

Illustration of Gender Inequality in Shashi Despsnde's Novels

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Abstract: *This paper portrays the women, her protagonists as the most oppressed and pathetic embodiment of human suffering. She feels that a woman, not only in India but also in other countries, is not treated at par with a man in any sphere of human activity. She has been demoralized, concealed and marginalized in the matters of sharing the available opportunity for accomplishment of her life.*

Key Words: *Gender, Inequality, women, society, discrimination.*

Shashi Despande is one of the modern Indian writers in English who have the dilemma of modern women who are erratic between conventional and modern roles. Her novels reveal the painful world of Indian women who are fostered to serve the society. The tyrannical obstructs the natural improvement of women and hinders their development. Despande through her novels has highlighted gender discrimination evident in Indian society which marginalizes women. Her descriptions and novels talk about human relations against a purely Indian setting. She states in an interview given to Lakshmi Holmstrom:

“I am different from other Indians who write English, my background is very firmly here. I was never educated abroad. My novels don't have any westerners, for example. They are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives. Our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them”

The Dark Holds No Terrors demonstrates the unkindness and unjustified of gender inequality of mothers imposes on their girl-child. The protagonist of the novel, Saru, is deeply aware of her mother's fondness for her brother, Dhruva, even as a child. Saru cannot accept the preference which her mother gives to her brother, Dhruva, simply because he is a boy. Saru recalls that there was “always a puja on Dhruva's birthday and a festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarti in the evening. My birthdays were almost the same – but there was no puja”. Saru finds her mother's inclination towards her brother Dhruva and a indifferent attitude towards her as embarrassing because they were abolishing her existence as a human being in the family. Dhruva dies by drowning in water, Though Saru tried her best to save him yet all her effort, went in vain. She recalls “Dhruva was swiftly, silently going away from me”. Saru was deprived of all the rights of a child after the death of Dhruva, her brother. Mourning envelops the family and Saru of her girlhood reminds Saru's reality was not noticed. She got a pair of earrings from her friend Smita, for her fifteenth birthday. After adoring the earrings secretly, Saru feels a sense of superiority and importance. However, Saru resents the gift given to her by her mother. She decides,

“So that was it! It was not for me, not to please me and make me happy, But because I should, as a growing girl, have these things to wear..... I don't want them, I don't want to eat, I don't want anything”

Saru is never pardoned by her mother for her death of her brother, Dhruva. She condemned and tormented by her mother foe being alive after the death of Dhruva. She could not tolerate the existence of her daughter while her son was dead. At frequent intervals her mother reminds Saru of her unquestioned authority in the house which clearly stated that Saru's vivacity or curiosity shall not be endured outside her domain. Saru's father carries on the role of a immature observer whom she describes as “spineless” Saru's mother always checked her whereabouts and often criticized for her socialising with her friends. Saru recalls her fifteenth birthday when she went for a walk along with her friends, Nalu and Smita. As soon as she returned home her mother scolded her for neglect the household work. Unable to escape from her mother's supremacy repression and unsympathetic attitude, she feels muffled and susceptible. Even her father shows no sympathy towards her. Assault by her mother's fierce blows of accusing words, Saru expanded severity towards her. She was frequently apprised by her mother that she was the murderer which begets melancholy, ordeal, vain in her life and destruction of her mental peace and harmony.

In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the mother-daughter relationship is based on gender-bias and loveless ness. Sarita's mother was the dominating character. Sarita is a girl and she is dark. Her mother dislikes Sarita's first for

being a girl and next for being dark. In Indian tradition, the dark complexioned girls are valued less at the time of her marriage. If a girl is dark the parents should give more dowries. Sarita's mother restricts her not to be exposed in the sun. Sarita had also to put up with constant reminders from her mother that she was dark complexioned and should not step into the sun lest it should worsen her colouring. Sarita recollects her conversation with her mother,

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get 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 Dhruva?

He's different. He's a boy (DHNT, 40).

These words are firmly implanted in Sarita's mind paving way for her rebellious attitude in future. In this connection, as a typical Indian mother Sarita's mother sowed the seeds of ill-treatment to her own daughter.

At every given opportunity Sarita's mother snubs her. This sense of rejection by her mother fills the adolescent Sarita's mind with a feeling of hatred towards her mother. Shashi Deshpande clearly highlights the gender favouritism by parents towards their own daughters. Deshpande effectively conveys the patriarchal setup in our society and parent's yearning for a male child. Denied parental love made Sarita the victim of her apathy. Sarita rebels her mother for her education. Sarita goes to Bombay to study Medicine in spite of her mother's antagonism. Luckily for her, her father encouraged her. Sarita's mother doesn't recognize the importance of girl's education. She uncertainly utters,

“But she's a girl... And don't forget medicine or no medicine,

Doctor or no doctor,

You still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding.

Can you do both?”(DHNT, 144).

In Roots and Shadows, we get the glimpses of Shashi Deshpande's established vision. Though the female character is present in *Roots and Shadows* Indu, is prominently presented as three different aspects of the trauma, Indian women have to go through in their lives , have been projected in the whole network of the novel.

This novel is an exploration of Indu's begs for the understanding of her inner self, the contention of her self-determination and right with reference to her relationship with Jayant, her husband, and the members of her inherited family. Being a girl child, she was taught to be humble, submissive, docile, passive and obedient in her childhood. Suppressed in Indian patriarchy, Indu, the protagonist of the novel, rebels against Akka, the head of a matriarchal family, who represents age-old and orthodox beliefs and conventions, and marries Jayant, a man of different caste, but of her own choice, with the hope to escape from her caged existence in her conventional and orthodox ancestral family with its rigid values and beliefs. In her quest of freedom and happiness, she leaves her parental home with a very simple dream that her marriage would help her to realize her need to belong, to be wanted, to be needed, and to be loved. She seeks marriage as an alternative to the restrictions imposed on her in the name of gender-distinction in her ancestral family. After her marriage, she surrenders and submits herself whole-heartedly to her husband in the name of love. In marrying Jayant, she enters into an independent and free world of her dreams. She feels:

“I had thought I had found my alter ego in Jayant. I had felt that in marrying him, I had become complete. I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And in Jayant, I had thought I had found the other part of my whole self, not only that but total understanding, perfect communication. And then, I had realized this was an illusion. I had felt cheated”. (Deshpande 114-115).

But very soon, in the absence of a perfect understanding between them, she realizes that her husband, a typical Indian husband, wants her to live according to his views and ideas, dreams and aspirations. She feels deceived and disillusioned in her marital life. She begins to taste the bitter fruits of marriage, a trap. She strongly believes:

“Behind the facade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage, after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue”. (Deshpande 3).

Indu condescendingly calls an Indian woman, a prey, a heroine, just a stupid fool carrying a world of darkness in herself, a pure female animal, a inferior creature of a new world filled with unawareness, intolerance and superstition, or a typical nature only interested in getting married, bearing children, having sons and then grandchildren. She is not

the only woman who suffers a lot in her marital life. Vithal's mother is a meek, silent and suffering wife who has been a victim of the sadistic anger of her husband. Indu learns from Old Uncle:

“Vithal's father . . . a grim man who rarely spoke and never smiled, there was a streak of cruelty in him that came out in his relations with his meek, silent wife. The boy, as a child, had been a frequent spectator of scenes in which the father had worked out his sadistic anger on the mother for the merest trifles”. (Deshpande 138).

Unable to bear physical cruelty and mental torture, she leaves her marital home, her husband and son.

Female protagonists in Deshpande's novels stand apart from that of their male counterparts in the writings of many contemporary women writers. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, fantasy and reality and the mask and the face, they lead a life of restiveness.

Representative poet of Victorian age wrote of the feminist era in the following words:

“Man for the field and woman for the hearth:

Man for the sword and for the needle she:

Man with the head and woman with the heart:

Man to command and woman to obey. “The Princess.”

Shashi Deshpande through her novel portrays the women, her protagonists as the most oppressed and pathetic embodiment of human suffering. She feels that a woman, not only in India but also in other countries, is not treated at par with a man in any sphere of human activity. She has been demoralized, concealed and marginalized in the matters of sharing the available opportunity for accomplishment of her life. Sarita undergoes great dishonour and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife. Deshpande talked about the deliberate gender discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters and their desire to have a male child. Deshpande's novels reveal how through her central characters' childhood their individualities were shaped and shaped according to the feminine measurements. They were made to pursue by their families. The Indian culture has habitually maintained on inculcating a particular system of manners in the girls. The traits of femininity are considered praiseworthy among the girls predominantly in the middle class society. The feminine qualities of self abnegation, tenderness, and self-effacement are inculcated in them since they were girls. The novelist has projected the position of girl – children in the contemporary middle – class families and has defined the social factors responsible for shaping them. A festive female protagonist in Deshpande's novels stands apart from that of their male counterparts in the writings of many fashionable women writers. Sandwiched between custom and modernity, misconception and reality and the mask and the face, they lead a life of restlessness.

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