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GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S
NOVEL "THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS"

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ABSTRACT

Gender discrimination is any type of unequal treatment based on gender. Discrimination against women and girls including gender based violence, economic discrimination and harmful traditional practices remain the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. The predicaments of women continue to be the same or rather worse despite the entire efforts for women empowerment. Gender discrimination is also an indispensable feature of feminism. The literary writers with true concern towards the present predicament of women use their literary medium for the awakening of the human conscience which affects dormancy towards the pitiful condition of women. In modern days, the women writers play a pivotal role to create awareness and empower women through their novels. Shashi Deshpande is one such genuine writer who creates life-like female characters in her works. Her true concern and eagerness to uplift the women make her depict her female characters as a beacon of hope to the oppressed ones because she makes her female characters rise up with their inborn potential and confidence from their helpless situations. The novels of Shashi Deshpande are about women's self-quest and struggle to free themselves from the restrictions imposed by society, culture and nature. The present paper tries to explore the issues like gender discrimination and empowerment of women. The prime objective of the present study is to focus on gender discrimination in Indian society as portrayed in the Sashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

Key words: gender discrimination, empowerment, predicament, inequality.

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INTRODUCTION

Women were suppressed for ages and they were denied to participate in social and political activities. In India Post-colonial period is a time of transition for women from tradition to modernity due to various liberation movements and western education. The traditional roles of women were reflected in the pre-colonial literary writings. The post-colonial literary writings reflect the liberation of women and their struggle to overcome the social, economic and gender biased discrimination and also delineates the various strategies and tactics used by women to empower themselves in the male dominated society.

Man-woman relationship occupied the central place in any writings. Faith is the basic pillar of relationships. In the Indian context breaking of relationship occurs due to lack of faith. The patriarchal society does not give equal status to woman. Empowerment is visualised as an aid to help women attain equality with men. It can be attained through the self-realization or identity. It helps to use the power which lies in themselves to achieve their own goal as well as to help the society.

The women writers try to break the traditional images of women of being a devoted wife and mother. Their writings are mainly equipped with women's liberation and new image of women with different perspectives. The changes of theme in Indian writings from traditional role of women to modern and liberated role occurred in twentieth century. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changes that occurred all over the world due to industrial and political revolution. These changes reflected in Indian writings due to the western education. The great novelist like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Shegal, Shashi Deshpande, besides numerous unmentioned authors handled various themes which shows their questioning attitude and reasoning ability towards the injustice that was accepted by the society passively for ages.

Shashi Deshpande a well-known woman novelist of the contemporary India was born in Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. She won the Sahitya Academy Award for the novel '*That Long Silence*' in 1990. Shashi Deshpande received a good deal of attention of the critics, scholars and media. She exercises her focus on the plight of social conditioning of woman. By projecting woman as a protagonist, she tries to reveal the problems of women. '*The Dark Holds No Terror*' is an important novel written by Shashi Deshpande. This novel explores the trauma of a middleclass working women who has become a trap in the male dominated society.

DEFINITION OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Gender discrimination means discrimination based on a person's gender or sex, which more often affects girls and women. Because of gender discrimination, girls and women do not have the same opportunities as boys and men for education, meaningful careers, political influence, and economic advancement. Gender discrimination also known as sexism is any unequal treatment based on gender. Sexism is discrimination, prejudice, or stereotyping on the basis of gender. Sexism is most often expressed toward girls and women. It has been characterized as the "hatred of women" and "entrenched prejudice against women."

In its simplest terms, the gender discrimination can be defined as 'the practice of treating a group of people differently based upon their gender'. In most cases of discrimination, it includes the presence of unfair behavior toward one gender believed to be inferior by another. Gender discrimination refers to the practice of granting or denying rights or privileges to a person based on their gender. In some societies, this practice is longstanding and acceptable to both genders. Certain religious groups embrace gender discrimination as part of their dogma. However, in most industrialized nations, it is either illegal or generally considered inappropriate.

Attitudes toward gender discrimination can normally be traced back to the roots of certain segments of society. Much of the discrimination is attributed to stories such as a woman being made from man's rib and societal practices such as dowries paid to fathers by prospective husbands to purchase their daughters to be wives. Countless literary fiction references are made to females being the fairer, weaker sex and males being the strong, invincible hunters of the world. The combined power of these societal and religious beliefs left little room for equitable thinking for centuries.

DEFINITION OF EMPOWERMENT

The oxford American dictionary defines "Empowerment" as "to make (someone) stronger and more confident especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights".

According to Schuler (1986)

"Empowerment refers to the capacity to mobilize resources to produce beneficial social change"

She identified three critical dimensions of the empowerment process such as,

1. Individual consciousness rising,
2. Collective consciousness development,

3. Mobilization.

The third dimension builds on the first two and it is where collective skills and resources are translated into political and legal action.

Empowerment means increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of an individual as well as community. It provides confidence for their activity and also improve their capacities. The freedom of woman helps her to decide her own wish in marriage education and employment which ultimately leads her to empowerment.

Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male domination. It is both a process and the result of the process. It is transformation of the structure of institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. It is a process that enables women to gain access to, and control of, material as well as informational resources. Empowerment is envisaged as an aid to help women achieve equality with men, or at least reduce the, gender based discriminations considerably. Empowerment would enable women to perform certain social roles that they cannot perform without it. Gender equality is enshrined in the fundamental rights under the constitution. The major strategies of women empowerment include – social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice.

In general women empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women to ensure equal rights to women and to make them confident enough to claim their rights. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in distribution of power and influence , have equal opportunities ,for financial independence through work.

Empowerment helps women to challenge the patriarchal ideology and male domination. An empowered women have the courage to decide her choice of living. She has the ability to identify her ambition and focus on the activities to achieve her goal. Empowerment helps to achieve equality with men or at least she can reduce the gender biased discrimination in the patriarchal society by breaking the stereotypical images of women.

Gender equality and Empowerment of women is recognized globally as a key element to achieve progress in all areas. There is growing social awareness across the globe to attain gender equality and women empowerment. The rise in the levels of education which nourishes progressive outlook and the advent of industrialization and modernization have affected a sea change in the attitude and thinking patterns of the people.

Shashi Deshpande has made a profound psychological journey on the minds of women. Her focus is on the Indian women – women who are urban, middle- class, educated, cultured and some of them, even empowered. When women have so many things in their hands apparently positive then it is really difficult to find the trap of patriarchy. Most of the Indian societies are based on a patriarchal framework and her novels are set within such a framework.

Deshpande's fiction focuses on the women characters trapped up in a conflict between tradition and modernity. She has clearly pointed out the gap between the prejudice stricken traditional women who prefers her daughter's marriage to career and the modern, educated, empowered women who prioritizes her personal opinion and empowerment.

In 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' the protagonist of the novel Sarita, known as Saru, is an educated and professional woman. But still she yearns for her identities which the male ego refuses to accept and subjects her to sexual sadism because of her superior social and economic status.

Since her childhood she has been a rebel against traditional norms. After the death of her younger brother she defies her mother, goes to a city, studies to become a doctor and marries the man of her choice. When she is a successful doctor with two children, their marriage is on the verge of breakdown because her husband begins to behave with her cruelly. He, though a loving father and caring husband during the day, turns into a monster in bed abusing and bruising her. Every night he reduces her to the position of a slave.

Saru's inability to protest the tortures inflicted on her compels her to go to her father's house after her mother's death. An analysis of Saru's relationship with her parents, her husband and her brother as well as quest for a identity awaken her dormant strength in her. Several other events which have taken place in her life contribute to the shaping of her personality.

Shashi Deshpande has delved into the problem of every woman in this hypocritical society where she is rendered a second grade position but is expected to be the lynch pin of the family. This double edgedness plays havoc on her psyche. She has portrayed the inner turmoil of a woman, fighting within herself, between her own knowledge and that thrust on her by the surrounding especially the mother in 'The Dark holds No Terror'.

In this Novel, the mother –daughter relationship is based on gender – bias and lovelessness. The Dark holds No Terror exhibits the trauma of a girl – child who has suffered bullying and curtailment of activity by her mother, but whom, nonetheless, wants to assert her identity as an autonomous individual in life. This girl-child Saru grows up as a victim of her mother's sexist and gender – based bias; which reduces her later life into a desperate struggle to overcome the initial victimization, to justify her decisions to her mother who no longer acknowledges her as a daughter, and to find out a new meaning to her life which could enable her to develop and nurture a balanced perspective towards her diversified roles as a mother, as a wife, and as a career woman.

Deshpande has taken up the strange mother - daughter relationship as a significant theme in the novel, *The Dark holds No Terror*: the mother, who has inculcated the norms of a closed – minded conservative society in which a woman is morally bound to prefer a son; and the daughter, who is yet to come to terms to her mother's diktats about her secondary status in the family.

The Dark holds No Terror presents the emotional undulations of the complicated mother – daughter relationship, the balance beauty of which is so vital for the development of a healthy woman. Even as a child, the protagonist of the novel Saru is aware of her mother's preference for her brother Dhruva. Reminiscent of her adolescence, in order to understand her present, Saru recollects that there was "always a Pooja on Dhruva's birthday, a festive lunch in the afternoon and an aarti in the evening. My birthdays were almost the same – but there was no Pooja" (Deshpande, 168-169). Her mother's non-chalant attitude makes Saru believe that her birth was a terrible experience for her mother.

In her childhood her upbringing was based on gender discrimination shown by her mother in favor of her brother, Dhruva. At every occasion birthdays and other rituals- Dhruva was given preference. Sarita was conscious about it and felt sorrow. She became the victim of gender discrimination in her own house. Her mother believed that a girl is a liability and a boy is an asset. This type of discriminated behaviour inculcated a sense of insecurity in the mind of Sarita when she was a child.

Slowly and gradually Saru developed a sense of hatred towards her mother. She became a victim of her mother's favoritism. When Dhruva was seven, he died. He was drowned. Unfortunately Saru was there when Dhruva was drowned. After Dhruva's death, Sarita was deprived of all the rights of a child. Her mother said, "Why didn't you die? Why are you still alive and he dead?"

Saru's mother never forgives her daughter for Dhruva's death. In her grief she is not able to comprehend her daughter's bewilderment and sense of being lost. Saru had also lost her kid brother and needed emotional support. Yet all blame is put on her and she is not allowed to have any escape from this sense of guilt, which makes her two venerate and insecure in her relationships with others.

In *The Dark Holds no Terror* Saru's buoyancy and gregariousness is gradually suffocated by her mother's constant criticism and fault finding. She is made to feel ugly and undesirable. Saru's mother thinks that physical beauty is a precondition of worldly success for a girl and is constantly critical of her daughter's appearance, "I was an ugly girl. At least, my mother told me so. I can remember her eyeing me dispassionately, saying – you will never be good looking. You are too dark, for that (Deshpande 61). As a girl grows up, she is made to feel different and conscious about revealing her femininity is slowly and deliberately encouraged in the child, till she cries out in horror. "If you're woman, I don't want to be one" (Deshpande 63).

Saru's defiance towards her mother is a strange mingling of her careerist ambitions and traditional options which she often cherishes in her dreams. She wants to be a self-reliant person, but at the same time, she dreams of superior conquering male who will give her the meaning of her life. In her imagination Saru seeks pleasure in total subordination to the man of her dreams-

"Sometimes I worked with him, for him, subordinating myself so completely to him, that I was nothing without him". (Deshpande 53).

Sarita got married to Manohar who was an English teacher in a college. It was a love marriage. Her marriage with Manohar was against her parents' wish. She was a successful doctor and earned the recognition in the society. Manohar felt uncomfortable with Sarita's steady rise in status as he was ignored when people greeted and paid attention to Sarita only. Manohar's male ego got hurt and he felt jealous of his wife's professional success. In due course of time her husband developed the inferiority complex which turned him into a monstrous animal during night. He enjoyed her glory and behaves like an affectionate husband during daytimes and tortured her during night.

Manohar's inferiority complex resulted in sadism. He couldn't find any other way to satisfy his ego. Sarita confessed to her father that her husband Manohar was a sadist:

"He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this...this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body." (Deshpande 201)

Sarita returns to her father's house after being unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. She once proclaimed that she would never come back to her father's place. Her stay in her father's house gives Saritha a chance to review her relationship with her father, husband and her dead mother. After the discussion with her father she understands that no one can give peace or comfort to her which lies inside her. She has to remove the fear and darkness from her. Saru tries to find the solution -the hope of resettlement. She revolts against the tradition but then tries to compromise and live with the reality. Saru, was the example of new women created by Shashi Deshpande who is capable of self-analysis. She struggles for her rights, and asserts her identity by self-analysis.

Shashi Deshpande's women characters revolt against the social taboos and old tradition. They struggle for their freedom, completeness and their identity. They fight against the existing system and tradition of society and express their feelings, their anger, their resentment against the social taboos but it does not bring them any satisfaction. When they identify themselves they found fulfilment in their life. Thus through self-identity the woman are like independent man. They have established themselves as autonomous beings. Women are able to identify their own wishes and rights. These women set themselves as a role model by creating awareness among the oppressed women.

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