

THE MIRAGE FOR EQUALITY: AN EXAMINATION OF GENDER-BIAS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR

Dr. Pinky

Assistant Professor

Dept of English

Guru Brahmanand Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Anjanthali

Email: pinkykdn007@gmail.com

C.N. Kimball aptly quotes a story for sensitise people about their ignorance:

“A merchant in the Middle East went from bazaar to bazaar buying rugs to export. One day he passed a stall where an elderly woman sat on a tiny rug before a very large hand-woven rug. He asked the old lady whether the rug behind her was for sale. Without looking up she answered that it is for sale. He asked her how much she wanted for the rug on which she replied: “One hundred rupees, sir. One hundred rupees”. Again he asked her to confirm the price on which she replied: “One hundred rupees. Not a single rupee less”. He looked at her and said: “Old lady, I have never seen a rug that beautiful”. She nodded and said: “I know that, sir. That’s why I’m selling it for One hundred rupees and not a single rupee less”. The merchant then said: “In the name of Allah, old lady, if you realize how beautiful your rug is, why would you ever sell it for only one hundred rupees?” Shocked at this question the old lady looked up for the first time, and after a moment of silence she answered: “Because, sir, until this very moment, I never knew that there were any numbers above 100”. (pp. 464-467)

Through this story Kimball tries to convey that when people remain ignorant of their abilities it comes at a terrible cost. This is also true about gender inequality. Every society advocates gender equality and it is in the process of attaining the zone of equal opportunities and rights to all men and women. Gender equality is the state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making; and the state of valuing different behaviors, aspirations and needs equally, regardless of gender. But on the way of attaining gender equality, there are many socio-economic hurdles which prevail in almost all the societies of the world. Hence, the result is gender inequality. Inequality presents and manifests as one of the most prevalent forms of social construction all over the world (Klingorová & Harvlíček 2), and it can be defined as culturally and socially created differences between men and women when both sexes do not have the same share in the decision-making and wealth of a society (Ridgeway 510). Inequality is the result of cultural and historical developments, geographic setting and religious customs predominant in society (Stump). This is also true about faith communities. This brings us to a brief look at the old problem of patriarchy.

Virginia Woolf, while defining women's place in the globally prevalent patriarchal set up, bemoans the unenviable position of women in these words:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She provides poetry from cover to cover: she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (41)

In literature women enjoy their highest importance but in reality a woman is nothing but a 'womb'- her role is always determined by the male dominated society as 'secondary'. Her importance can be felt only when it is the need to cook food, to take care the child and the in-laws and so on and so forth. When it becomes the question to talk about a woman's own story, everything gets blurred because there is no story of a woman's life. Vedic age bears the significance of scholarly women but after the Vedic age the status of women began to diminish. Then followed a long history – there are so many ups and downs in the field of women's reading and writing. Some women started to write using male pseudonyms so that the readers would not throw them away because they were written by a woman. Hence, gender bias was there from the beginning but not severely identified and focused to a great extent unlike it is done in the 21st century. Still women from the very outset are trying to create a space of their own.

Shashi Deshpande ponders over how patriarchal society damages females' ego and leads women to a state of intellectual slavery. Indian women are conditioned to a blind emotional dependence on men and in a sense the whole purpose and meaning of woman's life is to win and retain a man's love in her life. The inequality is started within the smallest unit of society that is family. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* displays a kind of reversal in the social roles of man and women in society. Saru's mother treats her different from her brother, Dhruva. Her parent gives all attention and freedom to their only son and this left the scar in the heart of Saru which has huge effect on her life. Son is more preference than daughter as he brought dowry to the family and can raise the family's condition when they grow up. As Saru has her first menstruation period, she does not permit to enter the puja room and kitchen as it is believed that woman is unholy during their period. In addition to this, she also has to eat separate alone. These actions are done without any explanation from her mother. Saru's mother vehemently opposed her higher studies for medicine not only due to financial problem but also for the fact that she did not approve women's independence. She is an authoritative woman, who did not want to break the chain of customs and traditions followed in the society she wanted to impose same traditions to her daughter. But Sarita rebels, as she opposed the culture to be followed in her life. There are different incidents and conversation between mother and daughter over skin tone centers the notion that a girl doesn't belong to parental home:

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even 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 (*The Dark Holds No Terror* 45)

When Saru moves to Mumbai, joins a medical college and meets Manohar, this meeting culminates in the two falling in love and her marriage with Manohar (low caste) an eminent nature against her parents' wishes. Which itself proves her rebel nature and ambitious she achieves her goal and fulfills her aspirations at any cost.

But soon the ecstasy of the married life vanishes when Saru being a wife transforms into sought after doctor as her profession. She makes her own identity and no longer is identity of her husband needed by her. Here, Manohar develops a sense of inferiority complex and feels humiliated on seeing the reaction of society to Saru superior position. He gets pleasure out of insulting his wife with sheer physical violence: "The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horrible familiar body. And above me a face I could not recognize" (*The Dark Holds No Terror* 112) When her husband remains far behind in profession career, he has no guts to appreciate wife's advancement and assist her. Rather he dislikes her with the result that Saru becomes the subject of exploitation by her own husband. She does not dare to oppose excessiveness of her husband. Rather she tolerates it silently and feels bad inside: "The women had no choice but to submit to accept, and I had often wondered... have they been born without wills of life-time of disuse?" (Beauvoir 6).

The Indian male psyche finds it very difficult to tolerate that wife should overreach her husband in any field. He wants to be the master of the house and wife to be the follower. A. Rich observes: "Men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (Kaur 14-15)

All this goes to show clearly that it brings various pains with it for Saru: pain of loss of self-respect, pain of physical torture and pain of mental trauma. In the beginning love and sex were fulfillment of life for Saru, but now sex has become 'a dirty word.' She suppresses all her pains, fears and horrors. She wears a mask of happiness and feigns marital harmony and peace which is a clear manifestation of alienation not only from her husband, friends and family but even from her own authentic moral, intellectual and psychological being.

Getting disenchanted in her relationships she starts spending more and more time in her clinic. But this relief provided by professional success cannot be complete and longlasting. Professional success cannot fill up the inner vacuum created by emotional discontent. Strained relationship with parents, marital incompatibility, disillusionment in extramarital affairs, communication gap with her own children and spells of deep discontentment after a brief escape in the field of work affect her psyche so adversely that she stops feeling one with her own self. In utter desperation she clings to the idea of God and has gone in for pujas, fasts and rituals : "But there was no comfort in it at all. Just the feeling of being a fraud, an actress acting out a role she didn't believe in" (*The Dark Holds No Terror* 43). Her husband's house offers her no sense of belongingness and she seems to have as Saru says, "no room of her own" (*The Dark Holds No*

Terror 135). Thus in the typical patriarchal set up, the situation becomes horrible for women as for as their physical, mental, psychological and social plight is concerned and in degrading them there are not only men but women are also responsible in surroundings. Sometimes the most horrible situation for a woman is not caused by the man who is unknown or an outsider but the man in the role of lover, husband, father and brother. When Manohar makes forced sexual relation with Saru it proves that the biased intimate partner often wants to control over you. But Saru accepts all silently for the sake of the children and social norms.

Shashi Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terror* questions and challenges the biasness of patriarchal set up that believe in gender politics and discrimination and try to satisfy male ego. With the passage of time, the modern educated woman is coming out of her traditional boundaries decided by the male dominated society. She is aware about her rights through which she wants to be equal with man in all walks of life. Her struggle is going on and she is trying to break the age-old silence by refusing to dance to the tune of her husband.

REFERENCES

1. Beauvoir Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translation H.M Harshley, London: Vintage, 1997
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990.
3. Kaur, Iqbal, "Femininity and Feminist Literature," *Feminist Revolution and Kamala Das's My Story*. Patiala: Century Twenty One, 1992.
4. Kimball, C.N., "Nature, Culture and Gender Complementarity", in R.W. Pierce & R.M. Groothuis (eds.), *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, pp. 464-480, Intervarsity Press, IL. 2004
5. Klingorová, K. & Harvlíček, T., "Religion and Gender Inequality: The Status of Women in the Societies of the World Religions", *Moravian Geographical Reports* 23, 2-11, 2015 <https://doi.org/10.1515/mgr-2015-0006>
6. Ridgeway, C., "Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations", *Gender and Society* 18(4), 510-531, 2004 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204265269>
7. Stump, R., *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 2008
8. Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. UBSPD, 1999.