

GENDERED VIOLENCE: INTERROGATING SPACE IN MADHUSREE DUTTA'S MEMORIES OF FEAR AND NYNA PAIS CAPUTI'S PETALS IN THE DUST: THE ENDANGERED INDIAN GIRLS

DR. MADHUMITA BASU

Abstract: Violence is a foundational and systematic feature of all contemporary patriarchies. The decades bracketing the turn of the century have witnessed unprecedented violence towards women. The place of gendered violence is not confined to national parameters but also located within transnational, economic and political configurations. This paper explores two heart-rending documentaries: Madhusree Dutta's *Memories of Fear* and Nyna Pais Caputi's *Petals in the Dust: The Endangered Indian Girls* and interrogates the severe discrimination faced by Indian girls at different stages of their lives. Caputi's documentary film portrays sex selective abortion that has led to the tragic and horrifying elimination of India's girls. Dutta's non-fictional film is an evocative portrayal of the interplay between sexuality, construction of fear and women's own contribution to the system that continues to denigrate them. Both the documentaries problematize modern Indian woman's sense of space and reflect that Indian women continue to remain a victim of the complex process of hierarchies, exclusions and othering. The analytical approach of this paper stems from the feminist studies of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Kumkum Sangari.

Keywords: Gendercide; foeticide; infanticide; sex selective abortion; gender violence

The decades bracketing the turn of the century have witnessed intense and unprecedented growth in the Indian economy. Modernisation has changed the fabric of Indian society in many ways. Over the last 50 years since Independence, India has showed remarkable progress, economically as well as socially, in reduced poverty and dramatically increased literacy rates. Despite economic success and material welfare, the position of Indian women continues to remain paradoxical. On one hand, the country has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are allowed to enter into professional fields, while on the other hand are seen practices of female infanticide and foeticide.

Son preference is widespread across Indian society with little variance across income classes, education levels, and rural/ urban areas. According to census data, the child sex Ratio (0-6 years) in India was 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001, which dropped drastically to 918 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2011. Gender biased sex selection is a discriminatory practice against girls which is embedded in a complex net of socio-economic and cultural factors. In most Indian families, a girl is considered 'paraya dhan' (someone else's property, not worth investing in), a burden whose safety needs to be ensured, who need to be paid for during marriage. Many women who give birth to girl children are forced to undergo sex selection, termed unfit for motherhood and treated like outcasts by their own families and communities. This prejudice against girl children has penetrated the urban-rural boundaries, not only causing a skewed sex ratio, but a rapidly declining sex ratio which raises some serious concerns about the discriminatory practices prevailing in twenty first century India.

Sociological research studies argue that son preference itself emanates from patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal practices all of which undermine the value of girls. More specifically, hypergamy prompts payment of high dowry to secure a worthy groom; exogamy and patrilocality translate into daughters having to marry outside the clan and relocating into marital families situated (most often) quite far from the natal home. Parents also cease to have rights over their daughters after marriage and cannot claim any physical or financial support. Patrilineality means that lineage is traced from the male descendants and also becomes a way of organising inheritance of property. These practices give rise to a host of other customs and traditions which subordinate women and their families and contribute to son preference. The patrilineal and patrilocal character of Indian kinship system dictates that sons are responsible for maintaining their aged parents. Couples with only daughters face a potential future of deprivation and loneliness. Preferences for sons, therefore, are closely tied to security for one's old age.

In India, girls are ruthlessly killed, aborted and abandoned simply because they are girls. The United Nations estimates as many as 200 million girls are missing in the world today because of "gendercide". Gendercide is described as the systematic killing of members of a specific sex. In India gendercide is seen in the systematic killing of women for various reasons, usually cultural. The most widespread form of gendercide is seen in the practice of gender selective infanticide and foeticide. Gendercide in South Asia takes many forms. Sometimes girls are killed or abandoned if not aborted as fetuses. Girls that are not killed often suffer malnutrition and

medical neglect as sons are favoured when shelter, medicine and food are scarce. Girls who survive infancy are often subject to neglect, and many grow up to face extreme violence and even death at the hands of their own husbands or other family members. The war against girls is rooted in centuries-old tradition and sustained by deeply ingrained cultural dynamics.

Nyna Pais Caputi's film, *Petals in the Dust*, is a documentary that brings to light the tragic annihilation of millions of Indian girls and women due to a preference of sons among Indian society. Weaving statistics, personal stories, and interviews with activists working to end the mistreatment of and discrimination against females; Caputi paints a vision of human cruelty that transcends the wars and genocides of modern history. Historical documents and endless news reports of the maltreatment of the female gender demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of this cruelty. The film interrogates the roots of misogyny, the experiences of women across socioeconomic and political lines.

Exploring the cultural origins of female genocidal crime, *Petals in the Dust* includes the voices of activists and gender experts as well survivors of gender crimes who have struggled to build meaningful lives. With escalating violence against women in India, this film shares the director's personal journey as a filmmaker to understand and shed light on the enormity of the problem of gender discrimination and violence. The film exposes the attitudes underlying the devaluing of women in Indian culture. Although sex-selection abortion is illegal in India, it is widely practiced, apparently at all levels of society. To combat sex-selection abortion, Indian law prohibits the use of ultrasound to determine the sex of the baby, but the law is widely ignored. According to Donna Fernandes, co-founder of the Vimochana women's rights organization, ultrasound clinicians have told her that even the daughters-in-law of judges have come for sex-determination ultrasound tests. Kumkum Sangari in her essay *Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture* writes:

The fact that there is no full male monopoly of institutional and interpersonal violence; that women can be active agents in inciting and inflicting violence, suggests the obvious that patriarchies are not the rule of men over women but systemic structures... Indeed patriarchies work to undermine solidarities by dividing women within the same family, neighbourhood, caste or class, as well as across classes, castes and religion. (327)

The most disturbing sequence in the film is of a woman who, after an ultrasound realised that her child was a girl and had an abortion. She has so internalized the patriarchal system's devaluation of women that she justifies this: "Girl baby means for 18 years I have to look for some boys to get married. I

have to make some property. That's why I don't like girl's life."

The film also includes a heartbreaking sequence in which a mother describes how her husband took her newborn girl away from her. The husband killed their baby girl: "My husband and his family wanted me to give the baby girl poison...and kill her. I went crazy with grief. I said 'No, I will not let that happen to my baby daughter.' In spite of that, they took her to my friend's house without my knowledge, and fed her rice husks. (Rice husks will slit the baby girl's throat from the inside.) I asked my husband "Where is my baby?" He said "She is dead."

While Caputi's film, *Petals in the Dust*, portrays the grotesque reality of the indiscriminate elimination of the girl child in India, Madhusree Dutta's *Memories of Fear* is an attempt to capture the process of socialization of girl children which makes them vulnerable to violence in later life. The documentary shows how girls are socially conditioned into a fear psychosis about just anything so that it is easier to control and suppress them. The film won the National Award for the Best Film on social issues in 1996. The documentary explores male despotism, the sexualisation and objectification of women as mere objects of male sexual, sadistic pleasure, humiliation and harassment of women both at home and at work place, sexual violence, crime and ill treatment done to women.

In the film there are four parallel narratives that trace the path of growing up of girls of various age groups. The film deals with the shattering of their dreams, the construction of their desires, the growing alienation from their body and the formation of fear. Although the experiences are apparently insignificant, they influence the gender construction of woman's psyche. The experiential narratives are juxtaposed with interviews of older women who have gone through violent marriages and are able to trace the connection between the construction of femininity and marital violence. Kumkum Sangari in the essay *Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture* writes:

Violence is a foundational and systemic feature of all contemporary patriarchies. Women's consent to patriarchies is often an effect of the anticipation of violence, or the guarantee of violence in the last instance- to ensure obedience, inculcate submission, punish transgression. Patriarchies rest equally on consent by women, violence against women, and on legitimating ideologies."(326)

The film evocatively portrays how women are reduced to erotic objects of the male gaze. Consequently, women are made to feel inadequate and insecure and they eventually capitulate to the patriarchal demand upon their bodies. Madhusree Dutta says the the film germinated in her mind when she met an elderly

woman who had come to the NGO Majlis looking for a way to help her daughter out of her abusive marriage. The elderly woman herself had been in an abusive marriage and said sadly, "I gave her fear as inheritance and that is why she could not cope with her own life." And that was the beginnings of a film that explored invisibility, violence and living in the city. In this film, parallel narratives trace the way in which four girls of different ages grow up and the connections between violence and desire. Dutta also wanted a form that would dilute the idea of testimony as raw data. So the film also included stylised performances, embellished re-enactments along with the more conventional testimonies.

In India where caste based discrimination, religious antagonism, class consciousness and economic disparity prevail; the subaltern state of being can be discerned at different levels of existence. Added to this there is a strong gender-based discrimination in India over the ages. In the words of Spivak, women constitute what she calls the "gendered subaltern". Both the documentaries explore the marginalised, helpless predicament of Indian women. In a male chauvinistic social setup, women are often rendered vulnerable. The dominant male ideology subjugates them, and puts some normative and discriminatory 'laws' before them to follow without questioning; it institutionalises these 'laws', and enforces them through family, society, politics or administration. Spivak's comment in this regard needs special

mention: "It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps male dominant". (*Can the Subaltern Speak*, 28) These documentary representations demonstrate that the condition of gendered subalternity is not limited to one social class or group of women. Though the women seen in these documentaries come from different backgrounds, social forces restrict them to conditions of subservience.

Both the documentaries interrogate the ambivalent position of Indian women. Son fixation has led to a culture of violence against girls, from being killed in wombs, to being killed as infants, to starved and trafficked as young girls, to being beaten as wives. The anti-female bias is by no means limited to poor families. Much of the discrimination is to do with cultural beliefs and social norms. These norms continue to de-stabilize the position of Indian women. Indian women in the twenty first century would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain gender justice. Women have acquired a level of financial and political autonomy and consciousness about their rights, yet they experience helplessness in bringing about basic changes for eliminating gender inequalities from the society. Although education is a powerful predictor of women's role and status and agency within the household, it is by no means their only relevant attribute that can potentially influence fertility decision-making within the household.

References:

1. Sangari, Kumkum. "Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture". ed. Women Contesting Culture. Changing Frames of Gender Politics in India. Ed. Kavita Panjabi and Paromita Chakravarti. Kolkata: Stree, 2012.
2. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Rev. ed. reprinted in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Ed. Rosalind C. Morris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
3. Caputi, Nyna Pais. *Petals in the Dust: The Endangered Indian Girls*. 2014. DVD.
4. Dutta, Madhusree. *Memories of Fear*. 1995. DVD

Dr. Madhumita Basu/ Assistant Professor/ Victoria Institution (College)/