

GENDER INEQUALITY IN ‘THE FORBIDDEN DAUGHTER’ OF SHOBHAN BANTWAL

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Abstract

Inequality between men and women has been existing since time immemorial across all nations, regions, religions, and cultures. Men are always treated superior to women and the latter are subjected to all sorts of ill-treatment and injustice. In India, a lot of gender discrimination and inequality between men and women exists. Women are considered weak and are treated as secondary to their male counterparts. Their valuable services towards the family and society are taken for granted and never acknowledged. This gender discrimination has been a serious social concern existing for centuries together at all social, economic, and political levels. Shobhan Bantwal in her novel ‘The Forbidden Daughter’ provides us a glimpse of the dark side of gender inequality through gender-selective abortions. The present paper is an attempt to apprehend how the menace, of female feticide, is practiced without remorse in Indian society.

Key Words: Gender, Gender Inequality, Gender Discrimination, female feticide.

Introduction

‘The Forbidden Daughter’ by Shobhan Bantwal is a beautifully woven intricate story around the prevalent social evil of India, female feticide. It is a heart-wrenching drama that gives an entrancing glimpse into the dark side of gender inequality in India. It is the second novel by Shobhan Bantwal after *The Dowry Bride* and is considered as the true and worthy successor. It acts as an eye-opener towards the strange modern custom of selective abortions. Shobhan Bantwal is a feminist writer who concentrates her works on various social practices and customs of the world, particularly Indian society that discriminate women on social, economic, and political levels.

Gender Inequality in ‘The Forbidden Daughter’

In a patriarchal society of India, the customs that are responsible for gender inequality and discrimination are patrilineality i.e., inheritance through only male descendants, and patrilocality i.e., married couples should live with or near the husband's parents. These customs paved the way for the ill-treatment of women. In the novel, ‘The Forbidden Daughter’, Isha was a victim of patrilocality. As Bantwal says, “Nikhil and she had no choice but to live with his folks. As their only son and daughter-in-law, they were expected to live with the parents, obey them, humour them, tolerate their foibles, and care for them.” (24)

In India, parental preferences of male children over the girl child and the practice of selective abortions are evident in decreasing the feminine ratio in India. According to the 2011 census “There were 919 girls under age six per 1000 boys, despite sex determination being outlawed

in India.” (Sharma) According to the research of Amith Singh, female feticide has become one of the gravest issues that are affecting the contemporary world which is treading inch by inch towards a land of no women. He found out that there is an uneven sex ratio throughout the world and particularly, in India. In his article, he discusses several serious social consequences that are caused by female feticide such as rapes, molestations, prostitution, etc. He claims that female feticide at large jeopardizes human existence in the first place.

Mehar Singh Gill in his “Female Foeticide in India: Looking beyond Son Preference and Dowry” attempts to discuss factors that force people to select female feticide. Gill finds out that dowry and son preference are not the only reasons in this regard. It is found out that the son’s family plays a significant role in defence of the violence inflicted against the girl child. Gill also finds out that more than son preference, it is an aversion towards daughters that needs attention. The paper attempts to understand the dynamics of both son preference and daughter aversion as well. The reason is that girl children are seen as liabilities whereas sons are assets as per the social norms observed in the country. This resulted in a spike in female foeticide in India.

. . . in case of densely populated countries like India and China, preference for male children seems to have rather gone up in recent decades, particularly with the adoption of smaller family norms. In other words, the basal cause of female foeticide is essentially not the son preference per se, but the underlying factors that make such preference go up or go down. (Gill 291)

Gill suggests a few steps like a high level of urbanization which results in individuality and challenges the traditional structure of dependency on other people, be it father, brother, husband, or son. Women empowerment in relation to education and equal pay that would result in real world role models for the upcoming generations unlike the mythological models of ideal women who need to take care of family and culture is also an important step to be observed. Gill also suggests that “adoption of the same standards of sexual purity, whatever these may be, for both males and females would play a very important role in reducing son preference as well as an aversion to daughters.” (301)

Shobhan Bantwal took this social evil of female feticide as the crux of her novel ‘The Forbidden Daughter’. The whole story of ‘The Forbidden Daughter’ revolves around female feticide. The crux of the story lies in the attempts to expose the dark side of doctor Karnik earning illegal amounts by secretly performing selective abortions against law. It was to uncover the rocket of doctor Karnik, Nikhil, Isha’s husband was murdered. Later Isha’s newborn baby girl, Diya was kidnapped to extort the proofs of doctor Karnik’s illegal business from Isha.

According to UNICEF, “Across India, gender inequality results in unequal opportunities, and while it impacts on the lives of both genders, statistically it is girls that are the most disadvantaged.” (Gender Equality)

Gender discrimination is viewed across all classes and castes in Indian Society as an economic and financial liability despite their contribution to our society. The major reasons for gender inequality in India are identified as the need for a male heir for the family, huge dowry, continuous physical and financial support to a girl child, poverty, domestic violence, farming as major jobs for the poor, and the caste system. (Jha 48)

Jha also identifies different economic, social, cultural, legal, and political factors which are fully responsible for gender inequality in India. Economic factors include labour participation, access to credit, occupational inequality, property rights, women's inequality in proper inheritance, and employment inequality. Social factors resulting in gender inequality include education, health, patriarchal society, dowry, gender-based violence, women's inequality in decision making. Cultural factors are old-age support from sons, patrilineality system, the role of sons in religious rituals, and son preference. Despite men and women being equal in the eyes of law, legal and political bias has hindered the attainment of equality and resulted in gender inequality.

Married women in India are treated with basic respect, only if they produce sons. A woman who begets daughters is ill-treated and is a constant receiver of hate and contempt. Isha often reflects the same in the novel while she says about her sister-in-law – “The Proverbial icing on Sheila's Cake: she had produced two beautiful boys.” (Bantwal, 22)

Priya, Isha's eldest daughter was constantly looked down on and reprimanded for her actions. She was always compared to her cousins Milind and Arvind, sons of Sheila, for nothing. And in Tilak's eyes, the boys could do no wrong. They received loads of attention while Priya got none. Ayee and Baba, as the children addressed her in-laws, although not overtly abusive to Priya, never showed her any affection. She was kept at a distance and subjected to stern discipline. (Bantwal 22)

When Priya was old enough to sense the discrimination, she started to complain about it and acted upon noticing Sheila's boys receiving extra attention. Nikhil and Isha tried to make it up for her, but it was “hard to explain to a child that her gender has everything to do with the way they treated her” (Bantwal 23) Even Isha was constantly criticized for her ways of rising Priya. Nikhil's and Isha's attempts to cheer up Priya were termed as spoiling the child by her in-laws. Priya never received any affection from her grandparents, not even when she lost her father. Priya's tantrums for missing her father were treated as indiscipline and adamant. Priya's grandmother often complained,

“Every Day it's the same thing, crying and more crying. You don't see Milind and Arvind behaving like that. Girls are such fusspots” (Bantwal 44)

Thus, Isha's mother-in-law stereotyped the act of crying for her lost father as weak nature of girl children. Priya's grandfather went a step ahead and physically punished her by grabbing Priya by her arm and whacking her bottom repeatedly as she was crying and refusing to go to school after Nikhil's death. Isha could take it no longer and left the house instantly as she realized that there was no security in that house neither for her and Priya nor her unborn daughter in Nikhil's absence as her in-laws constantly blamed Isha's unborn daughter for Nikhil's untimely demise.

Isha always wondered if Sheila who is now treated with respect by her parents, was at all treated equally with Nikhil when they were kids. By the time Isha got married to Nikhil, Sheila was treated as a model daughter by Tilaks for being a faithful wife to a successful man and giving them two beautiful grandsons.

“Did your parents treat you the way they did Priya, because you were a girl?” (Bantwal 119) asked Isha when Sheila visited her in the Convent for the first time after she left home.

“They were always stricter with me,” said Sheila, “and I was scolded for the things Nikhil was never reprimanded for. Back then, I thought it because he was younger. . . As I grew older, I realized there were other reasons for the way they behaved . . . They doted on Nikhil. He was perfect in their eyes. (Bantwal 120)

Thus, gender discrimination and gender inequality are observed across caste, creed, and section in Indian society. In India, it is very common that girl children are seen as unlucky and bad omen that brings ill luck to their families. Despite their education, social status, or culture, families treat girls as burdens and despicable. Isha’s mother-in-law, allegedly a progressive woman with a college degree and an interest in arts and literature is no different in considering her unborn granddaughter as the whole reason for her son’s death. She was never happy even when Priya was born.

“Arrebapre . . . a girl” (Bantwal 19) was her reaction when Isha had given birth to Priya. The moment they came to know that Isha was pregnant with her second daughter they were very upset. One day they stooped to the level of suggesting the dreadful subject of abortion to the shock and disbelief of Nikhil and Isha. From then on, every dinner in their house started with “Stilted conversation, then deteriorated into emotional arguments, and finally sank into sullen silence.” (Bantwal 27).

It strained the relationship between the younger and older tilaks. The bitterness and animosity grew day by day along with the baby in Isha’s womb. Nikhil’s untimely death during that time put Isha and her kids in a tough spot. Isha’s mother-in-law blamed the unborn child as the prime reason for Nikhil’s death.

“If you had not ignored our suggestion to have an abortion, Nikhil would still be here. I was telling you for weeks that the unborn child is showing all the signs of bad luck.” (Bantwal 45) When Isha retorted, she further added, “The astrologer warned me about that child. The baby is not even here yet and already has caused so much tragedy for us. What will happen after she is born?” (Bantwal 45)

Isha’s rebel against her in-laws worsened the situation and ended with her father-in-law punishing Priya. Isha could now sense without doubt, the resentment of her in-laws towards her and her daughters, with Nikhil gone. The incident left both Isha and Priya terrified. Isha knew that it’s time she moved out of her in-law’s house. Nowhere to go, as she has lost both her parents, she decided to go to the convent run by nuns that she attended in her childhood. The convent occasionally offered shelter for women on a temporary basis. Despite her decent brought up and affluence, she decided to take shelter in an orphanage. All she took along with her was, the insurance policy that Nikhil had taken, making her his sole beneficiary. Isha being a woman of self-respect was prepared to live a meagre life rather than put up with the ill-treatment of the elder Tilaks. She gave birth to her younger daughter in the convent in minimal conditions. She lived at the convent for a short while taking care of her children and teaching orphans there. Thus, Isha brought up her daughters away from the Tilaks and their bigoted philosophy that girl children are burdens and bad omen.

Conclusion

Shobhan Bantwal dealt with gender inequality and gender discrimination in her second novel ‘The Forbidden Daughter’. Through the character Isha, she validated that an independent woman could lead her life with dignity and contentment managing simultaneously both her children and business. The novel asserts that girl children bring prosperity, light, and

abundance to everyone around them. They must be treated as goddesses on the Hindu Karmic land but not as bad omen or burden. Shobhan Bantwal exposes the evil practice of gender-selective killing in her gripping tale to emphasize that curbing female feticide is the need of the hour. Finally, Bantwal elucidates that, gender discrimination and gender inequality can be curtailed in India through women empowerment i.e., by encouraging girls to pursue higher education, teaching them life skills, and allowing them to take up employment.

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