCHES

*T.M. Umarani
Gomez Sophia
U. Anamica*



**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Jayaraj Annapackiam College For Women (Autonomous)
Periyakulam, Tamil Nadu, India.**

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FEMALE INFANTICIDE IN INDIAN WRITING IN
ENGLISH, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
DATTANI'S *TARA*

ANGELINE SORNA

*'I saw where in the shroud did lurk
A curious frame of Nature's work.
A flow 'ret crushed in the bud,
A nameless piece of Babyhood,
Was in a cradle-coffin lying;
Extinct, with scarce the sense of dying;
So soon to exchange the imprisoning womb
For darker closets of the tomb!...
... What thy errand here below?
Shall we say, that Nature blind
Check'd her hand, and changed her mind...'*

Charles Lamb in his poem, *On an Infant Dying as Soon as Born* laments the death of an infant thus. While this deeply melancholic and heart-wrenching poem talks about the death of an infant girl, this paper deals with the plight of a million baby girls who are denied even the basic dignity of 'the shroud' or the 'cradle-coffin' but are unceremoniously disposed off, sometimes even in a garbage can. It is about the uncountable flowerets crushed in the bud not because 'nature blind checked her hand and changed her mind' but because they were girls, the inferior and 'unwanted' sex!

As defined by UNICEF, female infanticide is the abortion of a foetus because it is female or the killing of an infant right after the birth, because it is female. A UN report reveals that between the years 1981-91, 1.2 million girls were missing in India, victims of female infanticide or foeticide. On the fiftieth anniversary year of Indian independence, million girls had been

denied the right even to be born in a country which prides itself on being the largest democracy of the world.

Over period spanning centuries, female infanticide had been embedded within Indian culture. A traditional blessing from Atharva Veda states,

“Let a female child be born somewhere else. Here, let a male child be born” (VI: 2 -3).

The woman was viewed only as a bearer of sons. She was the ‘field’ in which a man would sow his seed to bear sons. The ancient lawgiver Manu declared that a woman must be kept as a dependant. ‘Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence’. A daughter may be necessary to light a lamp in the house. A woman is necessary for procreation but all women were considered the property of their male relatives. Over generations both men and women have so totally internalized these ideas that they could find nothing wrong in plucking out an unwanted female child from the womb as if it were some intrusive weed.

Indian history as well as mythology abounds with stories of great kings who performed enormous sacrifices and underwent rigorous penance in order to produce male heirs. Prominent among these is King Dasaratha, father of Rama who obtained a special *kheer* and fed it to his three wives who promptly gave him four sturdy sons. Some people believe that Sita was one of the early saved victims of infanticide as she was found by King Janaka inside a pot buried in the earth, a traditional method of infanticide, practiced even today in North India. This brings us to the assumption that perhaps Rama and Sita were products of some ancient form of sex selection. When Mughal king Akbar wanted a male heir, he made a pilgrimage to seek the blessings of the powerful Sufi saint Sheik Salim Chishti. His prayer was fulfilled and soon a son was born. In honour of the saint, Akbar named the prince Salim. When enlightened kings like Dasaratha

and Akbar desperately wanted male heirs to continue their lineage little needs to be said about others.

In 1789, during British colonial rule in India, the British discovered that female infanticide was openly practiced in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. In 1857, John Cave-Brown documented for the first time the practice of female infanticide among the Jats in the Punjab region. Data from the census during the colonial period and from 2001 propose that the Jats have practiced female infanticide for 150 years. In 1870 the British government enacted the 'Prevention of Murder of Female Infants Act'. When statistics were collected in the nineteenth century, it was discovered that in some villages, no baby girls were found at all; in a total of thirty others, there were 54 girls to 343 boys. In 1898, female infanticide was recognised as a crime and the government order was passed making it a cognizable offence.

Enormity of the problem today

In spite of all the awareness created through campaigns by media and NGOs the practice is still in vogue at an alarmingly high rate. A casual reading of the newspapers would give us news of abandoned girl child or murdered girl baby in an average of 5 a month. According to women's rights activist Donna Fernandes, the practice is so deeply embedded within Indian culture it is "almost impossible to do away with it", and she has said that India is undergoing a type of "female genocide". The United Nations has declared that India is the most deadly country for female children and that in 2012 female children aged between 1 and 5 were 75 percent more likely to die as opposed to boys. The children's rights group 'CRY' has estimated that of 12 million females born yearly in India 1 million will have died within their first year of life.

Female Infanticide, a neglected topic in literature

Indian English Literature has been quite faithful in reflecting the gender-based violence and discrimination against women. The emotional dilemma of a woman's conflicting

conscience is captured in Kamala Markandaya's '*Some Inner Fury*', Zeenath Fotehally's '*Zohra*' and Attia Hosain's '*Sunlight on a Broken Column*' show woman's suffering due to polygamy and purdah system. The girls' problem of trying to adjust to the changing culture has been the preoccupation of most of the women novelists. Nayantara Sahgal, Chitra Banerjee, Jumphah Lahiri and others tell about the problems faced by sensitive educated girls who cannot feel at home either in the East or the West. Anita Desai specializes with the problems of adjustment. The girls are shown as having a sensitive nature which is too delicate to cope with the dehumanised urban surroundings and with the callousness of the in-laws like Maya in '*Cry, the Peacock*', Sara in '*Bye bye Blackbird*'. In '*God of Small Things*', Arundhati Roy hits on the glaring double standards prevailing in the society when it comes to daughters and sons. Namita Gokhale's '*The Book of Shadows*' deals with the cruelty of acid attack on women. The most shocking aspect of gender discrimination is that the discriminated women, paradoxically, get caught up in a 'vicious circle' that thrust the inequities of one generation to the next and play the main role in gender discrimination. Shashi Deshpande gives a brilliant description of this "vicious circle" in her famous novel, '*That Long Silence*'. Many pieces of literature just touch topics like domestic violence, dowry death, prostitution, eve teasing etc while the main focus is given to more saleable and interesting themes.

In the short story "*The Ultrasound*" included in the collection, "*Arranged Marriage*" Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni overtly talks about the practice of female foeticide in India. Rama Mehta in '*Inside the Haveli*', Kamala Markandaya, in '*Nectar in the Sieve*' and Chitra B. Divakaruni in '*The Mistress of Spices*' mention the 'unwanted girl child' syndrome. Though the syndrome of unwanted girl child is hinted in many works by Indian writers in English, the truth remains that not many have taken up female infanticide or foeticide as the main theme of their

writings and the issue is not reflected in its existing proportion and magnitude.

In the vast arena of Indian writers in English only a very few have taken up the challenging topic of female infanticide and foeticide as the main theme of their books. One such conscientious writer is Mahesh Dattani and his *Tara* is a powerful critique of socio-cultural evils associated with gender discrimination in Indian society. It climaxes tragically as it portrays the characters in angst as they grapple with guilt and atonement.

'*Tara*' is an enthralling play that questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways because of their gender. It is a play in two acts. It opens in London. The opening scene shows Chandan, (Dan), a playwright trying to remember his childhood days spent with his sister Tara. He tries to write a story about his own childhood but he has to write Tara's story as Tara and Chandan are the two sides of the same self, rather than two separate entities. The play revolves around these two Siamese twins who were joined at the hip during birth. They could only be separated surgically and the partiality and injustice started there. Proving true that a woman herself is the worst enemy of other women, the mother prefers the male child and thus strengthens the chain of injustice. The twins have just three legs in all and though it is clearly obvious that the leg is attached to the girl's nervous system, the gender biased mother and grandfather decide to give it to the boy during separation. They are even willing to pay a huge bribe to the doctor to do so. This one decision haunts the whole family and alters their life for good. The boy eventually loses the leg as it does not belong to his system and both of them remain crippled for life. After numerous surgeries and sixteen years of physical and emotional struggle Tara succumbs and dies. The parents fight all the time and the mother becomes insane. Chandan moves to England and tries to turn his anguish into drama by writing about his sister's childhood. Even after their unfair and

manipulated division, which is done against the law of nature, they are emotionally united. They share the same agony, which Dan tries to delineate by writing autobiographical drama, though a futile attempt.

Dimensions of female infanticide in *Tara*

Drama is considered to be the most effective and powerful genre in the world literature. The Indian English Drama has given voice to the unvoiced section of our society and it has been used as a medium to reflect the mean and unhappy aspects of life and create social awareness too. Dattani uses his plays to question all kinds of discrimination and his plays not only bring up gender issues and the space allotted to women in a patriarchal society, but also they deal with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of many girl-children even amongst educated, urban families.

'*Tara*' is not just the story of the protagonist of the play, but it is the story of every girl child born in Indian family whether urban or rural. Besides exposing the typical Indian mindset and preference of a boy child to a girl child, the drama looks at the triumphs and failures of an Indian family, comprising of father (Patel), mother (Bharati) and two children (Chandan and Tara). Tara is a lively girl, who does not get enough opportunities as his brother gets, eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes from the reality and settles in London; there he changes his name to 'Dan'. Dattani has presented the bizarre reality of women playing a secondary role to man. In this play, the idea of female infanticide is also presented.

Dattani explicitly talks about female infanticide in the first act when Roopa, a neighbour and friend of the twins, tells them about the tradition of Patels killing their girl children by drowning them in pots of milk:

Roopa. You would have had plenty of milk being a Patel and all that. (Laughs as if she has made a joke)

Tara (to Chandan). Did you get that?

Roopa. You mean you don't know about Patels?

Tara. Don't know what?...

Roopa. Since you insist I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies- you know dowry and things like that- so they used to drown them in milk.

Tara. In milk?

Roopa. So when people asked how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk.

Roopa. What a waste of milk! (pg29)

'Doodh Pithi', killing of unwanted girl babies by immersing in milk is commonly practiced in Patel community even today. Roopa's callous and shocking comment, "What a waste of milk?" shows how the society is indifferent to this outrageous act and values material things more than a precious little life. Though not a victim of actual female infanticide, she eventually shares the plight of the doomed children. The questions why Tara is denied the privilege of the good leg, why is she denied equal chances as Chandan though she is much smarter than her twin, why she is denied the right to own property, why she is considered a burden and many other questions have just one crystal clear answer that Tara is not wanted, because she is a girl. Tara is killed by this social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people and her potentiality is sacrificed at the altar of gender. Identity crisis becomes a chain with which a female is bound when the question of choice between male and female comes up.

Without offering any solution to the existing situation, Dattani presents the fact that female infanticide, gender bias and double standards cut through all the levels of the society and education or high standard of living has not brought about any

change in the mindset of the family. Just by presenting raw facts that twist our hearts, Dattani appeals to our conscience and makes us think.

Tara gives us a glimpse into the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced into thought and action. It speaks about male chauvinism prevalent in the present form and brings about the stark reality of the woman playing the second fiddle to man. It is a comment on the predicament of women in the past, reflects the status of women in the present and dramatizes the complexities of the social setup. The play is an exhortation to the society to shed the age old prejudices against women and have a progressive outlook.

It is contextual and relevant in the light of the increasing incidents of foeticide, infanticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. It is not just the story of the protagonist of the play, but it is the story of every girl child born in Indian family whether urban or rural.

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