

Partial Perspective Neglected Gender in the works of Mrinal Pande

Pranita Sanghi

Abstract

India has made considerable progress in every dimension leaving an indelible impression for the future generations to adore. Whether it is science or social welfare, technology or care, India's contribution is noteworthy with country escalating in various realms with every passing minute. In spite of innumerable major achievements and contributions, there is still something where our nation lags behind. Though several progressive steps have been initiated, society has not changed its outlook towards women. Overcrossing limits and restrictions, women are entering each and every field making a lead to success, but the prevailing perspective of gender discrimination does not provide equal access to resources and requisites.

The way females are treated and neglected gets a major voice in the writings of distinguished Indian writer, Mrinal Pande. Whether as the Chief Editor of hindi daily "Hindustan" or the chairperson of apex body of Indian broadcast media, "Prasar Bharati", Pande has always empathized with the condition of women in India and worked for their betterment.

In the short story, "Girls", an eight year old girl is treated as non-entity with no consideration to her feelings or aspirations, based on the gender, the most decisive factor for the Indian society. She is constantly reprimanded that she must compromise with respect to every aspect of life and through her, there is an indication for all the females, "... You are born a girl and you will have to bend for the rest of your life, so you might as well learn..." Seeing longing of her family to have a boy, the girl wonders if she can become a boy. Even watching the birds flying makes her wish that she "had been born as a bird". Her question, "Do mother birds too think that their girl birds are inferior?" forces us to rethink about our ideals. She refuses to be a part of culture which worships girls as Goddess and yet ill-treats them in every way possible just because they are "girls".

It is not just at home, that females are treated so, as the same attitude of misbehavior extends to every sphere of life, personal as well as professional. Krishna, a lady of 35, feels the sting of discrimination when she is appointed editor of a Hindi language news agency in the novel, "My Own Witness". She comes to know that even the infrastructure differentiates as she cannot get a suitable chair for herself because "editorial chairs came only in male sizes".

The paper is an attempt to discover where woman stands today and to evaluate the changes needed to bring about social harmony. Unless we respect the dignity and prestige of

women, we cannot say to have made progress and the irony is that still in majority of places, even self-respect of women is placed in disregard. The paper intends to interpret the feelings of women through illustrations from literature to bring forth the urgency to change our perspective and make it impartial which is prerequisite for making the “Developed India” in real sense.

Discussion

India, a nation that is progressing at a faster pace with every passing minute and carving the path to be at the top of the world with its unique outlook, is setting an example for the other nations to follow in terms of acceptance, adaptability and modernity. Indian Culture is highly enriched with several customs and rituals idealizing the concepts of family, relations and humanity which cannot be expected to be found in other countries across the world as most of the places idealize finance over fraternity. But in spite of this remarkable traditional vision accompanied with positive approach to current changing trends, there is the most important arena demanding utmost attention but being deliberately ignored even in modern times.

The gender which nourishes home as well as life with its freshening traits and all-encompassing attitude is still under scrutiny with constant trials and conspiracies. Paradox lies in the fact that the gender which is blessed with the ability to bring a new life into this world and which nurtures a child such that the dependability on mother knows no bounds, is still regarded as a gender depending on others. The woman who teaches a baby how to take first steps is still considered as someone who must be directed and supported by others in every walk of life. Nowadays, women are moving out of invisible prisons bounding their growth and individuality but still they face the criticism of society which is unwilling to change its perspective towards the feminine.

The society still fails to realize that women are neither to be enslaved nor to be condemned but to be idealized and befriended. The partial outlook towards women has been attracting attention of several literary contributors since ages and one such writer exposing the reality behind the fake glimmers of modern society, is the renowned journalist and author, Mrinal Pande. Her multifaceted career ranges from being the faculty at the prestigious Maulana Azad College of Technology, the editor of the well-liked women’s magazine “Vama”, the chief editor of Hindi daily “Hindustan” to the chairperson of the official zenith body of Indian broadcast media “Prasar Bharati”. She is a famous Indian television personality hosting a weekly interview show “Baaton Baaton Mein” on Lok Sabha TV along with having worked for “Doordarshan” and “Star News”.

Her involvement with “National Commission for Self-Employed Women”, gave her an insight into the conditions of rag-pickers, vegetable sellers and domestic help. Daughter of distinguished hindi novelist Shivani, Pande has created a niche for herself in the world of literature. Her contributions have been acknowledged by the Government of India in the form of awarding “Padma Shri”, the fourth highest civilian honour in 2006.

Her writings exemplify the underlying issues of a woman’s life providing a base to understand the problems with the focused examination and to work on the solutions to bring about the needed change. Her short stories, novels as well as articles concentrate on the most

neglected yet most crucial aspects of social development pertaining to the perspective of Indian society towards women.

The short story “Girls” highlights the secondary position given to women in Indian household and how they are forced to accept the domination. In spite of so much progress and changing trends, many women still feel and are sometimes forced to feel that giving birth to a son is compulsory to rise or at least to maintain their position in family. They continue to conceive until they get a son finally, no matter how many girls are born in the process, as if it is something automatic which cannot be and to be in particular, should not be stopped until there is a son. The story is presented through the point of view of an eight year old girl, the second child of the family. The protagonist’s mother is pregnant for the fourth time after giving birth to three girls. Though it is troublesome for her, she bears it as if there is no alternative. Her dialogues “I hope it’s a boy this time. It will relieve me of the nuisance of going through another pregnancy...” and “If I have a boy this time, then I will be relieved of this burden forever...” show her helplessness in this matter.

The family may not even be so strong financially to support so many children; yet they continue to increase the number. They treat the born daughters as an unwanted burden while waiting for a boy without even considering how it feels to be treated so. Instead of enjoying tidbits of girls’ childhood, they are neglected and avoided making “the girl” feel that they are a sort of trouble for their mother making her life tough “...as if we always harassed her at home...” In the whole process of conceiving again and again, at times even mother loses the essence of motherhood forgetting that even daughter is her own child, a part of her own body. Responsibilities and a sort of hatred takes over even the most loving bond of mother-child, “..Ma did not allow us to lie in her lap for too long and complained, ‘Ugh! Oh! My bones are aching, my sari is all crushed. Get up now. I have such a lot of work to do, and to top it all there is this huge nuisance. Come on, get up.’”

Experience makes the girl realize that the grown-ups always leave the sentences unfinished when they speak about something unpleasant, “... Like, ‘Ah, a women’s fate...’ or ‘Oh, three girls...’” ironically suggesting that her very existence is regarded unpleasant. Girls are taught to adjust and bend to each and every demand of society, acceptable or unacceptable, just because it is believed that being a girl corresponds to being a puppet dancing to the tune of whims and fancies of every other individual.

Prayers with tears filled eyes shows the craving to have a boy as it is considered to be a matter of honor to have a son and the most striking aspect is that this is done even by the grandmother showing her whole-hearted support to the differentiation being done in spite of herself being a woman.

Continuous neglect towards girls and constant longing for a son makes the girl wish to become a boy. There is suppressed wish to be wanted and favorite of her family particularly her mother in the question, “But can’t I become a boy, can I?” The otherwise loving and caring father immediately turns stern on this question asking her not to argue with the elders instead of empathizing with her and making her realize that she is valuable in her own worth and need not turn into someone else to be identified.

A woman is expected to surrender and suffer in silence as a matter of fate no matter what happens. When the protagonist's aunt discloses her plight to the girl's mother by saying that, "I don't get as much respect as a dog does in that house," instead of helping her out by standing up for her in society, the mother simply remarks that, "All of us suffer like that, one has to endure it." Unless women realize their rights instead of accepting the undue as their fate, the future cannot be expected to change.

The girl wishes sometimes to become a boy and sometimes to become a bird but doubts if similar inferior treatment is given even to girl birds. She is made to look down upon herself in so many ways by her own family that she wishes to escape from the real world, to vanish all of a sudden bringing all the suffering to an end. "I wish that somewhere, anywhere, I could find that magic betel nut which would make me invisible as I put it in my mouth."

Indian society wears a mask in most cases where it shows double standards. It doesn't want to accept that it is doing something wrong thereby eradicating the very possibility of providing a solution because if there is no problem, then where is the need to work for a solution. Though it criticizes not just girls but even the mother of daughters to the extent that the treatment is nearly the one given to an outcast, it worships girls on various occasions of festivities as a custom. A female deserves respect as even God has blessed her with the power to give birth but when the society condemns her based on what she gives birth to, then how can the same society worship her for being a girl. Through the question to her aunt, the girl questions the double-faced society, "When you people don't love girls, why do you pretend to worship them?"

Being a girl is taken as a rule which indicates that she can neither overrule the society nor question it. She should not even express her feelings, sufferings or emotions but instead be a silent spectator of her own life. Even if she tries to express, it is taken as a violation of her enclosed existence as a girl. "What a temper for a girl to show!" as if even temper can be regarded correct if expressed by a boy. Absence of girl's name gives a universal appeal to the character as she stands as a specimen of female in the male dominated society.

In the comment of the girl, "I don't want to be Goddess", there is a hidden concern to be treated at least as a human. In most cases, even the humanity dies, when the matter is concerned with woman and then the same society worships women in various forms. Most importantly, the society needs to understand that a woman too has a heart and head to feel and react.

Even the world out of home, holds similar restrictions for women though she steps out of the four walls to experience freedom of thought and expression. In the novel "My Own Witness", the protagonist Krishna faces discrimination at work place because more important than her qualification and experience, becomes her gender. She has been the victim of inferior treatment given to females since years. Even the contribution of wives in the form of selfless care and concern for the family, is regarded subordinate by "men who worked hard to run the nation."

The feelings of women deserve no consideration as “the despair, the terror, the sheer fury which they had felt over the years, was never recorded, nor talked about.” In spite of being completely matured, capable of running family and handling all the chores of household, wife is considered to be minor as is revealed in husbands addressing wives as “Girls”

With the passing years, Krishna craves to break away from all the restrictions but even the thought of stepping out is unacceptable. “... How could she, and more importantly how could he, who was supposed to control her and dominate their conjugal life, betray such a long and stable tradition?” A woman is expected to sacrifice her dreams and forget her desires even if she tries to pursue her life after fulfilling needs of family. The society wants woman to give priority to others always neglecting her own needs to extent that she forgets that she too exists.

And finally when Krishna breaks off the chains of suppression by stepping out into the world of profession opting to become editor of a Hindi language news agency, she faces discrimination even in the work place as gender becomes the prominent factor deciding and interfering with all aspects of her work including infrastructure as the facilities and services are designed and accustomed to suit to the needs of only men. An important aspect to consider is that she faces this at the experienced age of 35. It shows that life is like a tailored package for females, with restrictions, discomforts and guidelines irrespective of age or position.

In the short story, “Bitch”, there is striking comment on humanity by putting animals in a better position than humans when it comes to relations. Comparison done between a dog and a human, forces us to rethink about the institution of marriage which is being used as a tool to exploit women. “Oh Ma, at least he won’t come home drunk and beat her. Or arm-twist her family for a wrist-watch or a bicycle, or get her pregnant as soon as he can, and then run off with another woman. A son of a bitch is better any day, Ma, any day, than the son of man.”

Pande has presented strong side of women too. The novel “Devi: Tales of the Goddess in Our Times” is a question, a protest against the prevailing attitude towards women. It makes us realize what we have done to our Goddess which indicates to ourselves and why have we allowed it to be done. Through Aunt Lalitha, Pande has presented Goddess in the form of Saraswati, Laxmi and Durga thereby projecting the obvious message that the strength of the Goddess lies within all the women, just the world fails to realize her worth.

Through the lens of Mrinal Pande, various facets of women’s life can be understood with a clear focus demanding solution to the situation by waking up for ourselves. As a writer, Pande has presented illustrations which though fictional prove to be real when looked around. Every individual and as such every female too has a right to live up to her dreams and design her life as she wants it to be. If a male is considered necessary to run family’s name, then important to remember is the fact that a female is needed to run the family and if a male carries the surname for the generations, it is the female who gives birth to the generations.

While meeting demands to be a perfect daughter, wife and mother, do not let a female forget her own identity, her own self. It is neither a crime to be a woman nor to give birth to one but our treatment given to women suppressing her existence is truly a crime. The trend of

discriminating women in various aspects has continued since ages and is still prevailing with disguised notions.

Male or female is just a matter of gender, not a criterion to evaluate or outline existence, freedom or importance. Unless India changes its perspective towards gender and adopts impartiality, development in real sense cannot be expected. A woman nurtures family out of love and compassion, not out of fear or compulsion, and deserves to be identified, respected and liberalized to lead her life as she wants. Do not force her to suppress herself in silence or forget her capabilities and before dominating a woman for being a woman, remember always that it is “she” who has given birth to you.

Bibliography

Pande, Mrinal. “Bitch”. *The Little Magazine*. littlemag.com/jan-feb01/mrinal.html

---. *Devi: Tales of the Goddess in Our Times*. India: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.

---. “Girls.” A Treasure Trove of Short Stories, edited by S.Chakravarthi. India: Frank Brothers, 2011. pp.58-65.

---. *My Own Witness*. India: Penguin Books, 2001. Print.

Pranita Sanghi
pranitasanghi@gmail.com