

Gender Discrimination in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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ABSTRACT

Gender discrimination is swiftly becoming the center of contemporary talk of many national and international platforms. Women's power and efficiency could not be noticed, found or even imagined earlier in the professional area of work.

Shashi Deshpande researches predicaments of the Indian women of middle-class society and their struggle to adopt in it without trying in getting freedom from its tradition. She creates mass awareness against oppression and suppression of the women in the strict patriarchal society. Women are considered to be enslaved, banned and weakened as fewer opportunities are offered to them for the betterment of life despite and conscious about the wellbeing of family members. Man never likes woman to have equal share, as he is enjoying all the privileges in the family and the society. Since that time, a woman has lived under the care and control of her parents or husband or her children. She is considered a property of her father; when she marries, she is transferred to be the property of her husband. A married woman is expected to be obedient, silent, docile, and submissive and is supposed to be chaste. The conflicts between traditional upbringings and the force of education and employment are sufficiently described in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Keywords: mirrors society, ensuing problems, predicament, gender discrimination, superior husband, subordinate etc.

Human life in a society is the resource of literature. It mirrors society and plays a vital role in development and registers the same in the form of books. The purpose of literature is to reflect society, the reality of life.

Indian society stands as the value-laden structure with required resources, not a value-ridden society. It has been a formation with its base on patriarchy and its related intertwining branches extending towards the family units. The writer presents a purview of society in which men hold the prime and responsible positions to define, discriminate and decide the regulations of everyday life and find solutions for the ensuing problems. Women live under an oppressive mechanism of the patriarchal society. The interpersonal power relationship of women and men is highly sensitive and serious. The educated women of Deshpande's novels crave identity.

Gender is a sociological construct and a by-product of patriarchy. It has its foundation on male domination and builds up female subjugation. It defines specific roles and conditions on the female members. The attitude of a girl is developed in a way to make her feel that her primary duty is directed towards her family without any importance for her own identity. The burden of the female child is heavier and more complicated than that of the counterpart. She is highly influenced and seasoned by the society. The gender biased customs of the society are thrust upon her, and she passively accepts them without any question.

Sharadha Iyer has opined, Even women with liberal modern education, with an irrepressible yearning to break loose from time honoured crippling and in equities social law, do often lose their mooring and find themselves in perilously embarrassing situation. Even economically independent women have not been able to clear off the be setting pitfalls created by the custom and beliefs sedulously preserved in the tradition bound Indian Society. (43)

It is the time-old belief of patriarchy to say that the creation of woman is intended only for reproduction. Marriage happens to be the civilized medium for that purpose. Its sanctity permits male domination, compels

economic dependence, and causes female subjugation. Deshpande shows marriage as an institution of patriarchy enslaving women. The marital life seems to be the only success of any Indian woman.

Saru witnesses the predicament of her grandmother, who has been deserted by her husband. Even though her father takes care of her, she has been considered a burden by her own people. In olden days women had accepted every burden as their fate but never revolted. Saru realizes the importance of economic independence, which can be the only insurance against suppression or subordination. She could meet a woman who was hailed with respect by other women in the crowd. She finds that she is somewhat superior to other women, and she was a doctor by profession. Inspired by her, she determines to study medicine. She feels,

To get married, and end up doing just what your mother did, seemed to me not only terrible but damnable. Strangely, the ambition stayed with me through the years. All my friends knew about it. My essays ... 'What would you like to be when you grow up' – proclaimed it to the world. But I never spoke of it at home. By the time my desire had hardened into an ambition, silence had settled down on our house. Dhruva was dead, I was alive and I could not speak. But I worked though. Good, how I worked! I gave up all pleasure and concern-treated on studies. I got it at last-passport to medical college – a first class in my Inter Science ... but there was no room for jubilation in me. I had worked too hard and I was tired. Besides, there was one more ordeal waiting for me. (40)

Gender discrimination is a dark spot which makes the survival of women too difficult. It shapes the psyche of a girl child, which drags her into the dark recesses of her mind, which does not allow her to move beyond the circumference of the societal purview. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reflects the processes of female gender discrimination and oppression in the family setup. The patriarchy has its evolution of a girl child towards her marriage. The marital life does not have any slot for education or career development in Shashi Deshpande. She does not offer any revolt but advocates a solution within the allowed premises of societal values. The institution of marriage does not assure any psychical security to any woman. It is degraded by the society to be a business contract, in which man frames the terms and conditions.

The practical norms never allow women to be involved by her. A female child is acculturated into her social role by those norms. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the heroine is constantly reminded about her colour and the appearance of her physique, as her mother thinks that it would be difficult to get her married if her daughter were to grow dark.

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care if you don't. we have to get you married.

I don't want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can't.

And Dhurva?

He's different. He's a boy. (45)

The upbringing of a girl is completely directed towards adjusting herself within the set frame of marriage. The patriarchy tries to procure a husband with the expected social and economic status. Saru is the woman who has been made conscious of her gender since childhood. She recalls her childhood experiences. Saru, in her family, has never been given any importance. Her mother showers no love or affection on her because she is a female child. She neglects and ignores Saru and takes care of her younger son, Dhurva.

Saru's memory goes back to her childhood and reminds her of her mother's attitude towards her brother and herself. Sarabjit Sandhu comments on the attitude of Saru's mother thus:

The mother is very attached to her son. Her attitude is a typical one, after all, he is a male child and, therefore, one who will propagate the family lineage. In another sense, also, the male child is considered more important than a girl, because he is qualified to give agni to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would otherwise wander is ferment. (19-20)

Education provides the mental courage for a woman to confront reality. The decision of Saru to join medical college is a kind of rebellion against the stereotyped existence. Her education strengthens her willpower and drives her towards her decision with a strong belief in her capability. Maria Miles says,

The non-conforming conduct of the women is not the consequence of an external necessity but of changed consciousness. They are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between man and woman but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities are realized in their own lives. (26)

Saru has gained the reputation and recognition as a doctor, but still her mind oscillates between a successful and an unsuccessful life.

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A., If he is 5'4" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety, if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor – nurse, executive – secretary, principal – teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it is not worth it. He'll suffer. You'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazine will tell you that a marriage must be an equal partnership. That's nonsense rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you. (137)

A woman's identity is defined by others in Indian culture. Gradually she finds out that she has become, "just a ventriloquist's dummy" (18). She faces her problems fearlessly and resumes her bondage with her husband, as it would be the only solution permissible by the society. Kamini Dinesh views this as,

The emancipation is not repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife in the end is, therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife ... one who is no longer afraid of the dark. (204)

The society does not tolerate the questioning nature of a woman, as it is not one of the characteristic qualities in the design given to her. Whoever may be the breaker of the laws and breacher of the codes, it should always be the duty of the women to join the rifts and paste the parts to make it a whole. Repeated experiences would suggest her that she has to take socially acceptable decision and never the otherwise.

The final picture of Saru going back home and uniting with family can be accepted by an Indian with a traditional view, unlike the western feminism. A critic, Rajendra Prasad, feels that a woman must peel away the multiple layers of roles in which she had swaddled herself before she could arrive at the truth about herself. Societal enthusiasts suggest education and employment as a redemption for this kind of social view.

Indian society expects the women to do the daily chores of her family even if she happens to be an educated woman. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita faces many difficulties after her married life and feels herself to be a victim of male chauvinism. When she happens to go home late at night because of her profession, she cares to inform her husband through the compounder. But when she reached home, Manohar was in a brooding mood, not ready to talk to her with penitence and contrition. Manohar was upset to see people greeting his wife with greater regard and behaved indifferently. This kind of situation caused so many troubles for Saru. She feels the patriarchal pressure even from her educated husband, as he happens to be a male partner of the society.

The traditional concept of superior husband and subordinate wife has been proved practically in the episodes related to the marriage. Shashi Deshpande frames her women characters to play a subordinate role in the family; “Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and the uneasiness of the modern Indian women in being a part of them” (132).

Saru feels enclosed physically and psychologically without proper space to move freely. When she enters into her room full of her husband’s clothes, she understands that a woman has no space for her own. She wants to escape from the enclosure, which is associated with suffocation and darkness. In the view Vincent Aerathu, Submission of the wife is ensured with help of socialization that begins in early childhood and extends well into adolescence and adulthood. Girl children are trained to think, speak, dress and behave in such a way as to give preference to the males around them and stereotypes of mythical figures like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari are given to them to emulate. But, when they grow and get educated, the third new sense of identity and equality clash with the internalized sense of submission and docility and consequently, when they get married later, their marriages threaten to fall asunder. (103)

Indian society visualises women to be daughters, sisters, wives and others, and Shashi Deshpande criticizes socialization in many of her novels. Even though Saru scorns the socialization of her mother, she realizes that a woman is always a woman even after she achieves something in her life. She finally understands that marriage is not a contract of happy fulfilment. She assumes: “It’s easy to generate, she thought, and says she is better because she never married, never bore a child. But that would be as stupid as calling me fulfilled because I got married and have borne two children”(121).

A girl is fettered by her marriage to a man who has sadistic tendencies. Saru’s marital discord increases due to her famous personality as a doctor because her husband, Manu, thinks that women should not be superior to men and can’t take strong decisions in life. According to lawmakers of Indian Orthodox culture, women are not decision-makers. As Doniger Wendy says in *The Laws of Manu*: “A girl, a young woman, or even old women should not do anything independently in (her) house” (155).

Her professional identity is revealed on the day when she returns back home with blood stains on her coat, as she has treated the victims in an accident. She gained recognition and respect from her neighbours who came to her for consultation frequently. This kind of superiority disturbs her husband.

The societal discrimination presented by the novelist narrates the predicament of Indian women inside the society. The age-long conditions never allow a woman beyond the threshold of the house. The pressure of the oppression would definitely find a way to come out. The process of releasing the pressure should not affect anyone around her. She has to be careful enough in her mission to breathe free air among pollutants alive around her. She should not be so radical in her behavior because it may cause some disturbances in her family. Marriage is a very serious and vital issue in the patriarchal setup. It is sanctimonized to be godly, and the womenfolk should not dare to pose questions regarding any single process of promotion.

As far as the novelist’s presentation displays, the women should find subtler ways to sustain their marital status, and along with that, they have to make their initial steps towards better living conditions. Deshpande, as a progressive writer, shows how the so-called ideals of the society curtail the natural freedom and cripple the movement of the women. She has presented a purview for the liberation of new ideals to be sanctioned by the society on par with the trend of the world.

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