

ECLIPSED FEMINISM IN VAASANTHI'S *BIRTHRIGHT***-K.Sakthi Balamurugan,****Assistant professor of English****PSG College of arts and science****Coimbatore, Tamilnadu****Ph: 9750738682****E-mail: sakthieeswaran@gmail.com**

Abstract: Vasantha Surya's translation of Vaasanthi's Tamil novel, *Kadai See Varai* titled *Birthright* in English is about female foeticide. Dr. Mano, Vaasanthi's complex protagonist is an obstetrician-gynecologist practicing in a village in Salem district. The plot revolves around issues like the intricate operation of patriarchy and its conjunction with feudalism, religion, culture and politics. Through the conflicts and dilemmas that are dramatized in the well layered narrative, the voices of the women reflect, triumph, grieve, agonize, analyse and politicize, facilitating an exploration into the area of a shared ethos. The tensions that arise when striking a balance between tradition and modernity, superstitions and beliefs, men and women, values and money, form the intricate many-layered workmanship in this deceptively simple and straight-laced storyline. The ethical debate that underlies the legal and medical practice of female foeticide as practiced in clinics is realistically presented raising questions of Gender justice and equality. The middle-class values encoded in the set beliefs of the social hierarchies and the class positions within those hierarchies are brought into sharp focus in the novel, when many laws have stood silent witnesses to many a violation. Vaasanthi's skill as a writer makes readers feel compassionate and morally reprehensible and to reflect on feminism eclipsed by male gender in gender in general and society on the whole.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Patriarchy, female foeticide, inheritance and birthright

ECLIPSED FEMINISM IN VAASANTHI'S *BIRTHRIGHT*

Birthright is a short novel translated by Vasanthi Surya from the Tamil novella "Kadasee Varai" written by Vaasanthi. The *Birthright* deals with the two unabashed products of patriarchal society, namely the sex-selective abortion and women's rights of inheritance.

Mano is a successful gynaecologist in a small village near Salem. Mano's clinic is the right choice for any carrying woman in and around the village. Delivery of male infants and abortion of the female foetuses is done with extensive care in the clinic. She performs abortion on female foetuses for women who came to her with a total disregard for law, seeing her work as a service to conceived woman and also for the welfare of the female foetus. A man when he is asked why he does not want a girl child justifies in a callous and mercenary way "As soon as her hair grows, we have to buy clips and ribbons! Then the ear-rings, and bangles. A girl has to be given jewellery and ornaments. When she goes to work, she fetches low wages... without a grand wedding and a dowry; she will have no respect in her in-laws house. So we have to get into that debt and can't come out" (ix).

Mano believes that she is actually saving the mother from the abuses of her husband, in-laws and relatives by killing the female foetuses. The woman who gives birth to a girl child is ill treated as if she has brought a disgrace to her husband's family in those villages. The multiple suicides of many mothers after giving a girl child shake the moral stand of Mano and she feels it is better to protect the mother who suffers now than the unborn foetus who is going to suffer the same crisis once it is born on earth. When a friend is appalled by Mano's practice she replies "you wouldn't understand how merciful creature really I am. At the end of novel, she refuses to abort the girl children by saying "last full moon, during the puja mangamma spirit came and said that from now onwards all the girl children who are born in this clinic are going to get prosperity to their parent's homes.(146)"

The helpless doctor realizes that it is the society which is patriarchal that has to be aborted and not the innocent female foetuses. She thinks it is the responsibility of a woman to protect the female child. If she is so determined in giving birth to a female child, the society will be cornered in affix to accept the change. Mano's mind is haunted with thoughts, "This loneliness that's been haunting me since my birth--I'm the only one who knows what that is

like. That's why it has never been enough for me to be just myself, I need a larger frame."
(22)

The novel carefully weaves the theme of women's right of inheritance through the struggle of the protagonist. As the only child, and a daughter she tries to establish herself as the rightful heir which is against the custom in the male patriarchal society. The role of Heir gives the right of inheritance. Gender plays a vital role in determining the powerful role called heir. A man is born-qualified and entitled to inherit the property of his parents though there is nothing to inherit. A woman is born-disgraced and disqualified to inherit in spite of having a great deal of wealth.

The idea of "heir-ownership" designed by the male patriarchal society disqualifies woman to inherit the ancestral property so that the women cannot be economically self-reliant, wherein she is pushed to the hapless state where she is always a dependent to men. The law clearly states that the right of inheritance is applicable to woman and in modern times one could see a rise in the percentage of women who inherit their ancestor's property.

The protagonist Mano endeavours to prove herself as the rightful heir. MANO is the only child, a daughter of wealthy land lord who is fondly called as "Ayya". She emerges as a successful gynaecologist and mints money effortlessly that she can take care of her family for three generations without any economical constraint. It is about the question of *right* rather than the desire of inheriting the property and wealth. She does not want to accept the norms laid by the society which from the beginning seems to be a patriarchal one.

The long term process which started several thousand years that conditioned women made them unconscious of their suffering and hardships. The women are convinced and made to believe that any if they think against the norms laid down by the society, they behave in a horrible way bringing disgrace to their family. When Mano proudly shows her first rank in progress card her joy is shattered by her Grandmother's words "*stick it on your forehead! But the fellow who will hold your tomorrow is not going to be impressed. He will only ask you if you can boil the rice*" (21). Mano's disclosure of her cherished desire for higher studies again her Grandmother, a victim of chauvinistic society flares up and says "*nobody here is depending on you to earn or anything. You cannot become a man*"(21).

However, Mano with her steadfastness and father's support is able to get the chance of doing her higher education. She had to strive for everything which any boy would get

effortlessly. But she gets a great blow when she finds that her father is making arrangements for second marriage for a sole reason that he is in want to heir. Enraged with fury, she shouts at him *“what if your second wife doesn't bear a son? Will you marry a third, fourth, and go on marrying? All the woman who have trusted you will you throw out them into the street? (25)”*. This particular incident provokes Mano and her mother to realize the precariousness of their position.

Mano's love for Shiva, her boyfriend whom she met and fell in love gives rhythmic notes of melody in her life. That too lasts for few days when her mother advises *“my daughter will not do anything wrong, i know. I haven't come to say anything about that. But I just want to remind you about one thing; you shouldn't blunder into some mess and just give up whatever right you have in this house. Don't give up your fort”(35)*. Her brain is caught with this viral thought which she has never thought of before. Her endeavour of proving herself as the heir is stronger than her love. She knows very well that Shiva cannot comprehend her feelings that she has for the house and her father's property. She feels suddenly alienated from Shiva after her mother's warning *“Don't leave your fort”*. She sacrifices her love in the painful endeavour.

But to her surprise, Shiva finally consents to her condition that she laid upon before every suitor who wants to marry her. The condition is that the husband should be with her in their ancestral house in the village after the marriage. She is eventually rejected by many suitors for this sole reason, in spite of her profession and economic background. She juxtaposes her conditioned love of her with his unconditional love and felt guilty. But she hops in joy for she is successful in her endeavour of inheriting her role as the heir and having her lover as husband. She is startled when her father says *“This is my house...without my permission how could you come to this decision all by yourself” (64)*. She feels she is a failure both in her endeavour and in love. But she continues her struggle *“if you expect me to leave after the marriage then I won't need such a marriage. This war of mine will go on until you say this is your house” (69)*.

The protagonist achieves success when her father realizes the love and care of her daughter during her massive heart attack. Her dominant, self-centred father who took the opportunity to insult her by saying *“You know Pandurangan my friend. Suddenly he died and what a confusion. Nobody to lit the pyre... Just one daughter”(37)*. He even takes a giant leap in breaking the tradition by allowing her daughter to light his pyre. It is acknowledgement

that she is qualified as his heir. To light the pyre of a deceased father is a right always given to the son. The custom is closely associated with the act of inheritance. If the deceased person doesn't have a son, the boy who torches the pyre is considered to be the heir and he ultimately inherits the wealth. Thus, the male society has blocked the every possible way of acquiring wealth which makes every woman economically independent and self-reliant individuals.

Vaasanthi's writings are distinctive because of "her delving into the complex psyche of the educated". As Sharon Pillai declares, "*Birthright* tries to envision *swaraj* from the point of view of women, marginalized by definition in andocentric discourses" (38) and propounds new vision transcending time and space.

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