

Realism in Kishwar Desai's Novel Witness the Night

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Abstract

Kishwar Desai is one of the finest women writers of Modern India. Her novels are social thrillers. It is set in the beating heart of modern day India that lay bare its cauldron of inequalities, injustices and cultural traditions. Women are the divine gift from God. But they are brutally tortured from womb to tomb. Kishwar Desai is a fine writer who highlights the hidden social realism of female infanticide and foeticide in Northern India. I feel alone, as I have always been. The child who should never have been born anyway. This is what the child feels because of the neglect from her own parents. This paper focuses on the social realistic picture of women in the fiction Witness the Night. Desai perfectly probes the extent of harassment and child abuse which happens in Punjab. She delves deep into the pathetic condition of women and their exploitation by the society and its impact on women.

KEYWORDS: Distorted, Penniless Refugee, Insufficient, Insecure, A cry for help

In our present society, harassment can be attributed to women in many forms like physical, visual or verbal conduct. It may occur when there is disparity in age, sexual difference, race, colour, religion, natural origin, disability, political orientation or any other legally protected status. Harassment is of different kinds, including verbal harassment, physical and psychological harassment and visual harassment. It can occur at a child's home or in the organizations, schools or communities where the girl interacts with. There are four major categories of child abuse: neglect, physical abuse, psychological or emotional abuse and sexual abuse. Different jurisdictions have developed their own definition of what constitutes child abuse for the purposes of removing a female child from his or her family and prosecuting a criminal charge.

Kishwar Desai in her novel, Witness the Night highlights the suffering and torment of girl children who belong to a reputed family. She gives different instances to highlight the atrocities caused to those children by their family and also by the society at large. This novel portrays the life of two sisters Sharda and Durga of Atwal family in Jullundar. Their relationship with their parents is not good. Atwal family does not like female children so they try to kill them. But however Sharda and Durga escape from the clutches of death. Sharda is rescued by Jitu, their brother and Durga in turn is saved by her sister Sharda. Their parents do not show any care or concern for their children. They give importance only to boys. But the girl Durga yearns for love from her parents. After that her parents begins to treat her more cruelly because of female sex. Her mother too does not have any love for her but she devotes her time in worshipping.

After getting matured, she begins to notice the strange things around the house. She is much more of a boy than a girl in her own mind. She tries to do everything the boys did including horse-riding and cricket. She has even learnt to smoke and abuse their parents like them. But for all, she gets only slaps and the boys get love and praise. She is not even allowed to go anywhere. Her father also invests the shares in the name of the boys. In the home, they are not allowed to touch the shelves in the library cupboards. So Durga's only companion is her sister Sharda.

Kishwar Desai pictures the hidden reality of the cruel female infanticide in Northern India. Durga and Sharda get depressed by seeing the skeletons of their unknown sisters who are buried in the backyard. Their grandmother dislikes her daughter-in-law's inability to produce a male heir. Moreover they kill the female children and allow them to be swept away on the path of the bees before they are talk or walk.

Motherhood is a boon to women. Durga's mother feels unlucky because she could be humiliated daily by her mother-in-law to give birth to the girls instead of male heirs. So she feed her opium and thought Durga is dead. They try to bury her in the ground. But fortunately she is saved by her sister Sharda from the graveyard. Thus Durga tells: "I can still feel the earth being shoveled on to me. Sometimes in my nightmares the mud descends on my face, handfuls of dirt are shoved into my mouth and in my eyes. Breathless, I gulp for air and fight the bed sheets" (156-57).

Kishwar Desai points out that the Atwal family considers the female infants are the curse to their family. So when they were born, they give her opium and put her in a pot of milk and twirled it around. They then bury the pot in the ground without the notice of the public. Occasionally, while tilling the land, tiny skeletons is turned up in the earth, but the family members hide it from others. Durga finds a tiny white skeletal hand with tiny skull and other limbs but they have all been crushed by the tractor. So Durga asked Sharda, "When soldiers die in the army, there must be thousands of skeletons left behind. But when that happens people give them medals and honour their families. These little babies...no one even remembers them" (139).

As a television anchor Desai brings the social realism as the headline in her novel as "saplings were being planted in memory of all the disappeared daughters" (54). This incident reveals the extent of harassment and child abuse which happens in Punjab. In Punjab the sex ratio is very low, for 1000 men 850 girls are only available. Still now girls are taken away by the midwives from their parents. These midwives put them in a pot and make them suffocate to death.

Durga, as the young teenage girl of fourteen never received the love and reputation from her family. Her life is spent between home and school. She is separated from her lovable sister because of her parents. She thinks always that she is isolated from the whole world. She never gets love from her parents because she is deprived of parental care, concern and affection. She wants a person to love her. So she believes her tutor and accepts his words. It makes her to murder the whole family. Durga's pathetic situation is described by Kishwar Desai as, "I feel alone, as I have always been. The child who should never have been born any way" (18).

Kishwar Desai through the life of Durga portrays the corrupt system in India. The local police charged against her for the criminal act of killing thirteen members in her own family. She is brought to the asylum. Ramnath the Superintendent of Police tries to get the report as Durga is mad by giving injection, medicines and electric shocks to her. Thus she is physically and psychologically tortured by the society. She gets raped by her tutor whom she believes whole heartedly.

In this frustrated state, she turns into speechless and helpless in the lonely remand home. Simran Singh, the social worker from Delhi goes to visit Durga to enquire about the case. The lovable and the affectionate words of Simran make Durga to share her tragic life through a diary. Out of anger Durga refuses to talk about her family. On the other hand Durga herself wants to become a doctor or an engineer and Simran plays the role of a mother. In this context Anjana Basu opines, "Simran has become a single parent by adopting the girl Durga."

Simran Singh makes a serious investigation to prove the innocence of Durga and to rescue her from the remand home. Through her investigation, she finds that the Atwal family runs clinics for themselves and others, where tests are conducted and babies are aborted. Till today they indulge in female infanticide. A critic Vibhti Patel in his "Girl Child: An Endangered Species?" says, "In cities like Surat, Valsad, Panaji and Delhi, newspapers carry advertisements with titles such as know the sex of unborn child with the aid of latest imported equipment and scientific techniques by chromosomal and biochemical studies by qualified and experienced team" (7). Simran gets shocked by the illegal sex-detection test practice in India. Thus the female sex gets harassed from womb to tomb.

Kishwar Desai gives the picture of the social worker Simran Singh, who turns as a mother to give rebirth to Durga and saved her life from the remand home. She gives protection in her own home and gives education to her. She makes Durga to get free from physical and mental tortures given in the asylum. She gets the new life with the support of Simran Singh. She moves to school with the ambition to become an engineer. Durga is often disturbed by her past thoughts but the love of Simran makes her as a perfect young girl.

Through this novel it is found that, Child-Parent relationship forms an integral part in the Children's social and emotional behavior. Parents play an important role in the lives of their children. Among the other different relationships, the relationship between parent and children is most important. A critic Jasbir Jain in her "The Marginalization of the girl child: A Narrative Perspective" says, "Childhood, considered so important a period for the formation of character and for the emergence of a value structure, has largely been ignored as an area of human experience specially where girl characters are concerned" (78). The moral values of life should be taught by the parents to their children right from their birth. It is an undeniable fact that there is a bad relationship between some parent and children because of the mishandling of the children by the parents. In the case of Durga, she never received love, affection and care from her own parents. This makes her to kill her entire family of thirteen members in her fourteen years.

Female infanticide and foeticide is a very common hidden reality of India. Girl babies are the bane to the family because of the family reputation and dowry system. Through the survey of sex ratio it is found that women become a rare species. If we continue this merciless way of killing female infants, it is very rare in future to find a mother to give birth to a child to create next generation.

The harassment against female sex was done in different forms against women from womb to tomb. If they continuously get harassed, they will rise against the society in any form. It spoils their life and they may create any kind of harm to others knowingly or unknowingly like Durga. Their negative influence of life even turns them as terrorist. Through Simran Singh, Durga's life gets changed and she turns as a normal human being. Likewise, if we give proper love, care and affection to any abnormal human being, we can turn them as a normal one.

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