



Gender as a Social and Cultural Construct in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*

* Amit Sharma

* Research Scholar at Shri Jagdish Prasad Jhabarmal Tibrewala University, Chudela, Distt. Jhunjhunu, 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

"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.

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) It clearly shows that women in the Indian society were never entitled 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.

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 M ohan feels hurt when Jaya says that he should do cooking in her pregnancy. 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)

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.

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