



Faces in the Water

Written by Ranjit Lal

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In this young adult novel, Ranjit Lal tells the story of fifteen-year-old Gurmeet (Gurmi for short) of the privileged Diwanchand family, a family respected for their long-standing tradition of raising boys—and only boys. The family attributes the well water at their family farm as their source of good fortune; however, when Gurmi leaves modern Delhi and visits the family farm one year, he discovers the truth—for several years his family has participated in female infanticide, drowning newborn girls in the well. Three spirits appear in the well and introduce themselves as Gurmi’s sisters, and they explain the story of their births and deaths as part of a family tradition.

Initially shocked and angered, Gurmi seeks revenge for this injustice; quickly, though, he befriends his sisters (and, later, female cousins) and interacts with them through an elaborate use of computer technology, an enlightened sense of listening, and experience in a magical parallel world. Soon, Gurmi learns to forgive and work for what is right, and his moment for righteousness comes with the birth of his twin sisters.

Lal sets up *Faces in the Water* in a way that potentially could critique financial and social privilege in India, such as Gurmi’s family remodeling their house with marble and granite or, as an only child, Gurmi being spoiled with electronics and sweet treats. However, Lal focuses on the controversial issue of female infanticide in India. The title of the book reflects the catalytic moment in the novel, when Gurmi sneaks to the family well and sees faces in the water; these faces come alive in the form of his disappeared sisters and, later in the story, lost cousins. Though Gurmi’s ultimately strives to end female infanticide in the Diwanchand family, the majority of the story focuses on family adventures that could-have-been, such as camping trips and cricket matches with sisters, which emphasize differences between growing up as a boy in a one-child, privileged household with growing up as a boy with three sisters in the same privileged world. Furthermore, the novel explores a schema of happiness equals, where Lal clearly argues that daughters and sisters are the cause of such happiness, and a lack of girls (or the purposeful elimination of girls) will cause extreme unhappiness in a family, particularly for the parents.

Thematically, the serious nature of female infanticide exists as a true issue—often unspoken, yet widely understood in India. According to census statistics, women are “missing” from world population; between 1901 and 2001, there have been approximately 35 million fewer women than men in India. A decline in girls ages 0-6 years continues to grow; in 1941 there were 1010 girls to 1000 boys, but the number decreases to 927 girls for every 1000 boys in 2001 (http://www.unicef.org/india/child_protection_1360.htm). Furthermore, female infanticide practices are not limited to certain classes; as in the novel, privileged families

participate in the practice. Female babies and children are often abandoned or discarded, thus earning the title “dustbin babies,” and though less studied, many participate in female feticide. In an interview, Lal describes, “I was horrified by the news reports about female infanticide which happens even in well-off families. And that led me to write this book” (http://crazybiswadip.blogspot.com/2011_09_04_archive.html). Expanding on issues of content and style in *Faces in the Water*, he notes, “It was quite a challenge to write on such an issue, considering that the readers will be younger people.” Therefore, in an attempt to compose a story that addresses a complex, contentious issue, Lal wrote a story for adolescents, about adolescents.

Though his main audience is adolescent Indians, *Faces in the Water* is written in English as a way to include a greater sense of the culture. However, Lal includes a smattering of untranslated words and phrases, including terms of endearment and respect for family members and names of foods. Additionally, Lal chooses not to use English when he strings words or phrases together to depict moments of high emotion, particularly when the Papa storms angrily around the house. In order to understand the accuracy of the language used in the novel, one must consult a professional translator or native speaker. For a foreign reader, this language serves as a reminder of the novel’s setting.

Set in a modern context in India, Lal attempts to appeal to adolescent readers by incorporating elements of modern technology into the plot. In particular, Gurmi uses his digital camera to take pictures of his sisters who are invisible outside of the well; the girls appear on digital screens which leads Gurmi’s parents to believe he used photo-editing software on his personal laptop to manipulate images. Additionally, Gurmi and his cousins play with remote controlled model cars and airplanes, courtesy of their fathers who work for Hanuman Motors, an India-based company. All the models are high-class SUVs, racecars, or fighter planes recognizable to an audience with exposure to popular media. However, this approach breaks down with the inconsistent use of technology for accessing the parallel and real universes in which Gurmi and the girls inhabit. Technology serves as means of communication—with his sisters and female cousins—yet the novel lacks a developed explanation of the “software” and “memory” necessary to view and interact with the girls. Rather, Lal borrows superficially from science fiction and social media, ultimately making the story less and less believable.

Furthermore, the story fails to fully address the seriousness of female infanticide. By focusing on the girls who would be Gurmi’s age or younger, Lal omits the long history of infanticide, leaving a reader to wonder where other disappeared Diwanchand girls may be in the parallel world. The plot’s focus on the adventures that could-have-been creates a feeling of empathetic warmth, yet removes most of the underlying issue’s weight. The novel ends quickly—in less than a chapter, Gurmi acts to save the lives of his newborn twin sisters and, with a transformed outlook on life, a formerly angry Papa turns the farm into a home for displaced girls. This ending may not fully satisfy a reader who asks questions of “what to do,” as it offers few solutions to the identified problem of infanticide. Despite these critiques, Lal does succeed in a crucial way: *Faces in the Water* broaches the subject of female infanticide in India, condemning the practice in a story aimed at an adolescent audience immersed in a technology-driven world.

Based in India, Lal writes both fiction and nonfiction books, including his recent publications *The Battle for No. 19* (2007), *The Caterpillar Who Went on a Diet and Other Stories* (2004), and *When Banshee Kissed Bimbo and Other Bird Stories* (2005), books with audiences of both children and adults. *Faces in the Water* won the 2010 Vodafone Crossword Prize for children's fiction with the young adult novel.

Faces in the Water fits within international and multicultural literature for young adults that addresses issues of gender, though few consider the issue of infanticide. In India, these novels include *Keeping Corner* by Kashmira Sheth (2007), which examines traditional practices for treatment of widows including child widows, and *Secret Keeper* by Mitali Perkins (2009), which explores the clash of cultures when an Indian family moves to the United States. Similarly, in China, young adult novels discuss issues of gender, including *Chinese Cinderella* by Yen Mah (2010), which critiques cultural perceptions of girls, and *The Diary of Ma Yan* (Ma Yan, 2009), which records a girl's struggles to attend school. Many novels from Africa also discuss issues of gender, including *The Girl with Three Legs* by Soraya Mire (2011), a memoir that takes on female circumcision. Additionally, *Our Secret, Siri Aang* by Cristina Kessler (2004) takes on initiation practices for women (and poaching animals), and *A Girl Named Disaster* by Nancy Farmer (1999) narrates a child-bride's runaway life. In general, international and multicultural novels for young adults such as these take on difficult topics related to issues of local culture and gender.

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