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Children's Exposure to Social Reality in light of Ranjit Lal's *Faces in the Water*

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Abstract

This research explores the intersection of children's exposure to social realities and literature, focusing on Ranjit Lal's Faces in the Water. The novel, aimed at young adult readers, addresses the harrowing issue of female infanticide within an affluent, educated Indian family, dismantling the assumption that such practices are confined to marginalized communities. Through the protagonist Gurmi's journey, the narrative critiques patriarchal oppression, highlighting the complicity of both men and women in sustaining gender discrimination. By employing a child's perspective, Lal balances serious themes with engaging storytelling, using elements of fantasy and youthful innocence to render the subject accessible to young readers. This study situates Faces in the Water within the broader framework of developmental psychology, children's literature, and social awareness, examining how fiction can foster empathy and inspire moral engagement in young audiences. The research underscores the transformative potential of literature in shaping socially conscious individuals and challenging oppressive societal norms, demonstrating how narratives designed for young readers can function as vehicles for social critique and change.

Introduction

The question of when and how children should be introduced to social issues is as much a matter of psychological and educational concern as it is of moral and philosophical contemplation. The interplay between innocence and awareness, between the child's imagination and the harsh realities of the world, is a subject that requires thoughtful handling. As scholars have often pointed out, children are not blank slates but rather beings who begin to form ideas about the world around them from a very early age. Children as young as three or four already notice differences in race, gender, and social status, studies have proven. This suggests that an awareness of the social world—and the inequities that often define it—takes root early, and thus necessitates responsible guidance from adults.

However, it is still hard to know how these sensitive matters should be broached. Developmental psychologists such as Dr. Melanie Killen argue that children acquire biases not innately, but through their exposure to societal norms (Killen & Rutland, 2011). To cultivate understanding and prevent the perpetuation of prejudice, it becomes important to introduce social issues at a young age, yet in a manner

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that is both appropriate and comprehensible to a child's developing mind.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development states that children in the pre-operational stage—those between the ages of two and seven—are capable of grasping fundamental concepts such as kindness and fairness. But their capacity for abstract reasoning remains limited, and thus, discussions of social justice must be grounded in the concrete, the particular and the relatable. This seems to be possible, at least in part, through the introduction of books and stories that are relatable, but also rooted in ideas of social justice.

As children grow older and their capacity for logical reasoning sharpens, they enter what Piaget terms the concrete operational stage. At this point, typically between the ages of seven and eleven, children begin to understand cause and effect, which allows for more complex conversations about social issues. As Bigler and Wright (2014) have shown, children exposed to discussions of prejudice during this period are more likely to challenge stereotypes and advocate for fairness.

However, since a lot of social issues may be very harsh on young minds, one must tread carefully, lest the child be overwhelmed by the weight of these realities. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1994) reminds us that a child's sense of safety in their immediate environment is paramount. Bigler (1999) highlights this, noting that children need not only awareness of social problems but also the reassurance that they can be agents of change in their own small ways—whether through kindness, standing up against bullying, or participating in community efforts.

The question of introduction of social issues to children, therefore, is not merely a matter of when, but of how. The gradual unveiling of such knowledge, tailored to the child's developmental stage, is of utmost importance. Early conversations about fairness and diversity serve as the foundation, upon which more complex discussions can be built as the child matures. Children's literature can serve as an important means of shaping our understanding of the world, preparing them not only to perceive injustice but also to imagine, and work toward, a better world.

***Faces in the Water*- Ranjit Lal: An Introduction**

Ranjit Lal is an acclaimed Indian author, columnist, and naturalist known for his rich contribution to contemporary Indian children's and young adult literature. Born in Kolkata and educated at The Doon School, Dehradun, Lal initially worked as a journalist before fully devoting himself to writing fiction and non-fiction for younger audiences. His passion for wildlife, bird-watching, and the environment often filters into his stories, creating an engaging blend of humor, sensitivity, and social relevance.

Lal has authored over 35 books spanning fiction and non-fiction, many of which are celebrated for their thoughtful handling of complex themes like gender discrimination, environmental awareness, social injustice, and animal rights. His writing style is marked by wit, empathy, and a distinctive narrative voice that appeals equally to young readers and adults. He has contributed regularly to publications such as *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, and *The Hindu*, particularly focusing on environmental issues and wildlife conservation.

Among his popular works are *The Battle for No. 19*, *The Tigers of Taboo Valley*, *The Small Tigers of Shergarh*, *The Caterpillar Who Went on a Diet and Other Stories*, and *Smitten*. What sets Lal apart in the landscape of Indian children's literature is his ability to treat young readers as intelligent and emotionally perceptive individuals. He does not shy away from serious topics but instead crafts stories that empower children and adolescents to think critically and develop empathy.

Lal's work has received both national and international recognition. His writing has been shortlisted for and awarded numerous honors, including the *Crossword Award* and the *Hindu Young World-Goodbooks Award*. Critics and educators have praised his work for its courage, originality, and ability to address pressing societal issues through the lens of accessible storytelling.

One of Lal's most poignant and critically acclaimed works is the novel *Faces in the Water*, published by Puffin Books in 2010. This young adult novel bravely explores the hidden horrors of female infanticide in India through the eyes of a teenage boy, Gurmi, who discovers the dark secret buried within his seemingly respectable family. Haunted by the faces of unborn sisters whose lives were cut short, the novel delves into themes of guilt, conscience, complicity, and moral awakening. It is a powerful and unsettling narrative that holds a mirror to the patriarchal obsession with

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male heirs and the silent suffering of discarded female lives.

Faces in the Water has been lauded for its courageous subject matter and sensitive storytelling. It won the 2011 Crossword Book Award for Children's Literature and was shortlisted for the Deutsche Bank Awards for Excellence in Writing. The novel is now included in many school reading lists and has been commended for initiating difficult but necessary conversations about gender violence and family complicity. With *Faces in the Water*, Ranjit Lal has not only crafted a compelling piece of fiction but has also made a lasting contribution to Indian literature that challenges taboos and uplifts suppressed voices.

Female Infanticide/Foeticide in India

Female infanticide and foeticide are among the most alarming manifestations of gender-based violence and discrimination in India, deeply rooted in historical, social, and cultural contexts. The practice of deliberately ending the life of a girl child—either at birth or even before birth—has had a long and tragic history in the subcontinent. Despite legal prohibitions and growing awareness, these practices persist, revealing the deeply entrenched patriarchal values that continue to prioritize male offspring over females.

Historically, female infanticide was often practiced among certain upper-caste and land-owning communities in northwestern India, particularly in regions like Punjab and Rajasthan. These communities considered daughters to be a financial burden due to the dowry system, a social evil that continues to haunt Indian society. As historian Lata Mani explains, "Colonial accounts of female infanticide were often moralistic, but they did reflect a deep-seated cultural preference for sons among native elites" (Mani 123). During the colonial period, the British administration enacted laws such as the Female Infanticide Prevention Act of 1870 to curb the practice, but enforcement was inconsistent and often met with resistance from local power structures.

With the advent of modern technology, the issue took a sinister turn. The introduction of prenatal sex determination in the 1980s allowed families to know the sex of the foetus early in pregnancy. This led to a rise in sex-selective abortions, or female foeticide. The 1994 Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act was enacted to prohibit the misuse of prenatal diagnostic tools for sex selection. However, as activist Sabu George notes, "Despite the law, illegal sex determination and abortions continue with impunity, especially in private clinics" (George 48). The persistence of such practices highlights the failure of mere legal frameworks to address deep-rooted cultural biases.

The 2011 Census of India painted a grim picture of the child sex ratio. It showed a decline from 927 girls per 1000 boys in 2001 to 919 in 2011 in the 0–6 age group. States like Haryana and Punjab reported ratios below 900, indicating a severe demographic imbalance. As feminist scholar Rita Banerji argues, "This is not merely a statistical anomaly but a gender genocide enabled by family structures, medical technology, and patriarchal ideology" (Banerji 204). These imbalances have long-term social consequences, including increased violence against women, human trafficking, and forced marriages due to the shortage of brides.

The underlying causes of these practices are deeply tied to societal norms. In many parts of India, sons are seen as carriers of the family name, economic supporters, and performers of last rites. Daughters, on the other hand, are perceived as liabilities, to be married off with substantial dowries. This patriarchal logic is reinforced through religious beliefs, inheritance laws, and lack of social security for the elderly, which further pushes families to prefer male children.

Despite awareness campaigns like "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter), implementation remains inconsistent and often symbolic. The problem is exacerbated in regions where literacy rates are low and patriarchal norms are strongly entrenched. As scholar Vibhuti Patel notes, "Addressing female foeticide requires a multidimensional approach—legal, educational, economic, and most importantly, cultural transformation" (Patel 67). It is essential to shift attitudes at the grassroots level, starting from childhood itself.

In this regard, children's literature has a powerful role to play. Stories shape moral imagination and help children question societal norms. By embedding themes that challenge gender stereotypes and affirm the value of girl children, children's books can become

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a transformative tool for change. Literature that sensitizes young minds to issues like female infanticide fosters empathy and critical thinking. When young readers encounter stories of strong, cherished girl protagonists who challenge unjust systems, they begin to internalize values of equality and justice. Addressing such critical issues in children's literature is not merely a literary choice but a moral imperative.

***Faces in the Water* – A Critical View**

Ranjit Lal's novel successfully tackles the issue of female infanticide among other social concerns such as systemic patriarchy. The narrative centers on fifteen-year-old Gurmi (short for Gurmeet), who stumbles upon the grim truth of his family's past—three of his sisters were drowned at birth simply because they were girls. As Gurmi grapples with this horrifying discovery, he is haunted by visions of his sisters, whose faces emerge from the water in the well on their ancestral farm, confronting him with a sense of guilt and anguish.

The novel is written in the first-person narrative style and offers us insights from the protagonist Gurmi's perspective. Gurmi is a fifteen-year-old born in the Diwanchand family. The novel opens with an introduction to the family and the two things they take pride in: the fact that there have only been boys born in the family for generations and that they never fall ill, thanks to the water they drink from an ancestral well on their property in the village which acts as an elixir. They are a rich family of businessmen who run a factory of powerful electric motors.

Although Gurmi was born on their ancestral farm on the outskirts of the city, he has lived in urban Delhi all his life. All Diwanchand babies are born on the farm, not a hospital. His uncle Balvinder's wife, Surinder aunty, is a qualified gynaecologist and she delivered the babies born in the family. Although it isn't explicitly stated, given the family's societal status as upper-class elites, it is understood that all the members of the Diwanchand family are well qualified individuals leading a lavish life of luxury. This portrayal of a wealthy, educated, upper-class household is both intentional and impactful, as it challenges the widely held notion that practices such as gender discrimination and female infanticide are limited to impoverished or uneducated communities. By situating this horrific tradition within a family of privilege, Lal shows the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms and the deep cultural roots of gender discrimination that transcend economic and educational boundaries. Nivedita Menon aptly comments on this in her book Seeing Like a Feminist where she writes about patriarchy in India as, "Patriarchy is not a residue of backwardness that will vanish with modernity or education. It thrives equally in urban apartments and rural huts, among IAS officers and daily-wage labourers."

a. The Patriarch of the Family

Gurmi makes it evident right at the start of the novel that his father is an abusive husband to his mother. His father, Balbirji, is described as "hefty and bristly" with a "snarling temper" and Gurmi says that it is better to stay out of his father's way "when he is in the mood to snap and bite" and adds that "his bite is certainly worse than his bark" which hints at physical abuse. In one instance when the family's Rottweilers on the farm are mentioned, Gurmi compares their bark with his father's snarl describing it as a "if you take one more step we'll tear your throat out" sort of snarl. As the novel progresses, there are more indications of this abusive nature of the father. Gurmi tells the reader that his mother never smiled. When Balbirji visits Gurmi and his mother at the ancestral home, he expects to be treated as the centre of everyone's universe. All his whims and fancies had to be satisfied by the whole household. His mother cooks a lavish spread of fragrant mutton pallau with almonds and raisins and saffron rice which the father describes as "garbage pig's slop" and dismisses it in his "unpleasant bellicose way." When the father finds Gurmi clicking pictures with his camera, he comments that "only girly men are photographers," exposing his stereotypical prejudice.

It is evident through all these incidents that Balbirji exemplifies the harmful archetype of patriarchal male supremacy, manifesting in multiple oppressive behaviors that degrade and control those around him. His appearance and temper portray him as an almost animalistic figure with a "bite", a clear metaphor for the severe physical and emotional abuse he inflicts upon his family. Through Gurmi's perspective, we see a man who considers himself the absolute authority, not just in his demands for obedience but also in his expectation to be the household's center of attention.

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This expectation is typical of patriarchal dominance, where the male figure commands control and reverence. It must be noted, however, that in Indian society, patriarchal oppression is sustained not only through overt acts of control and violence, but also through deeply embedded cultural practices and ideologies. Feminist historian Uma Chakravarti highlights how patriarchal men maintain dominance by controlling women's sexuality, labor, and mobility, often under the guise of familial duty, caste honor, or religious tradition.

Balbirji also dismisses his wife's efforts with derogatory contempt, calling her carefully prepared dishes "garbage pig's slop" in a "bellicose" manner. His comment on Gurmi's interest in photography as a pursuit for "girly men" further exposes his stereotypical, misogynistic mindset, equating certain passions or professions with weakness or femininity, which he views as inferior. Gurmi's mother's perpetual lack of a smile is another powerful indicator of his father's oppressive influence, revealing a life stripped of joy or self-worth under his control. In many ways, the father embodies a deeply ingrained patriarchal authority that devalues others to sustain his own sense of male supremacy, making him not just a flawed character but a significant vehicle of toxic masculinity and domestic dominance. Feminist political theorist Nivedita Menon asserts that patriarchal control in India is not confined to rural or uneducated populations—it is deeply entrenched in the very fabric of everyday urban and educated life. According to Menon, patriarchal men maintain control through mechanisms that appear "normal" or culturally accepted: decisions about what women wear, who they marry, when they return home, or whether they pursue higher education or careers.

Menon critiques the notion that patriarchy is merely a traditional relic, arguing instead that it is actively reproduced by modern institutions such as the state, family, and media. Even men who claim to be progressive often harbor internalized biases that manifest in subtler forms of control—expecting women to "adjust," uphold family honor, or remain primary caregivers regardless of their professional ambitions. She writes: "Men continue to hold on to their privileges in the most banal ways—in household arrangements, in love relationships, in workplaces. These are not marginal, backward men. These are modern, urban, educated men. Patriarchy is not external to them; it is what sustains them." This is true of Balbirji as well.

Portraying characters like Balbirji in young adult fiction holds significant importance in the journey toward gender equality, especially in the formative minds of young readers. By presenting an unapologetically patriarchal figure whose actions reveal the damaging consequences of toxic masculinity, such novels invite young readers to question and confront harmful gender stereotypes and power imbalances.

For young readers, understanding characters like Gurmi's father offers a window into the real-life consequences of gender inequality. Gurmi's experiences—his mother's silence and joyless existence, his own dismissive treatment, and the father's scorn toward "feminine" pursuits—reveal the deep-seated biases that stem from patriarchal ideals. Through such portrayals, readers are encouraged to recognize these stereotypes and question the validity of equating strength and authority exclusively with masculinity.

It is the father's authoritative nature that forces the mother into multiple pregnancies and subsequent infanticides when a daughter is born to her. Gurmi's mother as an expecting woman is terrified of the consequences of birthing another daughter because she has already had to lose three daughters to the evil practice of drowning new born girls in the family well. In one instance, she turns to Surinder and says, "I just hope it will be okay this time. Balbirji will kill me otherwise."

Balbirji's controlling and authoritarian nature not only strips Gurmi's mother of her autonomy but also forces her into participating in horrific acts that are emblematic of patriarchal violence and oppression. His dominance over her body and reproductive choices exemplifies how deeply his authority penetrates her life, reducing her to a vessel for fulfilling his expectations of male heirs. Her desperate compliance reveals the extent of his psychological and physical hold over her, pushing her to commit morally devastating acts, such as infanticide, perhaps out of fear for her own life.

Balbirji's influence creates an environment in which Gurmi's mother has little choice but to adhere to his

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twisted demands. His threat looms so powerfully that her only recourse to survive his wrath is to submit to the practice of killing newborn daughters, a violent custom rooted in extreme patriarchy and misogyny. She is terrified of failing to produce a son, as each birth brings her closer to potential punishment from her husband. Through Balbirji's character, the narrative exposes the violent lengths to which patriarchy can drive individuals, forcing women into complicity with their own subjugation. Gurmi's mother is not inherently cruel; she is made cruel by a system—and by a husband—that demand her loyalty through oppressive, life-threatening control. Balbirji's nature embodies this system, illustrating how patriarchal power can strip individuals of their moral agency, driving them to actions that are as tragic as they are morally abhorrent.

b. Women's Complicity in Patriarchal Structures

Surinder's role in perpetuating female infanticide is a deeply disturbing element of *Faces in the Water*, highlighting the insidious nature of patriarchy, where women themselves are often complicit in maintaining oppressive systems. When Gurmi's mother expresses her fears over not birthing a son, she also expresses her desire to keep a daughter in case she is blessed with a female child again. To this, Surinder replies saying, "Hush Sushmaji- I told you the Diwanchands don't keep daughters, and that's that. You should be used to it now. Don't talk like that. Why do you think we are so respected and envied in the community? We have such a reputation to protect. Everyone looks up to us, like we are royalty. It's a matter of great pride and the family's honour. Besides, think of the amount of money that has been saved." Her words to Sushmaji not only reflect a chilling normalization of the practice but also reveal how deeply societal values tied to honour, status, and wealth can corrupt ethical reasoning, even among women who might otherwise be expected to empathize with the plight of other women.

Surinder, as a woman and a qualified gynecologist, occupies a morally complex position. On the surface, one might expect her to advocate for the lives of these girls or resist the patriarchal practices of the Diwanchand family. However, her words suggest that she has internalized these oppressive values to such an extent that she justifies and even defends the practice. Her admonition to Sushmaji—"Hush Sushmaji... You should be used to it now"—reflects a resignation to the status quo, a surrender that is often demanded of women in patriarchal societies to ensure their survival within the system. As historian and women's rights activist Radha Kumar writes in *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800–1990*, "The Indian middle class, despite its exposure to liberal ideas and global discourses, continues to exercise rigid control over women's mobility, sexuality, and reproductive choices."

This complicity reveals a painful truth: patriarchy does not function solely through male dominance but often relies on women's participation to uphold its structures. Surinder's role in delivering the babies who are later killed ties her directly to the act of infanticide, and her justification of it reflects how deeply ingrained these values are. Her perspective, while reprehensible, is shaped by a lifetime of conditioning that equates a family's honour and societal respect with the absence of daughters. As Uma Chakravarti puts it, "Patriarchy in India operates through the twin structures of caste and gender, controlling women across both public and private spheres, regardless of whether they are educated or not."

Surinder's invocation of family honor and economic savings adds another layer of critique. She frames the killing of daughters as a rational decision that benefits the family, linking it to the avoidance of dowry—a practice itself rooted in the commodification of women. The mention of money saved by avoiding dowry payments reduces daughters to financial liabilities and brings to light the transactional view of women's worth in patriarchal societies.

Her statement, "Think of the amount of money that has been saved," not only trivializes the moral gravity of taking a life but also highlights the intersection of gender discrimination and economic pressures. While dowry is often cited as a reason for female infanticide, the Diwanchands' wealth makes this justification particularly hollow. Their economic privilege makes it clear that the killings are not driven by necessity but by a deliberate choice to uphold patriarchal values.

The idea that the Diwanchands' respect and envy in the community stem from their lack of daughters is an

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even more damning indictment of societal complicity. Surinder's pride in the family's "reputation" reflects a collective failure to challenge toxic norms, where wealth and honour are prioritized over human lives. By emphasizing that the family is "looked up to, like royalty," Surinder illustrates how societal validation can perpetuate violence against women.

Portraying the grim realities of gender violence and complicity in children's and young adult literature is not only necessary—it is politically and pedagogically urgent. As Paulo Freire asserts in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, education must be "an act of knowing" that encourages learners to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and take action against oppressive elements of reality (Freire 35). Novels like Faces in the Water function as critical pedagogical texts that help young readers not only witness injustice but begin to recognize its roots and repetitions in the world around them.

Children's literature, when engaged with courageously, becomes what bell hooks calls a "location of possibility" where marginalized voices can speak and be heard, and where young readers can cultivate a radical imagination that challenges normative social values (hooks 207). By narrating the brutal truth of female infanticide through a young protagonist's perspective, the novel opens a reflective space in which readers—particularly adolescents—can grapple with questions of morality, silence, resistance, and inherited violence. This is not trauma for the sake of narrative spectacle, but trauma as epistemology—a way of knowing how structural patriarchy operates and sustains itself across generations.

Such representations also allow for what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as "ethical singularity"—the moment when the reader experiences a connection with the subaltern voice, not as abstract data but as a human encounter that demands ethical engagement (Spivak 338). The murdered baby girls in Faces in the Water, though largely voiceless and unseen, are rendered present through Gurmi's evolving consciousness and the haunting metaphors of the "faces in the water." The novel thus works to "interrupt" normalized structures of privilege and demand a reckoning, especially from readers who, like Gurmi, may find themselves complicit through silence or ignorance.

Literature that depicts violence against girls—especially when situated within family structures—dismantles the romanticized domestic sphere, often viewed as apolitical or benign. As feminist critic Mariam Fraser notes, "Representations of the body in literature—particularly female bodies—function as battlegrounds on which the politics of gender, purity, and shame are enacted" (Fraser 28). By showing how girl children are not just devalued but actively erased, the novel teaches its readers to interrogate the ways in which gendered violence is often disguised as tradition, honour, or rational decision-making.

Incorporating such themes in literature for young audiences also reinforces Jacques Rancière's idea of the "distribution of the sensible"—the political act of making previously invisible experiences and subjects perceptible through aesthetic representation. Children's literature, then, becomes a site for redistributing attention, emotion, and moral inquiry toward those historically silenced or marginalized. It affirms that children are not passive absorbers of entertainment but ethical beings capable of complex engagement with power and injustice.

Novels like *Faces in the Water* give young readers the intellectual and emotional tools to recognize injustice and imagine alternatives. They do not merely inform; they transform. As young readers learn to identify systems of oppression, question normalized hierarchies, and empathize with marginalized voices, literature becomes an act of social resistance and ethical becoming.

The Role of Young Adult Fiction

Ranjit Lal's *Faces in the Water* stands as a remarkable contribution to young adult fiction because it tackles deeply entrenched social issues such as female infanticide, gender discrimination, and patriarchal oppression, all while maintaining a narrative tone accessible and relatable to its intended audience. The book not only educates but also instills important values of empathy, equality, and moral courage in young readers.

By exploring complex and unsettling themes like female infanticide within the framework of young adult fiction, the novel does more than just entertain—it becomes a tool for awareness and reflection. Adolescents, as the future custodians of societal values, are at a critical age where their understanding

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of fairness, morality, and equality is being shaped. Books like *Faces in the Water* encourage them to question oppressive traditions and recognize their role in dismantling them.

The novel's depiction of female infanticide exposes young readers to the real-world consequences of gender bias, prompting them to confront uncomfortable truths about societal norms. Yet it balances these heavy themes with the promise of change, embodied in Gurmi's awakening sense of responsibility and his growing resolve to challenge these practices. This duality—acknowledging harsh realities while inspiring hope—makes the book a powerful vehicle for instilling progressive values.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Faces in the Water* is its choice to tell the story through the perspective of a child. Gurmi's innocence and curiosity infuse the narrative with a sense of wonder and playfulness, softening the impact of its darker themes while still making them accessible. His interactions with the ghosts of the drowned girls serve as a impactful yet playful narrative device, bridging the gap between childhood innocence and the weight of societal injustices.

The ghosts, far from being figures of terror, are Gurmi's friends, and their camaraderie adds a bittersweet charm to the story. They play games, share jokes, and interact with Gurmi in ways that retain the essence of children's fiction, ensuring that the narrative remains engaging for young readers. This blending of fantasy and reality allows the novel to address its serious themes without overwhelming its audience, making it both thought-provoking and age-appropriate.

The use of the child's perspective also serves to highlight the absurdity and cruelty of practices like female infanticide. Through Gurmi's eyes, readers see these traditions stripped of the justifications adults often attach to them, exposing them for what they truly are: acts of senseless violence. His natural empathy and sense of justice stand in stark contrast to the complacency of the adults around him, reinforcing the idea that change often begins with questioning inherited values.

Despite its heavy themes, the novel never loses sight of its young audience. The interactions between Gurmi and the ghosts are laced with humor, mischief, and the boundless imagination of childhood. These moments of levity serve as a counterbalance to the darker aspects of the story, ensuring that the book remains engaging and relatable. The ghosts themselves, though victims of a terrible crime, are portrayed as vibrant and playful, embodying a sense of resilience and hope that resonates with young readers.

Conclusion

In *Faces in the Water*, Ranjit Lal masterfully fuses the tools of young adult fiction with searing social critique, crafting a novel that is both deeply affecting and socially consequential. Through the eyes of Gurmi, the adolescent protagonist, readers are introduced to the brutal reality of female infanticide, not as a distant or rural aberration, but as a practice embedded within an affluent, educated, urban family. This narrative strategy is both subversive and illuminating. By rooting this violence in the familiar space of domestic respectability, Lal shatters the comforting myth that patriarchy is the domain of the poor, the uneducated, or the rural. Instead, the novel exposes how gender violence is naturalized and perpetuated across class, caste, and educational boundaries.

The narrative's child-centered perspective intensifies its moral urgency. Gurmi's innocence becomes the reader's lens, through which the horror of normalized violence is laid bare. In this way, Lal engages with what Martha Nussbaum terms the "narrative imagination," which she defines as "the ability to be an intelligent reader of another person's story," crucial for cultivating ethical citizenship in a democratic society (Nussbaum 95). Gurmi's journey from bewildered observer to emotionally burdened witness mirrors the reader's own confrontation with moral complicity and the imperative for resistance. This alignment ensures that young readers are not mere spectators of injustice, but are challenged to reflect on their own positions within systems of inequality.

Importantly, *Faces in the Water* underscores the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal ideologies and the role both men and women play in upholding them. The novel indicts not just the overtly patriarchal male figures but also women like Surinder, whose complicity is cloaked in the rhetoric of

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tradition, honor, and social status. As feminist theorist Gerda Lerner argues, "Women have been taught to look upon themselves as victims and to feel powerless. But women are also taught to participate in and perpetuate the system of patriarchy" (Lerner 217). Surinder, as both a gynecologist and a family elder, becomes a disturbing symbol of how education and professional success do not automatically translate to feminist consciousness. Her justifications—centered around family reputation, honor, and economic savings—expose the depth of patriarchal conditioning and its normalization within everyday discourse.

Yet, the novel is not without hope. By choosing a child protagonist who resists silence and begins to question the accepted moral order of his family, Lal gestures toward the possibility of rupture and change. As bell hooks reminds us, "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible" (Outlaw Culture 201). *Faces in the Water* does precisely that: it not only documents injustice but also affirms the transformative power of questioning, witnessing, and eventually resisting. Literature here becomes an ethical space—one that allows for recognition, mourning, and ultimately, the reimagining of social norms.

The novel's contribution to children's and young adult literature is particularly significant. In an era where much of mainstream content for young readers leans toward fantasy, escapism, or sanitized morality, Lal's novel dares to confront the unspeakable. This aligns with Rudine Sims Bishop's argument that literature should act not only as a "mirror" reflecting one's own experiences but also as a "window" into others' lives, and a "sliding glass door" through which readers can step into different perspectives (Bishop). *Faces in the Water* fulfills all three functions. It reflects back the realities of gender violence, opens a window into the hidden chambers of familial complicity, and invites readers to step into the role of witnesses and critics.

Faces in the Water stands as a powerful example of how literature can function as a form of social intervention. It offers no easy answers, no moral resolutions, and yet, it deeply affirms the power of storytelling in shaping consciousness. It reinforces the idea that engaging young readers with narratives about injustice is not only an educational necessity but a moral one. By confronting them with difficult truths, literature encourages them to imagine and strive for a future in which equality is not an aspiration, but a lived reality. In doing so, Lal's work becomes not just a novel, but a call to awareness, empathy, and transformation.

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