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IDENTITY CRISIS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN TRADITION IN
SHILPI SOMAYA GOWDA'S SECRET DAUGHTER

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ABSTRACT

Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter* is frank about female infanticide and lower status of women within societies and families. The sounds, scents and sights of India are vividly drawn deep into a culture as shown in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. This is about the tale of birth and death, strength and weakness, gain and loss, joy and pain runs the gamut of human emotions. Gowda weaves a bold compassionate story that is difficult to ignore written in compassionate prose with a deep understanding of the complexities of motherhood by the effective portrayal of Kavita. The paper will read the shocking hidden reality of Indian society in the form of female infanticide and foeticide to highlight the violence at the hands of their own family members due to the female sex. The study deals with the outlook of how women become a rare species in future by the male counterpart. It also throws light that the traditional cultural practices must be abolished for the emancipation of women.

Keywords: Tiny fingers, unwelcome member, Desperate cry, Cultural shock, Fertility

INTRODUCTION

Gowda as a realistic writer presents the condition of Indian women with great insight and understanding and efficiently presents their dilemma in a traditional bound society. The women seem to be like the mythical characters of Sita and Savitri presented as the symbols of sacrifice, suffering and true love for the spouse. She also depicts India as a developing country has the ugly face of female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, abandonment of a girl child, gender preference etc. It covers the face like a dark mask which is not reported or cited by anyone inside or outside the country.

Secret Daughter talks about the biggest issue of Indian society as the practice of killing young baby daughter of India. To be born a girl in

this society is like a curse. The birth of a son is welcomed and celebrated with great enthusiasm and the birth of a daughter is shunned and considered as foreshadowing a chain of troubles for the parents. According to *The Bible*, the birth of the human beings is described as, "Behold Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Psalm 127: 3). But many infants are killed as soon as they are born if they are found to be girls. Thus identity becomes a very big question in the case of women.

In the patriarchal society, normally a woman plays the traditional role of a home maker, while man remains a leader in every sphere of life. Women are expected to maintain the traditional family roles and also have the provision of mothering. The women are portrayed as the silent

victim of the tradition and the traditional values of family and society. Gowda in her novel develops the story about an Indian woman, Kavita who is innocent, uneducated village woman gets completely dominated by her husband and also she is transformed as a machine for child birth. She is married off to Jasu at the age of eighteen and settled into the daily toil of fetching water, washing clothes and cooking meals. She does everything as per the needs of her husband.

Motherhood is the greatest gift of God given to women. Kavita gives birth to two girl babies in her first two deliveries. As a mother, she gets excited by the fairness of the new born baby girls. She feels extremely happy by feeding her blood as milk. But she deeply cries by closing her eyes as: "No one heard my prayers" (SD 14). This mental agony happens in Kavita because of the female gender of her babies. The internal suffering of Kavita gets correlated by the words of the critic Sheela Rani Khare in her, "Facets of Feminism in Shobha De's *Starry Nights*" says, "The graph of women exploitation is shockingly raising. Women sometimes owing to the compelling situation of their life, are pushed into the net by their protectors while at other times their soaking ambition and will to assert their freedom, takes them into the tunnels of unimaginable sufferings" (184). But the father Jasu did a cruel act against his new born infants. He hands the first baby to his cousin for disposing. It is done by him within fraction of seconds. Then her second daughter gets abandoned, and then the third child is a boy who receives red carpet welcome in the family. Jasu celebrates it as the festival as it was his long desired wish for a boy. The family criticizes Kavita as, "Two daughters means she has committed a sin in her past life" (SD 233). The family also plans for Jasu to get new wife through second marriage to get a male baby before she gets a male offspring. The hidden reality of female infanticide in India gets visualized through the shovels in the hands of Jasu's cousins. Whenever he sees him, he finds the shovel in their hands which is used for burying the female infants. Thus it is clear that the cruel practice of female infanticide still happens in the villages of India.

After getting the male child, Jasu feels himself as a monster for his cruel act of his past. He also feels that he has got escaped from the sufferings of all the dowry problems aroused during the time of marriage to his daughters. When the poor woman Kavita gives birth to a girl child, Jasu asked: "Where is he? Where is my little prince?" (SD 15). This shows his favour for a son. In the words of Sambodh Goswami in his book, "*Female Infanticide and Child Marriage*" says: "A common belief is that if you kill a female child, the next one is sure to be a male. Another belief is that female children bring ill luck to the family, and could bring possible disgrace to the family honour because of their youthful exuberances" (41). Thus the female identity becomes a very big question even in this modern world.

Men are considered as stronger, bigger and smarter. They always pay less importance to women and considered them as weaker sex. This superior mentality forces them to act against women as a colonizer. The transformation of cultures and the advancement of technologies replace female infanticide with female foeticide. It is to be done through the ultra sound scanning to find the sex of the baby in the womb. This way of sex-selective abortion becomes very common even in rural areas. A critic Vibhuti 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" (7). The third pregnancy of Kavita makes her to visit a clinic to test the baby in the womb. The strict prohibition of ultra sound scanning is illegally practiced in the villages for the sake of money. Kavita prepares herself for the test to find the sex of a baby in her womb. If she finds it as a girl, it is the fatal day of her girl fetus. The outside door of the clinic has the placard as: "200 rupees now and save 20,000 rupees later" (SD 48). These words represent the way of avoiding the wedding dowry associated with a daughter during marriage.

Gender based discrimination against female children is pervasive across the world. Indian culture is also having a strong favour towards a son. Our

society believes that the boy baby will bring luxury to the family. The growth of the family and wealth gets protected by them. Kavita after a long struggle gives birth to a boy baby. The family members of the couple arrive in steady stream and give many gifts and wishes as "May your son lives a long life and brings you much happiness" (SD 66). This gender preference gets expressed in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* as, "My husband was overjoyed at the arrival of a son; no less so, my father he came, an old man, all those miles by cart from our village to hold his grandson. On the tenth day from the birth he invited everybody to feast and rejoices with us in our good fortune" (22).

God creates human beings equally, but man feels himself superior to women. The greatest drawback of Indian tradition is its rejection of girls in all sectors. Human beings are very cunning and partial in life. In the case of animals, they prefer the female calves and hens than the male ones. It is highly useful for them because of its nutritious milk and egg. But in the case of man, they prefer the male sex for their family prestige.

Through *Secret Daughter*, Gowda pictures the identity struggle of girl child in India in the form of female infanticide and foeticide. It also presents the view to the readers that make them to recognize that there is something fundamentally wrong with a culture that assumes the superiority of males and that celebrates Indian women as meek, submissive and sacrificial. Thus the identity of women remains an enigma as ever.

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