

**GENDER AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCT IN SHASHI
DESHPANDE'S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS AND THAT LONG
SILENCE***

Amit Sharma

Research Scholar

Shri JJT University

Rajasthan

Abstract:

Women form half of the world's population and as such their problems must be brought forth in front of the people so that awareness can be generated in the minds of the people regarding their situation and the problems that they face. But few have the courage to do so and the Indian women novelists writing in English have done this job fantastically. Be it kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Mahashweta Devi all have enumerated the complex problems of women hence they are mostly known by their feminist ideology and as such the discussion on their novels is primarily based on how Indian women as a whole are subjugated, oppressed and tormented in their lives-which consist of all aspects of their life like family, social sphere, professional life etc. But a prominent issue which perhaps remains unexposed is why they are discriminated on the grounds of being inferior to men. Who tell them that they are secondary? How does this concept of otherness come? Perhaps they are made to feel that they are second to men in everything which is quite applicable theory.

Keywords:

Oppressors, Alienated, patriarchy, social construct

Paper:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.....It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature....which is described as feminine.” (1)

The above cited prominent quote from *The Second Sex* declares clearly that gender is not something that is solely a matter of biology without graver implications rather it is a mode of patriarchy to go deeper in order to fulfill their knave designs, they created gender which creates cleavage between man and woman. Gender is a

socially constructed concept which society gradually drills in women, making them realize that they are women i.e. a weaker section of society who need the care and protection of males otherwise it is not feasible for them to survive. Female identity has thus been subjugated and dominated by the powerful sex that is man. This relationship of the weak and powerful is like a political relationship where the powerful personality or a powerful party dominates over the other. Like a man who has power in his hands has more influence in the society, in the same way this relationship of man and woman in the society is known as a political relationship which Kate Millet in her essay “Sexual Politics” refers to and dwells on the intricacies of this subject in detail. The questions arises why woman are so weak and who tells them that they form a weaker section of society, is there anything inherent in them which they lack which hinders them to be equated with men or God has made them so? No, the overt answer is they have been conditioned so that they should start feeling about their weakness, it is the family, friend circle where a female child moves in , the school and later in life college atmosphere where she rubs her shoulder with others that convince her and spontaneously she begins to feel that she is weak or perhaps lacks the quality that give her vigour and vitality.

Indian society from the time of Manu has socialized women in this way only and has left no stone unturned in creating gender bias so that the secondary place to women may be given. Manu said, “A woman should never had freedom, when they are young they should be under their father, after marriage they should be under their husbands, if their husbands die they should be under their sons.”(2) A woman has been considered worth nothing, she is a commodity that is used and thrown away. This objectification is a heinous crime. It clearly shows that women in the Indian society were never entitled to have freedom as our own scriptures dictate the society to grant zero freedom to women. Kamala Das, one of India,s prominent poets, in her poem „An Introduction“ has exposed the social and cultural construction of feminism:

---Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook,
Be a quarreler with the servants. Fit in oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. (3)

A mother though herself has been a victim of the oppression by the males still sticks to the traditional code and prepares the daughter to tread the same path and undergo same sort of suffering by being tight-tongued. Deshpande as a novelist is aware of the role the mother plays in providing marginalized role to her daughter by making her accept the patriarchal paradigms. The factors that influence the girls

include cultural aspects, social and psychological factors such as the family structure, women's position in it, female sexuality and trauma of monthly cycle.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a powerful novel by the novelist by which she drives home the process of socialization when the protagonist Sarita is reminded that she is a girl and should behave as a girl. She is time and again reminded that the ultimate goal of her life is to find a good match and get married. The mother is always apprehensive of her daughter's complexion that it might not grow darker otherwise it would become quite troublesome to find a good match for her. The following dialogue from the novel underlines the socialization process:

Don't go out into the sun, you will get darker.

Who cares?

We have to care even if you don't. We have to get you married. (45)

Sarita is made to realize aspects of her growing body "You should be careful now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it is only your father who's around." (55)

Sarita in the novel remembers her fifteen birthday. Her birthdays though were not celebrated but on this particular birthday she was gifted ear rings to wear. But she knew it was not given out of her mother's feelings of love and attachment for her rather because as a growing she must be equipped with all sorts of feminine ornaments keeping in touch with the traditions of the society. She is given ornaments as she is reminded by the ornaments that she is a girl and has to decorate herself by the jewelry or otherwise she would not look like a woman with feminine traits. Parents are always apprehensive that the girl child should look like a girl without the masculine tinge. When girls cut their hair short or wear jeans or shirts the parents in a traditional families raise eyebrow and time and again remind her that she is a female with the feminine quality and as such she has to mould herself in a traditional way and wear what other women wear. This is a process of socialization to make them docile, humble, relenting to the patriarchal set up of society only.

Even the daily household chores are chosen to be done not by the male members but by the girls only. Chores like setting the table, cleaning up after meals, helping in the kitchen, doing odd jobs are meant to be done by girls only. Jaya's husband Mohan feels hurt when Jaya says that he should do cooking in her pregnancy. It is generally observed that women can do all types of work and men just restrict themselves to the outside work only. They feel ashamed if they have to work at home and have to do some household duties like washing clothes, sweeping floors,

scrubbing utensils, taking care of the children etc. Their male ego is hurt. They feel like perhaps they are becoming effeminate by doing the work which traditionally is assigned to women. They fail to realize that marriage is a commitment, a bond so strong that it binds both man and woman not only physically but also spiritually and as such there is no harm if some help to women are given at home when they need it. But the society has bifurcated the roles for both and as such women have been socialized as well as men have been socialized to work in their separate departments. All the prayers and rituals are observed so that God may bless their husband with a long life. The main goal of a woman is determined as pleasing the husband and continuing the family lineage through the birth of a male child. In *That Long Silence* Jaya is told many times as “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (137) and that “the happiness of your husband depends entirely on you.”(138)

The traumatic menses is dwelled on in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. The sexual changes and the bodily changes are bound to appear as the female child moves from childhood to puberty. At one stage she begins her growth and this is the time that the monthly periods start which actually prepare her for motherhood which is a natural process and a law governed by nature but this experience becomes a hell for the female child as the mother and the female elders of the family start behaving with her in a very unnatural way. They discriminate with her and do not allow her to sleep on the same bed. The kitchen as it is considered pious is barred for her. Her entry to the temple and other religious places is restricted. She is made to feel as she is a culprit or a criminal who has committed a goof in her life that is why such discriminatory behavior is given to her. The pain that she passes through is not the physical pain of the period of menses in the form of back pain or body pain rather it is more mental; the anguish that she has been left alone is more incurable than any disease. She is made to feel that she must cover up her body as she is growing up, she must roam freely with the boys now and she fails to understand why this is happening as she has grown up with the same boys as a childhood friend. She is emphatically told that she is a woman and she must behave like a woman and there should not be fuss on it. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita is instructed when she attains puberty:

“You should be careful now about how you behave. Don’t Come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it’s only your father who is around.” (55)

The only goal for a girl is to find a good match, marry, settle down and produce male child so that the family could continue. They are from the very onset of their told that their ultimate aim is to marry. Parents are not mostly concerned about the academic qualification of their girls, even if they are worried, they are worried to the extent that good education would create more chances of finding a good

husband for them. The main concern for the female child is either education nor anything else but to develop such traits, such skills that could boost their position to attract maximum number of suitors. What a tragedy! Do they not have any identity of their own, do they not have any life, any individuality, Are they a mere commodity to be used for reproduction? Society fails to understand that women are too at par with the men, they have every right to propel their education, to cultivate human traits, to hone their skills and thus to accomplish their goals in life. *That Long Silence* is a fine example of this kind of treatment where Jaya is instructed, “A husband is like a sheltering tree” (137), and further “The happiness of your family and home entirely depends on you.”(138)

Socialization thus is very crucial in the construction of gender. The process of socializing begins even with the birth of a girl child. It reaches its pinnacle when the girl grows up and reaches the stage of puberty. With the biological growth in her body and the beginning of menstrual cycles, the parents start thrusting their own judicious statements regarding what she should do and what she should avoid. She is made to feel different from others just because of the biology. She is rebuked if she does not cover herself properly. She is always reminded that she is a constant burden on the parents’ minds. This burden will be relieved only when she gets married. Thus the society has fixed roles for a girl child; she is gradually driven into it. Her psychology is so shaped that she sometimes concedes to it without any grudges.

Shashi Deshpande bestows her protagonists with new sense of freedom and individuality. She is a humanist feminist who even in her own life could never accept the secondary status allotted to women in society. She thus revolts against this patriarchal mode of oppression. She depicts the socialization process of women in order to underline the basic concept that it is not the biology of women which is different from men which relegates women in social set up rather the it is society which can be blame for it as it flings the women in the wall of femininity. Her women protagonists are not inspired by the western feminist movement. It is not the separatist feminist movement or the radical feminism that Deshpande is in favour of rather it is her own brand of feminism which is quite conditioned by the Indian culture, social set up, ethical behavior which saves her from falling a prey to western concept of feminism. She is a true feminist as she depicts the internalization of sex and gender. Sex which is not merely a matter of body or a concept to be found in dictionaries denoting a grammatical item, on the contrary the recent feminist movements have explored deep and found out that sex has deep implications which is a matter of discrimination, a kind of politics in which the male is an oppressor.

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