

*Mrs. V. Vanitha,
Assistant Professor (SG),
Department of English,
SVS College of Engineering,
Women (Autonomous),
Coimbatore-6420109

**Dr. D. Anusuya,
Emeritus Professor,
Department of English (Aided)
Sri GVG Visalakshi College for (Autonomous),
Udumalpet, Coimbatore-642 132

FEMALE FOETICIDE: A SEVERE CHALLENGE FOR THE SOCIETY IN CHITRA
BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE ULTRA SOUND*

ABSTRACT

Female foeticide is a severe blow to humanity. It is the most disgraceful and deplorable act on the part of human beings who are considered to be the superior creatures of God responsible to create conducive conditions for the existence and survival of their fellows. It has widespread repercussions on humans and society as well. Women have been the subject of deprivation, discrimination, intimidation, and unjust treatment in society throughout history. The modern and sophisticated but heinous assault on women is not to allow them to come into existence. It is none other than female foeticide. It is the elimination of the female foetus in the womb.

Women who constitute half a human population have been discriminated, harassed and exploited irrespective of the country to which they belong, unmindful of the religion which they agree and oblivious of the time frame in which they live. Everywhere women are confronted with many challenges. Female foeticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of brutality against women where a woman is denied her most basic and elementary right i.e. “the right to life”. The phenomenon of female foeticide in India is not new, where female embryos or fetuses are selectively eliminated after pre-natal sex determination, thus eliminating girl child even before they are born. With the advancement of medical technology sophisticated techniques can now be used or rather misused, to get rid of her before birth. Through ultrasound scans and amniocentesis, the sex of the foetus can be determined during the pregnancy of the woman and then the foetus is aborted if found to be female.

Female foeticide has become a social hazard of international significance in the era of ultrasound technology and capitalist modernity. This paper tries to focus on the rationale behind the foeticide, and the consequences of this phenomenon on the Indian society. Finally, this paper will review to the measures taken to combat this heinous phenomenon for a balanced society. In *The Ultra Sound* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni draws attention to one of the scourges of contemporary India: female infanticide.

Key Words: Female foeticide, factors, strategies to curb

Medical advances and technological development have enabled scientists and medical practitioners to initiate certain methods and techniques to determine the sex of the foetus. The most important among them are amniocentesis, chorion villus Biopsy and now the widely used ultrasonography. People are interested to know the sex of the foetus. When it is determined, and found to be a female one, it is aborted. The sex-determination tests were basically designed to detect gender related congenital abnormality in the unborn child. It is unfortunate

that it is abused largely in India and other Asian countries to detect the sex of the foetus in order to have it aborted if it happens to be that of a female.

In spite of over six decades of Independence, in spite of India making rapid progress in science, technology and other fields, the picture that we see of India as of now is not one that can be appreciated, especially in terms of its treatment to the fairer sex. Chitra Banerjee focuses on discrimination against girl children, parents' neglect of the girl child, illegal abortions and female infanticide. The practice of female foeticide, which is illegal, is still prevalent in our country. There is one section of the Indian society which is trying its level best to be liberal in their thoughts, although aping the Western culture. On the other hand, there is another section of the society, in fact a large chunk of it, which is still in the clutches of orthodox views and thoughts. Female foeticide is one such grave social problem arising out of the so-called "traditional thoughts" of the society. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her writing stressing the point that illegal abortion of the female foetus is done due to family from in-laws, husband or the woman's parents, and the reasons for this are preference of son, girls being considered as a burden, poverty, illiteracy, social discrimination against women etc.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Ultrasound* from the short story collections *Arranged Marriage*, is a story which represents the current burning issue of female foeticide and female infanticide. It is a story about the treatment that an expecting mother receives after the disclosure of arrival of girl child. The discriminative approach towards women and girl child by patriarchal society is very much visible in this story. The inhuman attitude of female infanticide is criticized. It also criticizes the hardcore reality of how in old times the brutal system of female infanticide was being practiced and how the advancement of technology has changed the mode of operation but this technique "ultrasound" is very much responsible for the declining ratio of girl child as it is misused.

In *The Ultra Sound* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni draws attention to one of the scourges of contemporary India: female infanticide. In recent years the sex ratio had been declining rather alarmingly in favour of male infants and clinics which offered sex determination diagnoses were springing up all over the country. The connection between these two events was obvious to the government as the pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act was passed in 1994, which banned the use of these techniques for the purpose of determining the sex of the foetus. Despite the act, hundreds of female foetuses were still being aborted after ultrasound detection, which led the Supreme Court in May 2001 to call the Centre and State governments to implement the law more strictly. Discovery of female foetus had led many parents to seek an abortion owing to the inferior social status still afforded women in Indian society. Girls, moreover, are seen as heavy financial burden for parents who feel obliged by custom to provide a dowry, which in many cases, far exceeds their income. In Divakaruni's story, which, it should be noted, was written soon after the PNDT Act was passed, an abortion is desired merely to ensure that the eldest child of a wealthy, respectable, Brahmin family is not female. Far from being an economic necessity, tradition demands that the Bhattacharjee household close ranks and insist on Arundhati, the eldest daughter-in-law, terminating her pregnancy.

Arundhati's plight is contrasted with the liberal atmosphere of her cousin, Anjali's marriage in California. Both cousins had a traditional arranged marriage but fate took Anjali to San Jose with her husband, Sunil, who, despite the fact that his salary is modest, has encouraged her wife to continue his studies. Arundhati's husband, Ramesh works for Indian Railways and is frequently absent from the home leaving his young wife to cope with his mother and younger brothers. Differences apart both girls share a similarly unromantic view of marriage. As Anju muses: "Our husbands are kind and dependable and take good care of

us. In the Indian culture, that is the same as love” (A.M.213). However the life styles and expectations of the two cousins have little in common. Anju looks for to graduation and sharing parenthood with Sunil, while Arundhati’s world revolves around domestic chores and motherhood is an obligation that she must fulfil. Her role is to be accommodating, self-effacing, serving, kind and chaste and failure to comply with these approved standards can end up in anything ranging from mild disapproval to callous rejection.

After five years of marriage and visits to holy shrines, Arundhati finally becomes pregnant but her initial happiness is shattered when the news that the child she is carrying is a girl is not greeted with the same joy by her –in-laws .Her options are limited as public opinion would brand her as a bad woman. She would not be seen to have abandoned her husband’s home; they would have thrown her out for transgressing the norms of accepted Indian wifely behaviour. Anju is horrified both by her cousin’s dilemma and by the indifference shown by Arundhati’s and her own mother and Sunil. Her sense of justice and and gender equality is grievously insulted first when she learns that her cousin has had to undergo a gynaecological examination to check she was fertile and later when she discovers the abortion plan.

Patriarchy definitely bears a large share of the responsibility for the low status that women have in India, but that argument shifts the emotional responsibility to only one half of the humanity. Middle class women, such as the characters of the story, are also to blame for their lack of group worth and constant difference to male approval. Real female consciousness can only start working if women themselves begin to take responsibility for their own fate and demand their rightful position in the family.

Anju believes that her advice to Runu to leave the Bhattacharjee household and fight for her baby is the only solution that her cousin can take if she is to preserve her dignity and

integrity. Anju believes that she can offer Runu a new life in the United States with her daughter. One hopes that the Indian community she will try to join will not ostracize her for failing to conform to the rules. It should be remembered that ethnic communities often tend to define themselves with reference to an idealized home, a frozen, almost fossilized version of the country they have left behind. In this romanticised idea of the nation, religious, linguistic and regional specificities are subsumed under a kind of pan-Indian identity which is articulated and presented to the mainstream host society. Thus ethnic associations that set themselves up as spokespeople of the diasporic community the idea of one Indian culture, one set of Indian beliefs, one Indian life style and so forth. As outlined above, such monolithic constructs of Indianess force a fixed code of conduct on women, who are cast in the role of the transmitters of the eternal spirit of India. Consequently, anyone who threatens to transgress the unwritten rules of Indian womanhood is branded as a betrayer of all those sacred values: culture, tradition, the family, the Indian community itself.

Chitra Banerjee transmits the particular message to her readers that promoting gender balanced society involves targeting behavioural changes in society which in turn involves a long term community based intervention, awareness programmes, programmes to promote girl children's right and concerted efforts to change the mindset of the people. Divakaruni uses her stories to empower men, to encourage them to be themselves. She shows how personal choice is the birth right of all humans, men and women, Indians or Americans and that tradition can frequently encumber more than inspire. Therefore everyone must have to realise the importance of girl child in the family. Elimination of the female foetus can only be allowed when the life of the mother is in danger or there is any abnormality in the unborn child, otherwise it should be strictly prohibited. It indeed time to energize efforts to put gender equality at the top of development agenda and contribute in whatever way we can to give opportunities to girl children to bloom and shine. Moral education should be given to

both girls and boys so that they may understand the difference between right and wrong, justice and injustice and appreciate the values that are essential for human survival in this world. They should also learn to cherish those ideals that enable humans to live with others in peace and harmony, and cooperate with them to make their lives comfortable and meaningful.

References

Ghosh. Aritra. Female Foeticide and Gender Inequality in India, UGC Project Fellow & Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Sociology

Divakaruni, Chitra. B. *Arranged Marriage: Stories* (1995), India: Picader,1995. Print.

S Garg¹, A Nath² Female foeticide in India: Issues and concerns, Symposium: Violence against Children and Women, Year: 2008, Volume:54 Issue:4 Page:276-279

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315046300_FEMALE_FOETICIDE_AND_GENDER_INEQUALITY_IN_INDIA