

Chronicling the Self: A Feminist Approach to Mrinal Pande's *Daughter's Daughter*

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Abstract

Autobiography writing is a means for women writers to explore their inner-most recesses of their selves. Mrinal Pande's *Daughter's Daughter* is a rare type of the portrayal of self-wherein the author creates a fictional self to describe her survival story of being a daughter's daughter. In the autobiography the author maintains a distance with her own self, speaking through a girl of the age span of two to ten. In the story of her 'self', Mrinal Pande, introspects, observes, comments and narrates her past through her mouthpiece, Tinu. The present paper focuses in detail the pain of being a girl child in a patriarchal society and the author's decision not to be a victim of patriarchal domination.

Keywords- *Patriarchy, Discrimination, Identity, Omen, Marginalisation*

Introduction

The *Daughter's Daughter* presents a set of incidents that portray Mrinal Pande's refusal to be enslaved by the patriarchal hegemony that dictates a fixed place for a girl child in the society. The autobiography is a proof of deliberate duplicity of the Indian social system that renders woman the highest status of *Devi* /goddess on one side and an imposed subservient position on the other side by annulling every right of her to be a free individual in society. Gender discrimination and its darker effects on the author's mind as a daughter's daughter is the focal point of the book. Mrinal Pande adopts a new method to chronicle her 'self' in the story of her life maintaining a distance with her own self and speaking through the point of view of a girl of the age span of two to ten. She uses fictional characters to portray the reality of her life, the surviving story of her 'self', as a daughter's daughter at her grandmother's house. It allows the author to relate the reality of her 'self' from different angles. In the autobiography Mrinal Pande defines her 'self' in terms of her relation with her mother, grandmother and step-sister, through the fictional character Tinu.

Daughter's Daughter is a unique kind of autobiography that focuses on the childhood of a girl, Tinu, the mouthpiece of the author. Documenting the life of a girl child of tender age Mrinal

Pande attempts to relate her own 'self' as a daughter's daughter in a patriarchal framework. By creating an imaginary self through the character Tinu, the author remains detached of her 'self'; she introspects, observes, comments and narrates her past through the creation of her fictional 'self'. Throughout the narrative the author's attention is on the girls, Tinu, and Dinu, her step sister. Mrinal Pande published the book in 1993, many years after the incidents described in the book. She does not give a glimpse into her life after the age of ten but the discrimination against women in a patriarchal society is expressed through her observation on other women in relation with her like mother, grandmother, Hira di, Mami and her aunts described in the book.

The title of the autobiography, *Daughter's Daughter*, is an obvious attack on the patriarchal supremacy that deliberately nullifies the rights of woman from her birth. Tinu, the narrator of the life story is continuously reminded that she is a daughter's daughter, and is expected not to demand the advantages provided to the son's children at her grandmother's house. The self chronicling is a sensible observation of a young girl on the ways how the daughter's daughters are marginalised and uncared in comparison with the son's children. She is denied the rights and privileges allowed to her uncle's son, Anu. Repetition of the word 'daughter' in the title implies not the importance given to the girl children of the self narrative; it suggests the inferior status imposed on woman and her girl children in families and in Indian society at large. It also depicts the male supremacy over women and their rights. Tinu draws the attention of the readers to the fasts and holy hymns women rigorously practice unlike the male members at her grandmother's house to illustrate precisely the position of women and girl children in a male dominated society: "Anu does not fast but is given all special treats because he is the son's son. I am a daughter's daughter. I must fast to get special treatment "(46). She is compelled to accept the preference given to her brother by her mother and all other women members of the family. The title is a significant remark on the negative label on girl children and women in general for being born a girl. It is an ironic expression on the subordinate position imposed on woman by the Indian patriarchal culture that deprive woman her basic freedom to be a free human being, an equal member of the family and society. The title is an indication to the author's determination from her early childhood to protest against the increasing discrimination against the girl children in India and to protect them from the male antagonism.

The *Daughter's Daughter* is a truthful account of the self of a girl child and the formation of her identity in Indian patriarchal set up. Social, cultural and religious elements influence in the making of a child to a man/woman in Indian context. A boy child becomes a man of himself, an independent individual by the gradual realization of his role in the family and society through stories, songs and through the differential treatment, opportunities and attention he receives from the elder members of the family unlike his sister. Tinu recollects the place of her uncle in comparison with her

mother and aunts at her grandmother's house: "My mother's brother, P.K Maama, was the sun around which everything in this house revolved" (23). The identity of Tinu and Dinu in the autobiography is in relation with their mother at their grandmother's house. They are labelled 'daughter's daughters'. It indicates the inferior position of their mother and the lesser importance given to her two girl children at her own house.

Education of girls was not counted as important as that of boys as the girls' role in the family was fixed. Mrinal Pande remembers her own experience of being neglected her significant capacity for learning by the other women members of grandmother's house, through her imaginary self, Tinu: The Aunts smile or say something about boys being boys and about girls eventually needing skills only to roll out chapattis and boiling dal and rice (48) and "being bookish is silly, especially for girls" (110). From the birth of a girl child in a family the primary concern of the parents is her marriage. Being a mother of four unmarried daughters the sole responsibility of grandmother is to send them to their husbands' house. Grandmother believes, "A girl must get a husband before it's too late" (93). Presence of the growing girl children is a worry to parents. A.S. Altekar writes,

The *Ramayana* tells us that when Sita came of age and her marriage had to be arranged her father's anxiety became as intense as that of a poor man, who suddenly loses all his little money. (5).

In *Daughter's Daughter* Mrinal Pande observes the need of revolution in female roles, beliefs and conducts in families and in societies. Through her imaginary character Tinu, she highlights the need of women's education to make their minds free from the chains of superstitious beliefs bravely and to explore the world of true knowledge. Mrinal Pande describes how the elderly women in the family influences the young girl children to blindly believe in mysteries and omens behind flying snake, pheun bird, one-eyed people, ghosts and spirits. They associate the evil omens with the bad news of real life. The coincidences of bad news and bad omens enhance their superstitious beliefs. Tinu observes her mother's embellished version of the fearsome lore on the evil omens: "The ancient white snake could even mean a buried treasure, she says. She also says that the scary pheun bird was very rare and her cry brought advance of a forthcoming bit of bad news. ... One-eyed people are supposed to bring bad luck (43-44). Blind belief in the imaginary spirits and omens stop the reasoning capacity of children and it prevent them from acting. Tinu admits: "I think of the flying snakes and shiver" (51). The observations of Mrinal Pande on the superstitious beliefs of the illiterate women of the autobiography contradict with her educated father who does not have faith in grandmother's story of black tongue and ghosts. Tinu says, "Father is dubious as he listens to mother though. His mouth tightens. It could be that he is angry with her" (42).

The celebration at the birth of a boy child suggests the importance an Indian society gives for a male member in the family. The birth of a boy child enhances the status of the family and the mother. From birth a girl child faces discrimination from parents and other family members. Religion and cultural norms play an important role in the undue privileges and roles entrusted on the sons. Indian society is conditioned by the religious ideologies that give preference to the male child. A.S Altekar observes the obvious the "son-preference" of the Indian society from religious literature:

The *Atharvaveda* contains charms and rituals to ensure the rituals to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a daughter...In the *Brahmana* literature there is one passage observing that while the son is the hope of the family, the daughter is a source of trouble to it. ... (5).

The belief in *moksha*/ salvation makes it essential to have a son in the family to perform the last rights and the rituals for the dead. It is the sole duty and privilege of a son to lit the funeral pyre. In a patrilineal society the family lineage is continued through son. The birth of a son is an assurance to the parents for the perpetuation of his father's family name. The author remembers the anguish of her mother at the birth of her third daughter: "I was told by Mother that she'd cried herself to sleep that night, for a third daughter had born unto her" (52-53). The close observation of Tinu, on the changed atmosphere of the house after the birth of a son in the family is quite touching:

My mother is smiling with pleasure ... An aunt comes in with a gleaming bronze bowl of a special broth for mother that smells of fennel and coriander and ghee. ... We are told that when news came of my brother's birth, Grandmother and Hira di made my sister stand on all fours like a sacrificial goat, and then a large cake of jaggery was brought, and put on her 'auspicious' back. (84-85).

The description the author gives at the birth of her third sister is so different from the account she makes after the arrival of a son to her mother. There was no smile, laughter, delicious food and celebrations. She remembers how her mother looked "gentle, relaxed and smiling" after the birth of her son. Sudhir Kakar and Kathrina Kakar observes:

The inner experience of being a girl ... when adult eyes glow at the sight of your baby brother while they dim as they regard you, can easily become a fundamental crisis at the beginning of a little girl's identity development. This crisis, generally silent, given rare eloquent voice in the fictionalised reminiscences of the Hindi writer Mrinal Pande who describes the reaction of her counterpart, the seven-year-old Tinu, at the birth of her brother after three daughters have born to the parents (43).

Elderly women of the families play an enormous role in perpetuating the inferior status of girl children in the family and in society. These powerful women exercise patriarchal authority over women under them, including their own girl children, daughters-in law and grand children, and do not allow them to come out of the culturally defined subjugated position that does not permit them to be empowered in life. They are forced to be conformed to the norms and place assigned to them. They indirectly support the male supremacy to exercise power over women by demanding obedience to the patriarchal authority. Hira di and grandmother are the representatives of the patriarchal authority in taming their daughters to become obedient wives to their master, husband. Tinu observes: "Both Hira di and Grandmother refer to husbands as *Malik*- the master. She is taming Sita for her master. This, Grandmother says, is the right and proper thing to do. She has been doing it herself in her own way" (72). Mrinal Pande observes the attitude of the women of the older generation towards their girl children. They train their daughters to be obedient and submissive as a dog to its master. Tinu observes Hira di as she screams at the dog: "'Oh this bitch!' She screams at Poppy, as she wants her in and locks the gate after her. That's how she wants all girls, behind closed gates and asleep after dark" (76). Women with a traditional mind protect men making them feel a little entitled and self-righteous. They nurture men, their whims and fancies, pushing their girls to be perfect.

A girl has no permanent home in a patriarchal society. She cannot hold on to anything as she possesses nothing. In the home she was born and brought up she becomes a guest after her marriage. The house she goes after her marriage is not hers; it is her husband's house and then son's. She does not possess anything before or after marriage and she is in control of a male figure throughout her life as Hira di says: "People don't want girls to get too used to their father's or grandmother's house. One day they are all to leave their father's house, see? And then they will have to go to their father-in-law's house" (72). The journey the widowed grandmother makes with her four unmarried daughters from Almora to Gorakhpur, to her son's house, is a journey similar to the journey her own daughter makes with her broods. She realizes that she too is a visitor at his son's house. In the last chapter of the autobiography titled *The Journey*, in *The Daughter's Daughter*, the author shifts her attention from the Tinu and Dinu to their mother. Here the author notices the realisation of their mother that a woman has to be ready to make a journey of her own in different phases of her life as her role changes from a daughter to a grandmother.

Women are the worst enemies of women. The total liberation of women from the clutches of male domination is impossible without a collective effort of women being enemies to each other. Tinu, the mouthpiece of the author defines herself in relation with Dinu as a true sister from the beginning of the book. In the story of her life, Dinu is portrayed as "the Warrior Chief" (15) her "lifeline" (16) a real sister who protected her young sister, Tinu, from the attacks of their cousin, Anu.

It is only in the middle of the life story the author gives a reference of Dinu as the daughter of his father's first wife. Mrinal has not noticed her mother treating Dinu with any difference. The attitude of grandmother towards Dinu, the motherless child, and her repeated advice to her daughter about her care for Dinu, is seen by the author as cruel and against human dignity. She says: "Bringing up another's child is like trying to eat the flesh from your own palm, either way it is going to hurt" (92). Maami, her uncle's wife too tries to divide the mind of Dinu against her mother and Tinu, making her believe her stepmother's seemed favouritism for her own daughter, Tinu. Maami tells Dinu: " Didn't you hear how, when your mother calls out to you both, she says Tinu-Dinu, instead of Dinu-Tinu, though you are older? Don't you see she cares more for her own daughter Tinu, so she calls her name out first?" (111) Through this episode the author reveals women's capacity to build walls of hatred against each other and her cruelty to divide the minds of children against mother especially in a stepmother and step daughter relationship.

Mrinal Pande, through her fictional representative Tinu, chronicles her own self from the perspective of an eight year old child. The language and tone used to depict her 'self' in the autobiography is that of a child. She describes everything as a child notices with its innocence and openness. The true self of the author is revealed through Tinu, from her observation, reactions and comments on gender discrimination, being a daughter's daughter at her grandmother's house. As a child observer, Mrinal takes note of everything and decides not to be a victim of patriarchal domination. She understands the importance of education as a child and progresses in it with an exceptional diligence. Mrinal's resistance against gender discrimination is expressed through a dramatic gesture of Tinu at the end of the self narrative. She hides her private tears placing her arm across her eyes and straightening her legs. She is all set as a young girl to fight against the subjugation of women hiding her private pain. The gesture is a sign of her determined journey to her adulthood with much conviction to be bold against women victimisation.

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