



**Still the Second Sex'? Exploring Gender Discrimination and
Exploitation of Indian Women as seen in *Girls* by Mrinal Pande
and *Chauthi Ka Joda* by Ismat Chughtai**

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Abstract:

For ages now, the Indian woman, the highly glorified “bharatiya naari”, has continuously been taken for granted by the patriarchal society of India. She has always been considered as the insignificant ‘other’, ‘the Second Sex’, the weaker, unimportant one and has persistently been looked upon as a slave to serve man and an object to satisfy him. It is because of this, that her emotions, feelings, necessities and desires have never been given enough importance. Her standards of living are defined by the society and almost all the other decisions of her life, which are only supposed to be taken by her, are fixed by the “men” in her life. She has either been elevated or worshipped like a goddess or she has been degraded and shunned like an outcast, but she has never been thought of as what she actually is – a human being.

Through centuries, this idea has continually been drilled into the minds of women; sometimes by men and sometimes by other older women that they are inferior and weak and everybody else can have complete control over their lives while they themselves have no right over it. The best example



of this would be the Devadasi practice, the Indian custom of dedicating girls to temples, in which young girls are forced into prostitution against their will. The worst part is that all of this is done in the name of religion, as a result of which these girls are bound to follow what is told to them and lead a life of misery. The patriarchal society has made sure that women fit in to certain “roles” that are designed by the men. To stop them from breaking away from these roles, women are shown negative images of other women such as the prostitute, the widow, the ‘barren’ woman and the single woman. Any woman who is seen as a threat to the authority of men is either declared as a prostitute or a witch. She is then condemned and stoned to death. The extreme ill – treatment of widows and the horrible life that they lead, makes other women think of widowhood as a curse on a woman. This fear of widowhood is what forces women to fast, pray and follow all other superstitious practices for the long life of their husbands. As a result of all this, women are terrified and have an extremely low self-image. Women have been taught to idolize “specific” mythological female characters like Sita, Savitri and Damyanti. A woman is supposed to be chaste and virtuous. Some other mythological stories carry double messages and hidden meanings. For example, the story of Kunti and Karna is a warning against unwed motherhood, while the story of Savitri and Satyvan, on the surface tries to highlight the power of a chaste woman, but the latent message is a warning against girls exercising a right to choose their own husbands.

Not only this, a woman without a man is always considered incomplete by the society. Even in today’s time, a single woman is always thought of as an available option. She never gets the respect she deserves. Almost every man who comes her way tries to take advantage of her, and if the woman doesn’t comply, these men try to make a hell out of her life. Even in workplaces, women are



always discriminated on the basis of gender. A woman, no matter how deserving she is will always be paid less than a man. She more often than not, becomes a victim of the glass ceiling in spite of all the hard work and sacrifices, just because male chauvinism prohibits a man from working under the supervision of a woman. He takes it as an insult to his “male ego”, which he will never tolerate. That is why women are pushed back and are expected to be inferior to men at every stage in their lives. Apart from all this, just to make the woman feel that she is nothing without a man in her life, society, from the other side, tries to unnecessarily emphasize marriage, which in turn gives rise to unnecessary desires in the woman’s mind and heart. If a woman continues to remain unmarried for a long time, for whatever reason, the society badly ridicules her and automatically assumes, that the fault lies somewhere in her due to which she is single and “rejected”. Thus, the entire responsibility of protecting her and her family’s honour falls on the woman’s shoulders. When this frustration and anxiety starts levelling up in the woman’s mind, she is forced to take certain unnecessary steps which may lead to bad results too. Even in the marriage proposals, only the external beauty of the girl is given complete importance. Her level of education, her sensibility or whatever other qualifications, are never really considered. If she is good looking, all her other flaws and shortcomings are very conveniently ignored and vice – versa. A very apt example of this would be the advertisements of Fairness creams and weight gain or weight loss products, which show how a girl is continuously rejected by suitors because of her dusky complexion or low weight or obesity, and how her “life changes” overnight after using the respective product and she finally gets married.

The treatment of women by the Indian society has no doubt always been unfair. They have more often than not fallen victims to a lot of atrocities and injustices. Indian Literature, reflecting the



society in which it has been produced, has managed to somehow cover a large chunk of this injustice, and to efficiently bring out the position of women and their suffering in the society very realistically.

Mrinal Pande and Ismat Chughtai are two of India's most famous feminist writers. The power of their pen clearly reflects in their writing. Their short stories are known to bring out the evils and the hypocrisy of the Indian society in a subtle, heart touching manner. Both of them are two such writers who in spite of facing a lot of opposition and censorship from the society dared to not only express their views but also to stand by what they have said. Their decision to exist as female, "feminist" writers in the society where men consider a woman expressing her views as a challenge to their authority is in itself, a pragmatic proof of their boldness. For ages, even before the two of them, their preceding women writers had to undergo a lot of obstruction either from the society or from their own families. Women were deprived from education just so that they shouldn't be awakened and start questioning the norms of the society which are predominantly designed by men. Since both Pande and Chughtai have themselves been victims of gender discrimination, their experiences and suffering reflect in their stories, making them appear extremely realistic and easy to connect with.

Mrinal Pande has been widely recognized for her excellence at using her words to bridge the Indian society which has been divided by caste, creed, gender, religion and language. Through her stories she brings out the plight of the much hyped "Bharatiya Naari" and how she suffers from gender discrimination at every step in life. She bitterly criticizes the Indian society in which on one hand women are idolized and worshipped as Goddesses, and on the other hand, in the same society a girl child when born is considered as a burden and is treated as an inferior creature throughout her life. She satirizes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal Indian society in which on one hand, people believe



“*yatr nary astu pujoyante ramante tatr Devata*”, meaning “gods dwell in a place, where a woman is worshipped”, and on the other hand they follow the dictum “*dhol, ganwar, pashu aur naari, yeh sab taadan ke adhikari*” meaning, “the drum, the fool, the beast and the woman, all deserve to be beaten up”.

On one hand, while Mrinal Pande highlights the theme of gender discrimination in the society along with exploitation, Ismat Chughtai brings out more vibrantly the kind of exploitation that women have to undergo along with gender discrimination. Ismat’s stories focus more on the plight of the Islamic women, how they are forced to give up control over their own bodies, how they are seen merely as sexual objects and nothing beyond that, and how they are “expected” to be docile, shy and submissive by nature, in the society that is completely male chauvinistic. A woman’s intellect is never valued, it is only her body that matters, and as long as she can keep ‘men’ satisfied, she is considered to be a “good, ideal female”. Chughtai’s writing faced a lot of censorship and her stories were often accused of obscenity. But that did not deter her from continuing to write and express her views. She believed that experiences can never be obscene if they are based on the authentic realities of life.

Girls, by Mrinal Pande is a first person narrative of the experiences of an eight year old narrator, who is at her maternal grandmother’s place, with her fourth time pregnant mother. Like every other girl in the house, she is neglected, scolded, ordered and shooed away by her elders. This deeply affects the little girl who, at such a young age itself, has become sure that nobody loves her in the house except her elder sister. She craves for affection from her mother and other elders in the house, but she never gets it. She is always treated like a burden, an unwanted creature. All this



unreasonable hatred boils in her heart, until one day it suddenly explodes and comes out before everyone in the form of her refusal to become a Devi on the Ashtami day. “*I screamed so loudly.....as if a bullet had been fired somewhere*” she says. Pande in *Girls* wonderfully brings out how gender discrimination starts as soon as the child is conceived. The biggest irony here is that the narrator’s pregnant mother and maternal grandmother are desperately praying to the “goddess” for a male child. The mother wants to get rid of the pain of undergoing another pregnancy and the maternal grandmother wants her ‘honor’ to be protected by sending her daughter to her marital home with a son this time. The narrator’s mother Lali already has three daughters but she is not really attached to any of them. She sees them as a cause of her suffering; as the narrator states, “*To Ma everything was a problem*”, “*we (the narrator and her sisters) were a problem*”. Lali scolds, slaps and curses the little narrator, for every little thing. She calls the narrator a witch, telling that she was born only to plague her mother’s life.

Pande very cleverly highlights how not just the family but the society also desires for and expects a male child. Any woman with sons is honored and the one with daughters is looked at with pity. The old lady neighbor, who comes to visit the pregnant Lali, says that seeing the glow on Lali’s face, she is sure it will be a boy this time. The midwife, Tulsa Dai tells Lali “*if it is a boy this time, I will demand a sari with stainless steel zari*”, indicating that the birth of a male child is nothing less than a festive occasion which is supposed to be celebrated with great pomp and joy. Even after the male child is born, he gets all the attention and love of the family. All his demands are fulfilled and he gets more privileges over his female counterparts. Pande brings this to the notice of the readers through the narrator, when the little girl states how her male cousin is comfortably seated on the



grandmother's lap while she is asked to bend and touch the grandmother's feet. Only the male cousin gets to sleep in the grandmother's warm quilt, while the other girls are not allowed to do the same. The story carefully presents the most disturbing fact that how women themselves discriminate between genders. It emphasizes on how women conveniently forget that they too were once little girls and they too were victims of gender discrimination. Perhaps, this is why instead of empowering their girls, they teach them to be inferior. The statements, "*You are a girl and you will have to bend for the rest of your life*" "*What a temper for a girl to show!*" indicate how women are trained by other women to be inferior and weak, and subordinate to men.

Pande has deliberately chosen a little eight year old girl as the protagonist and the narrator of the story. Through the innocence of the tiny girl who is unaware of society and its chauvinistic rules, Pande aims to bring out the reality of male domination in the society and also how women ultimately, readily or reluctantly, submit to this chauvinism in order to survive in the society. Some do it out of fear, some do it out of force and some do it, just because they do not know of any other options. The reason probably being, they are brought up with the idea that keeping men happy is the only means of their survival.

Pande also focuses on another important aspect of a woman's gender related suffering – loss of identity. Throughout the story, only Lali's name is known to the readers. Names of all the other female characters, including that of the narrator, are not revealed to the readers, indicating their unimportance. The girls are referred to by the names of their parents "*Lali's middle daughter*" "*Mama's daughters*" and what's worse is that women with sons are referred to by the names of their children, "*Hari's mother*", "*Saru's mother*" etc. Their own identity is never given any priority. While



on the other hand, the men and the male children are never referred to by the names of their mothers. This injustice is another very significant feature of gender discrimination which is pointed out by Pande. She also very intricately brings out the double standards of the society through the major fact that girls who are ignored and given no importance throughout the year, are suddenly deified and worshipped as Goddesses on the Ashtami day. In the story, the irony is that the narrator's maternal grandmother, who was just a few days ago praying to the Devi, to bless her daughter with a son, is the one who performs the Puja of all the virgin girls of the house. She blows the conch, rings the bell and does aarti to the girls, just like they do to the goddesses. Also, what is interesting to note here is the description of the entire Puja through the eyes of the little narrator, which also brings to light certain other gender related social evils that are practiced in India. She likens the holy crimson powder on her grandmother's thumb tip as that of a bloodstain, indicating the practice of abortion of female fetuses, female infanticide, honor killings, dowry harassment and torture, physical abuse etc. In this way, the comparison of the crimson stained thumb tip to a bloodstain, more effectively demonstrates how people on one side kill the real woman and on the other side worship the image of the same woman, a goddess. Not only that, using the little narrator as an example, Pande tries to instigate feelings of rebellion in women against this duplicity of the society. She perhaps wants girls to react in the way the narrator does, instead of calmly accepting this horrible prejudice and blaming it on their fate.

Thus, through the eyes of the little narrator, Pande succeeds in not only drawing attention to the discrimination of women in the Indian society but also emphasizing the hypocrisy of the traditions, beliefs and practices of the Indian society.



Ismat Chughtai's *Chauthi ka joda*, on the other hand, is more of an emphasis on the exploitation of women at the hands of men and how it is not fate but women that force other women to satisfy the lecherous desires of men, in order to survive in the society. *Chauthi ka Joda* is narrated partly in first person, through the eyes of Hamida and partly in third person by the author. It revolves around a poor family consisting of an old widowed mother and her two young daughters. It is a well-known custom in India that as long as the eldest sibling is unmarried, the younger ones can't marry either. This is the reason why Kubra the eldest daughter is considered as a burden on the family and Bi Amma, her mother, is desperate to marry her off to a suitable boy. Kubra though, is thin, lean, sickly and is aging fast, "*nothing can be said about a girl, she grows by leaps and bounds, just like a cucumber*" Bi Amma thinks. Kubra has reached her middle age and is still unmarried after so many years. She is past the age, where she could find a proper suitor for herself, her hair has started graying, and her hands have already become wrinkled. No man is interested in her anymore. Bi Amma on the other hand is busy stitching the "Chauthi ka joda" or the fourth day outfit for Kubra in the hope that someday she will get married, and the burden of the house will reduce a bit. It is said to be a bad omen if the fourth day outfit goes wrong in the stitching; some or the other problem would arise and the wedding would be called off. This was the problem with Kubra's outfit. Something would go wrong in the last minute of stitching, and her wedding could never happen. On the other hand, the younger daughter, Hamida, is fast reaching the marriageable age. She is young and good looking but cannot marry until her sister gets married. Meanwhile, a relative's son, named Rahat, comes to stay with the family on the pretext of having some official work in the city. All three women put their heart and soul in the service of Rahat, with the hope that he will initiate the proposal and marry Kubra. They starve themselves with dry morsels but feed him with rich meals. Kubra too hopes that



one day he will marry her and fill her life with colors. She assumes he will be hers one day and that day would put all the backbiting, mocking neighborhood women to shame. The music of the shehnai rings in her ears and her face lights up as she sweeps Rahat's room and washes his dirty clothes with bridal anticipation. Rahat though does not respond to any of these services. He just eats, sleeps, goes to work and comes back home. They assume his indifference to be his shyness and send Hamida, to talk to and tease her future "brother – in – law". Though initially reluctant, Hamida agrees to do it, for her sister and her mother. She does as she is directed by her mother and sister, while Rahat shamelessly flirts with her, bothering the least about Kubra. Hamida tries to reveal Rahat's truth to her mother and sister, but they shut her up by telling that she is silly, and all men are like that. However, seeing no proposal coming from Rahat or his family, Bi Amma calls for the maulvi sahib who says a special incantation over a plate of malida and asks it to be fed to Rahat. When Hamida takes the malida for Rahat, he rapes her and leaves for his home the next morning, stating that his parents have fixed his marriage and he has to go. On the other hand, Kubra suffers from Tuberculosis and dies. Thus, the dress which was to become her wedding outfit becomes her shroud.

It is noteworthy how beautifully Chughtai carves out the tiny, complex details in the story. Her realistic approach to the lives of the characters only makes the story more connectible and appealing to the fancy of the readers. Bi amma is a poor widow who has the responsibility of two young and unmarried daughters on her shoulders. She is so overridden by poverty that she doesn't even have the option to "choose" a worthy husband for Kubra. She tries to hand over Kubra to any man who comes her way, which is why she doesn't give a second thought before deciding to make Rahat her son – in – law. She doesn't even try to find out anything about his character, family



background or to even know his consent. The narrator says, “*Bi Amma began to drive herself mad with worry. It seemed as though it was not Rahat, but a veritable baraat that had arrived on the threshold. And she had not yet chipped gold leaf for the bride’s hair – parting!*” Chughtai brings to notice how the girls are trained to think of their marital home as their real home, how they grow up waiting for their marriage and how if this marriage gets delayed for some reason, they get desperate. She effectively brings out Kubra’s desperation which is so clearly visible to Hamida, “The thought made my bi aapa’s face glow with bridal anticipation. The sound of the shehnai rang in her ears as she swept Rahat’s room to make it spotless. She would arrange his clothes lovingly as though they talked to her. She washed his dirty socks, his stinking vests and handkerchiefs filled with mucous. And on his oil – smeared pillow cover she embroidered ‘Sweet Dreams’.” In spite of this, later in the story, Hamida clarifies that Kubra was desperate for “marriage” and not for “men”. Hamida says, “*Did my sister hunger after men? No. She had already shriveled up at the mere thought of such a hunger. The thought of a man, did not come to her as a mere longing, but as an answer to her need of food and clothing. She was a widow’s burden and must not continue to remain so.*” Also, Hamida’s helplessness and her frustration evidently reflect through her monologues, “*I boiled with rage. We ate dry rotis so as to provide him with plentiful food and stuff him with paranthas dripping with ghee. My Bi aapa could not buy jushanda (medicine) for herself while she must get him milk and cream. I walked away in a huff.*”

Chauthi ka joda, just like *Girls*, highlights the central idea of gender discrimination. Kubra is considered as a burden upon the house, only because she, being a girl is forbidden from stepping out of the house and earning. A boy, in the very same situation, might never have been treated like a



burden. In fact, he would be considered as the man of the house. Chughtai also emphasizes on how, if the girl is unmarried, the society immediately assumes that the fault lies with her and something is definitely wrong with her, because of which she is not destined to “marital bliss”. The neighborhood women, instead of sympathizing with her or helping her out, make fun of her and taunt her. Also, the societal custom, of feeding the son – in – law with delicacies and giving him royal treatment, while the host family starves itself has been finely projected in the story. The story underlines how women are bound to satisfy the desires of lecherous men, due to some or the other kind of pressure – societal, familial or personal. Men, in return to all that the women do for them, take them for granted and try to exploit them in every possible way.

Both *Girls* and *Chauthi ka joda* are sensitive works written by female writers. That is probably the reason why one can not only understand and sympathize with the characters but can also feel their pain. The protagonists and narrators of both these stories are girls and are the younger children in their respective families. This fact makes it easier for people in their families to dominate over them. Through the eyes of both the narrators, the eight year old little girl and Hamida, the readers get an actual taste of the life of a woman in the Indian society. Both these stories draw attention to the falseness and the double standards of the Indian society and its customs and traditions. Both talk about how women are seen as nothing but merely child bearing machines and sexual objects. In *Girls*, Lali, the narrator’s mother is fourth time pregnant, only because her husband wants a son. Her husband only wants to satisfy his desire for a male heir to the family, and he gives absolutely no thought to how much his wife has to suffer because of this. He makes himself oblivious to her pain and thinks it is her duty to give him what he wants. He throws his weight around and dominates her.



In Chauthi ka Joda, Rahat uses Hamida as a temporary enjoyment for as long as he is staying in that house. He exploits her for his own sexual gratification, ruins her life and then very conveniently takes leave of her family on the pretext of getting married. Also, both Hamida and the little narrator are not happy with the kind of lives they are forced to lead. They rebel and protest, but their mouths are rendered shut by the other elder women in their respective houses. The little girl is asked to remain quiet and not trouble her heavily pregnant mother, while Hamida is asked to quietly endure all that is happening, for the happiness of her elder sister. The point of difference though, between Hamida and the little girl, is that the little girl protests, rebels and fights back. She says, *"I start moving back towards the wall and screaming, 'I don't want all the halwa – puri, tika or money. I don't want to be a goddess.' I screamed so loudly that the pigeons pecking at the scattered grain in the courtyard took off in a flurry as if a bullet had been fired somewhere."* This shows her protest against the hypocrisy of her family members and the falseness of the customs they follow. Also, when the little girl, along with her cousins is asked to sit down for the *aarti* of the *ashtamipuja*, she doesn't obey. Instead, she starts running around the courtyard. *"Poo.....ooo. I am suddenly transformed into a railway engine."* She says. This little gesture is perhaps her way of rebelling and telling her elders, that she is not going to listen to them or be a part of their pretences. Hamida on the other hand, never protests against whatever is happening with her. She knows whatever is going on around her is wrong, but she finds herself helpless before her old widowed mother and her aging unmarried sister. She is defenseless against the societal customs and their nature of placing men at the center and women at the margins. Unlike the little girl, she considers lot of things and hesitates before she can even decide to rebel against the situation.



In spite of this, ultimately, both Hamida and the little girl are troubled souls and victims at the hands of the hypocrisy and fakeness of the chauvinistic, patriarchal Indian society.

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