

INDIAN WOMEN'S STRUGGLE TO ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract: *India, being a traditionally patriarchal society, has always shown traces of gender inequality. Indian women have been facing various forms of inequality since ancient times. The headlines of every morning brings news of eve-teasing, rapes, bride burning, women trafficking, female foeticide and various forms of violence against women. The people of this patriarchal society always prefer a male heir, who will continue their family lineage and will also provide them with economic and emotional security in their old age. And a girl child has always been considered a burden on the family. This paper focuses on the struggles that Indian women faces in challenging the traditional gender roles assigned to them by the society. The journey of Indian women to achieve gender equality and empowerment has been analysed in this paper using the theory of Socialist Feminism through the works of two eminent Indian writers, who have successfully carved some of the strong women who are ready to face the world on their own without depending on any male counterparts. The two novels discussed in the paper are Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Time and Shobhan Bantwal's The Forbidden Daughter. A Matter of Time focuses on three women of three generations of a family who have suffered a lot because of the patriarchal mindset of the society but have started taking steps to empower themselves. The Forbidden Daughter focuses on a widow's struggle to save her second child from being a victim of female foeticide; the hardships she faces in raising her two daughters singlehandedly and how her patience, courage and struggles helped her in achieving a better future and life for herself and her daughters. They have set their foot on a journey to prove the society that they are no less than any son. They are ready to challenge all the stereotypical gender norms set by the society.*

Key Words: *Gender, Equality, Empowerment, Indian Women, Patriarchy.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is considered as a male-dominated society since ancient times. Women have always been treated in a shabby manner and considered subservient in respect to men. Women of India have suffered physical and mental torture and humiliation silently since long. They were treated merely as objects of pleasure and entertainment by men. They were not considered human who has some feelings. Birth of a daughter in a house was considered as a curse to family and the daughter, a burden. Indians keep worshipping a lot of female deities like Maa Durga, Maa Lakshmi, Maa Kali, Maa Saraswati but in their practical life condemn the birth of a daughter, mistreat their wives and daughter-in-law and have no respect for the women in their society. And that is why women in India have been suffering gender inequalities since a long time.

But after independence women started standing for themselves. It took them a long time to voice their sufferings but they started taking small steps for their betterment and upliftment. They have started taking stand not only for themselves but also for their daughters. They don't want to give their daughters the same sufferings that they have suffered. The journey for empowerment is a long and hard journey but women of India have the courage to embark on this difficult journey. They have started realizing about the latent power in themselves and have become keen to achieve gender equality and assert their rights which they have been denied since a long time. This paper analyses two novels using the Socialist Feminist Theory. It focuses upon the "interconnectivity of the patriarchy and capitalism. This theory broadens Marxist feminism's argument for the role of capitalism in the oppression of women and radical feminism's theory of the role of gender and patriarchy. According to Nancy Holmstrom, socialist feminists argued that "women's position in today's society was a function of both the economic system (capitalism) and the sex-gender system, which they called patriarchy" (Wikipedia).

2. A MATTER OF TIME:

Shashi Deshpande effectively portrays, in her novels, modern, educated middle-class women facing conflicts between patriarchy and independent identity. She tried to voice, through her characters, the struggles and oppression faced by women in a patriarchal land. The women in her novels are oppressed and subjugated by the patriarchal

ideology but they strive hard for asserting their rights and to establish their own identity. *A Matter of Time* (1996) by Shashi Deshpande traces the journey of women of three generations: Kalyani, her daughter Sumi and her granddaughter Aru. The three of them have suffered a lot because of being females in a patriarchal society. But they have started taking small steps to change themselves as well as the chauvinist mindset of the society.

The novel starts when Gopal, Sumi's husband, suddenly walks out of her life for a reason that even he is not able to explain. Gopal's desertion leaves Sumi and her three daughters- Aru, Charu and Seema in utter shock and disappointment. Sumi, with her daughters, returns to her parent's house. Even the description of the house suggests patriarchal ideology- "it was built by a man not just for himself, but for his sons and his son's sons" (Deshpande 3). Without Gopal, Sumi feels incomplete and despair envelops her. But she does not let despair and disappointment to break her. Rather she uses the situation to show a great strength to move on in her life for herself and for the betterment of her daughters. She decides to become independent for herself and for the upbringing of her daughters. She joins a job in a school and learns to ride a scooter. Not only this, she also discovers a talent hidden in her for so long- the talent of writing. She starts writing plays for her students and her play gets much appreciation which motivates her to write more. She refuses to take any financial help from her father and Ramesh (Gopal's nephew). She struggles hard to fulfill all needs of her daughters but never takes any financial help or sympathy from anyone. She stands strong hiding all her pain, humiliation, obscurities and dilemmas within herself. She proves one of the major feminist ideologies that to leave behind the marginalized lives, women need to be economically independent. When she got a job in a different city and she decided to go there with Seema, Aru asked her how she can go, to which Sumi replies, "Be happy for me, Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think I've got for myself." (Deshpande 230) Her reply makes Aru realize that after all the hardships and sacrifices her mother had done for them, it is time that her mother should do something for herself which gives her peace and happiness.

Aru, Sumi's daughter, represents another facet of the modern woman- independent, revolting and standing up for what is right. When Sumi was trying to establish her identity, Aru tried to stand up for women's right against patriarchal ideals. She is very practical in viewing her life. She does not prefer suffering silently. When her father left them, she wanted to get him punished for the irresponsibility he had shown towards them. She wanted to use law to punish him but Sumi did not approve of that. She was very much affected by the failed marriages of her parents and grandparents. She decided to fight against patriarchy and to become a lawyer. She also participated in social services in her free time and stood for injustice against women. She discarded marriage and motherhood as the major part of women's identity. As she had an opinion that due to marriage men gets a license to marginalize women and women silently become victims to betrayal and cruelty, she decided not to get married in her life. Aru also tried to be the support or "man of the family" (Deshpande 36). She accompanied her mother to dentist, took utmost care of her baby sister Seema, and did most of the chores of the house so that her younger sister Charu could focus on her studies. "She wants to take Gopal's place, she wants to fill the blank Gopal has left in their lives." (Deshpande 36). Aru tried her best to help her mother and sisters to pass through the storm that had surrounded their lives.

The novel focuses how the patriarchal society gives highest importance to the birth of a male child. It is this patriarchal thinking which causes many women to suffer just because they are unable to give birth to male heirs for their family. Kalyani suffered all her life because of this. Manorama, Sumi's grandmother, after many miscarriages gave birth to a daughter Kalyani because of which her in-laws pressurized her husband Vithalrao to marry again. This fear never left Manorama's mind and she always blamed Kalyani for all her problems. "For Manorama, she became the visible symbol of her failure to have a son." (Deshpande 151). Kalyani "was taken out of school and married off by Manorama to her own brother Shripati. Perhaps, after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now. Her family." (Deshpande 129). Kalyani, not only faced Manorama's acts of cruelty but also desertion by her uncle-turned- husband. When she lost her only son, her husband held her responsible for the incident thinking that she did it intentionally as their son was mentally retarded and she was unable to manage him. She had to return to her father's house with her two daughters, Sumi and Premi. It was when Manorama was in her death-bed Shripati returned to the Big House but never talked with Kalyani till his death. They lived under the same roof but silence surrounded them for nearly forty years. She suffered all these because of the old patriarchal thought that there is no meaning in a woman's existence without her husband. When Kalyani sees the spark in Aru to stand by her mother and her sisters, she felt proud of Aru. While talking with Aru, Kalyani shares her story of how a disappointment she was for her mother Manorama. She further says, "For so many years I thought I had nothing, I was so unfortunate that I could get no pleasure even from my own children. My mother didn't care for my children either. Daughters again, she said. And when you were born a daughter, I wondered how she could have been so blind. Now when I look at you, my three granddaughters, especially at you, I think- I am luckier than my mother. She's the unlucky one who didn't know how to enjoy her children and grandchildren." (Deshpande 226-227). While supporting Sumi and her children in their misfortune, Kalyani understood that it is injustice to deprive a daughter of all the happiness and opportunities that she deserves just because of her gender. She was proud of being a mother of a strong, independent daughter like Sumi and grandmother of Aru who was a perfect reflection of her mother.

In an unfortunate accident, Sumi and Shripati died leaving the family grief stricken. But Aru tries to be strong in front of everyone, consoling her sisters and Kalyani. When she sees Kalyani broken she rushed near her and said, "Amma, I'm here, I'm your daughter Amma, I'm your son, I'm here with you, I'm here." (Deshpande 233). In the end when Gopal visits them, Aru tells him to go and not to worry about them. She also tells him that they will be alright. In Aru reflected Sumi's strength to stand for her family. Aru stood strong as a support system, supporting and protecting her grandmother and her sisters just as sons are expected to do in a patriarchal society. Aru and Sumi made an attempt to break the mould designed for women in a patriarchal setup and faced all challenges that came before them to gain their deserving place in the society. They became the definition of empowerment in a society where women are expected to live a silent, oppressed and marginalized life facing various gender inequalities.

3. THE FORBIDDEN DAUGHTER:

Shobhan Bantwal starts her book *The Forbidden Daughter* with the description of a folk song from Uttar Pradesh which says:

"Oh, Lord, I beg of you. I fall at your feet time and again
in my next incarnation don't give a daughter;
Give me hell instead..." (Bantwal 11)

This aptly describes the condition of a girl in a patriarchal society like India. The birth of a girl child has always been considered a curse for her family in this country. In her book *The Forbidden Daughter* Shobhan Bantwal portrays the struggle of Mrs. Isha Tilak, a young widow against her in-laws and the society who pressurised her to abort her second daughter.

Isha and her husband Nikhil were expecting their second child. They were proud parents of a five-year old daughter Priya. However Nikhil's parents never gave Priya the love and care she deserved because she was a girl. They always wished for a grandson, the male heir of Tilak family. Priya was treated with strictness and sternness by her grandparents. When Isha and Nikhil went to the famous gynaecologist of the town Dr. V. Karnik, he informed them that the second child they were expecting was a girl and if they want he can abort the baby. It made Nikhil fume with anger. For Nikhil never discriminated between a daughter and a son. Priya, his daughter, was his life. He questioned Dr. Karnik that how can he think of such a heinous act being a doctor? When Nikhil's parents came to know about the sex of the child they also pressurised Isha and Nikhil to go for an abortion but Nikhil was firm in his decision. He wanted the child to be healthy and the sex of the child didn't matter for him. One night, the Tilaks got the shocking news that Nikhil has been murdered. After Nikhil's death, life became very difficult for Isha and Priya. She knew very well that Nikhil's parents "despised her and hated her children. Now that Nikhil was gone, they resented her even more, especially because in their warped minds they were convinced that Isha's unborn daughter was responsible for Isha's death" (Bantwal 48). One day when Isha went to visit the Ganesh temple, a sadhu told her that her second child will be a girl, a form of Goddess Lakshmi. She will bring with her light, comfort, security and well-being for Isha and others around her. "Her good luck will change your life" (Bantwal 13). He further said, "Your forbidden daughters are blessings for your future" (Bantwal 14).

After Nikhil's death, his parents ill-treated Isha and Priya and when situation became worse Isha decided to leave the house with Priya. She took refuge in St. Mary's Convent where she gave birth to her second daughter Diya. They lived a meagre life. When Isha's sister-in-law Sheila offered to help her, Isha took a loan from her and bought two new flats- one for her and her daughters and the other one she gave for rent. She repaid the loan from the insurance money that Nikhil made for their secure future. Now they had a better place to live but she thought of doing a job to fulfil her and her daughters' daily expenses. As she had a good hand at stitching she took up tailoring business. With time she became popular among her clients and was able to earn a good amount for their expenses. Not only this but she also emptied the other flat to use it for tailoring business as her clients and orders started increasing. She ensured a better and secure future for her daughters by her own capability and strength. Her struggle made Dr. Harish, a famous paediatric of the town and an old acquaintance of Isha, fall in love with her. He admired Isha's courage, strength and self-respect. He was attracted by Isha's will to achieve a better life and future for herself and her daughters by establishing her own identity in spite of all the obstacles that came before her. He decided to stand by her in all the fights of life that Isha will face. Isha not only secured a better life for her daughters, she also revealed before the world the real murderer of Nikhil- Dr. Karnik. All these struggles helped Isha in becoming a strong, brave and independent woman and a great mother who fought against all odds to protect her forbidden daughters.

4. CONCLUSION:

The Indian women's journey for empowerment has never been an easy one. The male-dominated society and its ideals will always try to show them that women are meek, docile and subservient. But women of India in this difficult journey will challenge such ideals and try their best to bring a change in the mentality of the society to achieve complete empowerment. India can progress in a faster speed if the traces of gender inequality can be removed

from the roots. These gender discriminations, once removed, will enable the women of India to realize their optimum potential and capabilities, which in turn will be a great boost for the development of this nation. So the evils of gender inequality must be washed from its roots for women empowerment to blossom perfectly in Indian society.

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