

Unravelling the Silent Tragedy of Missing Girls:
A Study of Gita Aravamudan's *Disappearing Daughters:
The Tragedy of Female Foeticide*

Chinmoyee Saikia & Dipendu Das

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Gita Aravamudan's *Disappearing Daughters: The Tragedy of Female Foeticide* through the lens of Society, Culture and Change: Crossings and Intersections. Aravamudan's work, which combines investigative reportage with personal testimonies, highlights the crisis of missing girls in India, placing female foeticide and infanticide at the intersection of patriarchal structures, technological progress, and socio-cultural expectations.

The work illustrates how society reproduces systemic inequalities by embedding gender hierarchies within kinship networks, inheritance logics, and community sanctions. Culture, far from being a static repository of values, operates as a dynamic site where modern technologies intersect with traditional practices to normalise gendered violence. The complicity of medical practitioners in enabling sex-selective abortions demonstrates how intersections of science, commerce, and cultural ideology sustain practices that devalue female life. By mapping these crossings, Aravamudan reveals the demographic, ethical, and political consequences of disappearing daughters: skewed sex ratios, intensified gender inequities, and the erosion of constitutional guarantees of equality. More significantly, the book invites reflection on how cultural continuity and social change operate in tandem, how aspirations toward modernity coexist with deep-seated patriarchal anxieties, producing paradoxical outcomes in which technological progress facilitates regressive practices.

This study argues that *Disappearing Daughters: The Tragedy of Female Foeticide* demands a reading beyond the documentation of a social problem; it is also a critical site where intersections of society, culture, and change become visible. The disappearance of daughters represents not only a demographic imbalance but also a profound cultural rupture that destabilises notions of justice, citizenship, and human dignity. Situating the book within interdisciplinary debates on gender and social transformation, this paper underscores the urgency of reimagining cultural narratives and instituting structural reforms to address the silent yet pervasive crisis of missing girls.

Keywords: Female foeticide, missing girls, gender discrimination, patriarchy, sex-selective abortion, demographic imbalance.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “missing girls,” referring to those lost to female foeticide, infanticide, and trafficking, is one of India’s gravest humanitarian crises. In contrast to more visible forms of violence against women, female foeticide and infanticide remain “invisible,” ending lives without making noise. The root causes of this tragedy are deeply rooted in societal values, intersecting with modern technology, economic incentives, and the complicity of various actors, including the state and medical practitioners. This crisis not only violates basic human rights but also contributes significantly to the gender imbalance in India.

Gita Aravamudan, in her book, describes the issue of disappearing daughters as “serial killing” and as “holocaust.” She stated.

Female infanticide is comparable to serial killing. However, female foeticide resembles a holocaust; an entire gender is being wiped out. It is a silent, smoothly carried out crime that causes no waves. It occurs while we, as a nation, remain unaware. In some regions, nearly two generations of women have been eradicated before I finished this book, and there is still no solution in sight (Aravamudan xvi).

Female foeticide and infanticide cannot be attributed to isolated cases or simply regressive tradition. Instead, the practice is a function of patriarchal kinship systems that privilege sons who inherit property, carry on the family name, and are seen as economic assets. At the same time, daughters are often

viewed as financial burdens due to the dowry system and the perceived lack of lineage value. Even among modern and educated families, these patriarchal expectations persist, showing that social class, education, or urbanity do not necessarily lead to gender equity. Community norms exert immense pressure, with women facing ostracism or abuse for refusing sex-selective abortions. The social architecture, therefore, is geared toward reproducing gender inequality, turning society itself into an engine for systemic violence against women.

During her visit to Usliampatti in Madurai, Aravamudan discusses her experience in the chapter “In Search of Disappearing Daughters.” Her goal was to find out if mothers killed their newborn daughters. She writes:

For some years now, an alarming number of baby girls have been disappearing without a trace in the Madurai, Salem and Dharmapuri districts of Tamil Nadu. The suspicion was that they had been killed by their own families. The terrible secret behind the disappearance came to light for the first time in December 1985, when the popular Tamil magazine *Junior Vikata* published an article on the killing of babies in Usilampatti. The readers were shocked. They had heard grandmothers’ tales of girl babies being killed by their own families. But no one really believes it was still happening (2).

The title of the article was, “Fearing dowry, they kill girl babies”. Six months after this article was published, the English magazine *India Today* released another disturbing piece, “Born to Die”, featuring gruesome pictures of infant skeletons. The families themselves ended the lives of their girl children and buried them in temporary graves near their houses. (2).

Ironically, the government responded with denial, ordering the magazine copies to be burned. Officials insisted that the article had damaged the village’s image, but by then, the story had already drawn national and international attention. Even the BBC aired a program addressing the phenomenon of “killer mothers.” During that period, around the 1990s, economist Amartya Sen published his influential work on the issue of “missing women,” arguing that over 100 million women were unaccounted for in regions such as South Asia, West Asia, and North Africa. He attributed this alarming gap to gender bias and unequal treatment, suggesting that a significant portion of these missing women might be from India. Sen emphasised that these statistics reveal a silent yet horrifying narrative of discrimination and neglect, causing the premature deaths of countless female infants and women.

The problem of the “missing girl” is defined by another author, Nishant Anand, in his book *Women in India: The Problem of Missing Girl Child*. According to him,

.....a group consisting of the unborn children in their mother's womb, who are deliberately disposed of (in contravention of existing laws) before birth, only because they are female. Their disposal is an instance of the most extreme instance of gender discrimination (forbidden both by domestic and international laws and conventions). Still, it is seldom regarded as such, it being more commonly referred to as a social issue (Anand 24).

Another disturbing dimension highlighted is the active role of the medical community. Medical practitioners, rather than merely responding to patient demand, often enable and commercialise gender-biased practices. Abortion clinics offer covert packages, exploit coded language to navigate legal restrictions, and justify their role by appealing to consumer choice in a gendered market. This not only absolves individuals of ethics but transforms female foeticide into a normalised, clinical, and commercially viable practice. Thus, technological progress is not inherently liberating; it often becomes another tool for patriarchal control. Sex-selective abortion began to emerge as a serious issue in major urban centres during the mid-1980s. In Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, reports indicated that around 3,500 female fetuses were aborted. According to UNICEF, a 1984 study conducted in Mumbai revealed that of 8,000 abortions following prenatal sex determination, 7,999 involved female fetuses. The report further highlighted that determining the sex of an unborn child had developed into a profitable medical practice. (Aravamudan 3).

The consequences of missing girls extend far beyond sex ratio imbalances. Long-term demographic shifts have resulted in communities, especially in states like Haryana and Punjab, where men outnumber women, triggering secondary crises such as bride trafficking, forced marriages, and polyandry. The commodification of women intensifies violence, while the normalisation of this invisible crime corrodes social and ethical norms. The collapse of gender parity not only erodes the constitutional promise of equality but also signals a larger cultural breakdown where the very fabric of citizenship, justice, and national identity is at stake.

Trafficking is another major cause of girls' disappearance. It is the most commonly used method in “the flesh trade”. Trading in human beings and the

exploitation of human beings are the most despicable forms of violation of human rights that can never be justifiable. As per the National Crime Records Bureau, one girl is abducted every eight minutes across India. A U.S. report on human trafficking further highlights India's role as a key centre of child sex exploitation. Officials estimate that while more than 100,000 minor girls are trafficked each year, law enforcement records seldom account for more than a thousand such cases (Roychoudhary 2014).

Young girls are trafficked from poorer backgrounds, where they are moved from supplying regions to places with a demand for brides to address the shortage of women of marriageable age. These girls are commodified and treated as property, often facing discrimination for not belonging to the local caste and being at the mercy of those who purchase them, who then exploit them. Some are abandoned or resold once they have fulfilled their role of bearing children (Anand 29). Manish Jha's 2003 film *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women* confronts these social issues by depicting a dystopian Indian village in the year 2050, highlighting the consequences of female foeticide and infanticide on gender balance, social order, and human behaviour. The narrative closely mirrors actual cases of gender imbalance and bride trafficking in India, depicting a society left with only men due to generations of female infanticide. Additionally, films like 'Lakshmi' by Nagesh Kukunoor and 'Love Sonia' by Tabrez Noorani focus on the grim realities of trafficking and the exploitation of young girls through prostitution in India (Pramanick 2021).

Gita Aravamudan characterises the killing of girl children as a pervasive, almost nationwide "tradition." She records harrowing instances where, in Gujarat, mothers drowned their newborn daughters in milk, and in Punjab, buried them alive in sealed containers (7). Aravamudan further stated how the mothers and the other family members justify their killing of a female infant or foetus.

...mother killed their own daughters because they did not want them, 'to suffer', and where grandmothers fed poison to their own flesh and blood so they could accommodate more male offspring in the family (7).

More than just investigative reportage, Aravamudan's book is examined as a "site of testimony" which foregrounds women's lived experiences, from coerced abortions to resistance and secret mourning. The book becomes a counter-archive that challenges both official denial and apathy. Testimonies

rupture the narrative of passive compliance, offering glimpses of resistance and dissent, even if small or secretive. The book presents the tragic realities of female foeticide and its long shadow of social trauma. Through the lenses of Cathy Caruth and Veena Das, the text can be interpreted as a literary exploration of both “psychic rupture” and “social violence” within patriarchal India, where the trauma of gendered erasure operates simultaneously on individual, familial, and collective levels.

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “a wound that resists full representation, an unclaimed experience” that returns belatedly through symptoms or fragmented narratives (Caruth 12). Aravamudan’s narrative style mirrors this fragmentation: the book’s accounts of sex-selective killings are mediated through stories, silences, hearsay, and interviews that together construct an incomplete archive of suffering. Caruth’s idea that trauma “shatters consciousness” and remains unspeakable is visible in the silenced grief of mothers coerced into foeticide, and in Aravamudan’s journalistic restraint, which evokes what cannot be easily articulated. The trauma here is “collective yet unacknowledged”, a psychic void spanning generations, where memory becomes residue rather than record. The distorted normalcy of killing daughters becomes, as Caruth suggests, a symptom of unresolved cultural trauma, a repetition compulsion at the societal level.

Veena Das, in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, argues that trauma is not only an extraordinary rupture but also inscribed into the fabric of daily life. In *Disappearing Daughters*, this notion is realised through the normalisation of female foeticide ritualised violence enacted not as an aberration but as a socially sanctioned practice. Das’s framework helps decode how communities absorb violence into their moral worlds, making trauma part of domestic and social routine. The complicity of family members, medical practitioners, and social norms reflects a “language of silence” that sustains trauma within the mundane. Trauma, thus, becomes an everyday aesthetic of survival rather than a momentary event.

Caruth’s psychoanalytic model and Das’s anthropological insight, *Disappearing Daughters*, may be read as a text where the boundaries between witnessing and complicity blur. Caruth emphasises the internal fragmentation and belated recall of trauma, while Das exposes its sociocultural normalisation within gender hierarchies. Together, they reveal how the trauma of female erasure in India transcends bodily violence; it transforms memory, identity,

and ethics. The daughters' disappearance becomes not just a demographic tragedy but a "narrative of national trauma", where silence, shame, and repetition conceal wounds that remain historically unhealed.

Females were the worst victims of oppression and violence throughout the past, present, and will be in the future. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin identified infanticide, especially of female infants, as a major check on the population expansion of early humanity. He remarked that this custom was widespread among Australia's Aboriginal tribes, while Barbara Miller later asserted that the practice was almost universal. Miller contends that in a region where women were not employed in agriculture and in regions where dowries were the norm, female infanticide was a common practice. Female infanticide was widespread in the impoverished regions of China, and while both Buddhism and Taoism condemned it, many people did not view it as immoral. In India, the practice of infanticide was accepted during the Vedic period and persisted for a long time across various Hindu castes. Similarly, infanticide was also practised and accepted in the two most developed ancient European cultures, Greece and Rome. (De 247).

The National Centre for Biotechnology has highlighted a troubling trend: the number of girls in India is steadily declining. If no action is taken, there may come a time when girls are absent altogether. To combat this issue, the government has implemented various measures, including the Baby Cradle Scheme, launched in. This initiative allows families to give up their children for adoption anonymously, without requiring paperwork or disclosing their identities (251).

In her 1985 book *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection*, American feminist Mary Anne Warren introduces the concept of gendercide, describing it as the systematic mass killing based on gender. She draws a parallel between genocide and what she terms "gendercide," emphasising its selective and structural nature.

... by analogy, gendercide would be the deliberate extermination of persons of a particular sex (or gender). Other terms, such as "gynocide" and "femicide," have been used to refer to the wrongful killing of girls and women. Nevertheless, "gendercide" is a sex-neutral term in that the victims may be either male or female. There is a need for such a sex-neutral term since sexually discriminatory killing is just as wrong when the victims happen to be male. The term also calls attention to the fact that gender

roles have often had lethal consequences and that these are in important respects analogous to the lethal consequences of racial, religious, and class prejudice (Warren 22).

Aravamudan's *Disappearing Daughters*, analysed through the lens of "gendercide", articulated by scholars like Mary Anne Warren and expanded by political theorists, frames female foeticide not as isolated violence but as a systemic form of extermination: a coordinated and normalised effort to eliminate an entire category of life based solely on sex. Drawing parallels to genocide, gendercide theory emphasises the collective, systematic, and policy-driven nature of the crime, where technology, law, and commerce work together to create "the silent holocaust" of missing girls. In this view, the disappearance of daughters represents an existential rupture, a destruction of future possibilities, cultural memory, and the right to exist itself.

Gita Aravamudan, in the last chapter of her book titled "Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow", talked about the shameful realities of female gendercide and its impact on gender imbalance. While talking about the situation in 1979, in Punjab. She stated,

In Punjab, by 1979, the first sex determination clinic had opened and already families were trying to selectively abort the female children. Punjab, of course, had a historical deficit of women, and the New Reproductive Technologies (NRTs) coming in only aggravated an already bad situation. The census figure indicated that even as far back as 1901, the sex ratio in most of North India was less than the all-India average of 972 females to 1000 males (Aravamudan 162)

She further stated that investigating the crimes against daughters is like "opening Pandora's box". In her book, she talks about how female gendercide has evolved, with time, from bad to worse. She stated,

I started with the medieval-sounding crime of female infanticide. At that time, I could not imagine anything worse than a mother killing her own just-born. But, as I went on, I realised that female infanticide, though uglier to view, fades into insignificance before the much more widespread crime of female foeticide..... Sex detection techniques progressively become better and better. Abortion becomes easier and easier. Suddenly, the womb becomes the most unsafe place on earth for daughters..... By 2000, female foeticide had almost become a national pastime (166-167).

CONCLUSION

Gita Aravamudan's *Disappearing Daughters* is an intersection of lived experience, cultural narrative, psychological trauma, and gendered extermination. The crisis of missing girls is not merely demographic but a profound literary, psycho-social, and existential tragedy that destabilises justice, citizenship, gender, and the very meaning of collective identity. Addressing this rupture requires new strategies; re-narrativising cultural memory, foregrounding trauma, destabilising patriarchal power, and confronting the reality of gendercide as an urgent political and ethical project. As a non-fictional narrative, her book is like an open discussion on the issue of female gendercide. She quoted an interesting observation made by a well-known social worker in Chandigarh. "I think Sita was one of the early saved victims of infanticide", she said to me. After all, she was found by King Janak inside a pot buried in the earth (52).

The disappearance of India's daughters is not simply a matter of demographic imbalance; it reflects a far-reaching cultural and existential rupture at the heart of Indian society. As detailed in the paper, "disappearing daughters" makes visible the ways society, culture, and technology conspire to erase female lives, even as the country aspires to modernity and equality. The paper concludes that justice for India's "missing girls" will only be possible when they are seen not as burdens to be eliminated, but as vital citizens central to any vision of a just, equal, and humane society.

Work Cited

- Anand, Nishant. *Women in India: The Problem of Missing Girl Child*. 2016.
- Andolan, Bachpan B. *Missing Children of India*. Vitasta Publishing Pvt. Limited, 2012.
- Aravamudan, Gita. *Disappearing Daughters: The Tragedy of Female Foeticide*. Penguin Books India, 2007.
- Bhasin, Kamla. *Understanding Gender*. Kali for Women, 2000.
- . *What is Patriarchy?* 1993.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. JHU P, 2016.

- Corradi, Consuelo, et al. "Theories of Femicide and Their Significance for Social Research." *Current Sociology*, vol. 64, no. 7, 2016, pp. 975-995.
- Culbertson, M. J., Vik, P. W., & Kooiman, C. G. (2001). Fear of crime and victimization among college students: Sex differences and the shadow of sexual assault. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25(1), 406-415.
- Das, Veena. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. U of California P, 2006.
- Killias, M., & Clerici, C. (2000). The Relationship between Fear of Crime and Victimization. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 91(3), 641-664.
- Luckhurst, Roger. "Mixing memory and desire: psychoanalysis, psychology, and trauma theory." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2006, pp. 497-507.
- Oksala, Johanna. *Foucault, Politics, and Violence*. Northwestern UP, 2012.
- Pande, Rekha. *Sex Trafficking in South Asia with a Special Focus on India*. 2016.
- Pain, Rachel H. "Social Geographies of Women's Fear of Crime." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1997, pp. 231-244.
- Soman, Priya. "Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Abolition of Sati System in India." *International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS)*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, pp. 75-82. airccse.com/ijhas/papers/1216ijhas08.pdf
- Walby, Sylvia. *Gender Transformations*. Routledge, 2003.
- Warren, Mary A. *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection*. Rowman & Allanheld, 1985.
- Wharton, John. *Law Lexicon or Dictionary of Jurisprudence*. 1872.