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Issues of Gender Discrimination in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

Inequalities existed in societies in different forms: race, religion, caste, gender. Gender discrimination is omnipresent in all the societies of the world. Women always get a secondary status in society which is more demeaning than insulting. Indian and Canadian societies are no exception to it. Writers of both the countries have taken up this cause in their works and have both explicitly and implicitly discussed the restricting codes of conduct designed by the patriarchal society for females. The suppressing conventional ideologies hinder the flowering of women's personalities and encourage them to lead a passive role in a patriarchal society.

Keywords

Girl-Child; Self-Abnegation; Inequality; Chauvinism; Predicament;
Discrimination.

As a feminist Shashi Deshpande has explored the real trauma of feminine role. Through her novels, she portrays the conventional male dominated society which does not allow women an equal position. Even after getting higher education and economic independence, they are not able to ameliorate their secondary position. Deshpande exhibits the most important issues of women's life. They oscillate between traditional and modern roles and hunt for the simple rights which are lost in the phallogentric society. Deshpande talks about girl-child, mother-daughter relationship, husband-wife relationship, male domination and self-abnegation. Through her novels, she wants to reconstruct the woman's life. She also wants to change the gender inequality evident in society. Her novels are the mirror to different facets of life and relationships. She points out to Geetha Gangadharan in an interview,

We have women going about with ghunghat on their faces. And women who have no choice even to decide about having children. We have many people who still advocate Sati, who consider dowry a necessity, who count it a loss when a girl is born and profit when a boy is born. It is this abysmal difference that I want to do away with, as a feminist. We all have a certain inherent potential within us, may be for different things, but we have a right to put it to use. (254)

Margaret Atwood, too like Shashi Deshpande, explores the dilemma of Canadian women. We come to know that not only in Indian society, but also in other countries, women are leading suppressed lives due to chauvinism. Atwood maps out the predicament of Canadian women through her novels. As Shashi Deshpande wants to redefine the position of women in Indian society, in the same manner, we see the efforts of Margaret Atwood. A detailed analysis of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Atwood's literature exhibits that women are denied emancipation from the conservative and traditional norms. Their

condition is equally suppressed in both Indian and Canadian society. But there is a positive attitude in both writers. They both want to emancipate their protagonists from their predicament due to chauvinistic society. They provide space to them for reorganizing their lives with new enthusiasm.

Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Atwood's writings take up the issues and images of deprived womanhood in India and Canada respectively. The issues raised by the writers snub the frequent thumping of the society which proclaims the women as liberated. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* reveals the qualities of women which make her an ideal woman – devoted, silent, religious and deferential to men. According to her our society is responsible for inculcating the feminine qualities. She defines in *The Second Sex*:

Thus the passivity that is the essential characteristics of the 'feminine' women is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years. But it is wrong to assert that a biological datum is concerned; it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by her teachers and by society. (19)

Shashi Deshpande is the first novelist who has explored the trauma of girl-child. She illustrates the plight of gender discrimination, which we find in all of her novels. Deshpande's quality is that, she touches the real aspects of woman's life in conventional and contemporary society. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sonu and Mriga in *If I Die Today*, Sonu, Mridula, and Sharmila in *Come Up and Be Dead*, Jaya and Rati in *That Long Silence*, Kalpana and Mandira in *The Binding Vine*, Akka in *Roots and Shadows*, Kalyani, Aru and Charu in *A Matter of Time* and Munni and Madhu in *Small Remedies* draw our attention to the discrimination faced by young girls in traditional households. Her novels reveal how through her protagonists' childhood their personalities were shaped and moulded according to the feminine roles they were made to pursue by their families. The Indian society has traditionally insisted on

inculcating a particular code of behaviour among the girls. We find her protagonist Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* suffering from the trauma of gender discrimination imposed by her mother. She faces very harsh treatment on being a girl child. A son has very strong position for her mother, because he inherits the family name. Saru endures the dilemma of gender discrimination constantly by her mother because she finds that she is not as important for mother as her brother Dhruva. She observes that every celebration and rituals are only for her brother, not for her. The partial treatment of her mother becomes the cause of Saru's rebellious nature. Saru notices that her mother "[...] never really cared. Not after Dhruva's death. I just didn't exist for her. I died long before I left home" (DHNT 32). Thus the effects of gender discrimination lacerate and hinder the healthy development of Saru. Deshpande exposes the Indian society having no qualms for advocating gender discriminations.

Kalyani, in her novel *A Matter of Time* also presents the bitter facet of gender discrimination. Kalyani, the mother of Sumi and Premi faces a terrified childhood due to the atrocities of her mother, Manorama. As a child, she receives love only from her father, Vithalrao. Manorama is a frustrated woman as she could not give birth to a son. Kalyani also faces the trauma of being a girl. Manorama becomes spasmodic in words and actions at the knowledge of her daughter receiving letters from an anonymous admirer. Kalyani's school education is stopped though her father wants her to become an engineer. She is married to Manorama's brother Shripati, without taking her consent and, "after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now "Her family". (129)

Akka, in *Roots and Shadows* also exhibits an example of gender discrimination. She leads her childhood with the trauma of gender discrimination. She becomes a victim of child-marriage. She also endures her mother-in-law's cruel behaviour silently at the age of twelve years. She is

constantly tortured because she does not bear a son. She endures all these humiliations passively.

We find that the issues which she discusses in her novels are based on real human life. They all are practical aspects which exemplify that we need to reconstruct the values of society.

As Deshpande exhibits the facets of woman's life, Margaret Atwood also presents the same plights through her novels. As in *The Blind Assassin*, her protagonist goes through the suppression of gender discrimination by her father, Norval Chase because he wants an inheritor in the form of a son whereas he is blessed only by two daughters Iris and Laura. He looked after his daughters after the death of his wife but he neglects them as girl children. They are expected to live within the four walls of the house and had no freedom to interact with the outer world. The outer world was a mystery for them as very less opportunities of tours and excursion were given to them. Iris and Laura find out their own way of meeting with the world outside 'Avilion' (their house). Iris says:

When we weren't with these tutors, we were supposed to stay at Avilion, either inside the house or on the grounds. But was there to police us? The tutors were easy to elude, they didn't know our secret pathways, and Reenie couldn't keep track of us every minute, as she herself pointed out. Whenever we could, we would steal away from Avilion and roam the town, despite Reenie's belief that the world was full of criminals and anarchists and sinister orientals with opium pipes...waiting to snatch us away and hold us to ransom for father's money...Instead of school, Laura and I were provided with a succession of tutors, men and women both. (156)

Iris and Laura's indifference towards their tutors shows the effect of constricting life on them. Norval feels his utmost duty is to save the girls from the greedy eyes of society. Hence, he confines his two daughters to the limited

walls of Avilion. He forgets that this act is throttling the growing capabilities in them and has made them powerless. Life becomes enigmatic to them and they are unable to judge and measure the relationships thriving around them. Iris and Laura were supervised to become good ladies, so that they could get good match for themselves when they grow up. Iris, being the eldest, could easily smell her father's unfulfilled desire of possessing a son. Callista, his friend, warns him for being too hard on girls. She admonishes,

“You're being too hard on the kiddies”, said Callista.

“They're not boys.”

“Unfortunately”, said father. (163)

Iris endures her father's harsh attitude because she has no way to escape from her predicament. Due to her mute acceptance, her father uses her as a commodity to save his assets and marries her with his business rival Richard Griffen, without her concern. Her father's decision of her marriage becomes the curse of her life, which she endures throughout her life.

Surfacing also touches the issue of gender discrimination. Atwood has portrayed a homeless female protagonist in the novel whose humiliation starts from her house. Her father builds a house in Quebec Island and forces his family to live there. The protagonist contemplates:

Even the village had too many people for him; he needed an island, a place where he could recreate not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with when 'they say freedom' they never quite mean it, what they mean is freedom from interference. (63)

Her father's restrictions are visible during her upbringing at Quebec. She is not allowed to meet her neighbours who live ten miles away from her home. Communication between people and sharing the ideas and experiences develops the personality of a human being but narrator's father denies the

interaction with the outer world to her. It is revealed when protagonist says: “Although we played during the visits with the solemn, slightly hostile children of Paul and Madane, the games were brief and wordless”. (58)

Atwood reflects the need of communication between parents and children. The narrator’s childhood is full of solitude. She finds herself enclosed into the narrow confines of her father’s ideology. Life becomes merciless as it does not provide her a space to develop and blossom.

The protagonist states, “[...] both of my parents were pacifists” (77). She is reared up as one “who didn’t know the local customs, like a person from other culture” (77).

Atwood clears that her parents’ neglected attitude towards her is the root cause of her promiscuous nature. George Woodcock also agrees with this thought in *Introducing Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing* and says:

In fact, it seems to have been largely because of fear of world about which they knew a great deal in one way or another, that the parents erred in bringing up the narrator to be so ignorant of life beyond the home and the island that she must learn about it in shameful indirection from her more knowing and by implication, her more corrupt brother. (65)

The protagonist is extremely “shut-off” from the society by her parents. In her school days, she is not even allowed to attend Sunday school by her father. She develops as a socially coy person.

Atwood presents the plight of girl child who is denied the basic right of making choices for herself. Her freedom is always restricted by the male society. Norms of her freedom are different from boys hence the protagonist becomes emotionally undeveloped and she is not able to deal with the society. By her father’s domination, she loses the ability to comprehend a relationship and conditions around her. Her mute acceptance and docile nature makes her a weak creature and she “becomes an escape artist” (77). Her description of

Moose family mirror's narrator's own family:

Father Moose, Mother Moose and a little boy Moose, are together near the gasoline pumps, while a little girl moose is in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof is up on the roof of the service station. (13)

The description of Moose family is quite similar to the condition of narrator's family – the daughter is segregated from the family and there is a hint of a plunge to come.

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is explicitly concerned with the complexities of culturally-encoded concepts of femininity. Atwood explores the problems associated with the life of Canadian women during 1960s. The novel is written during a time when Canada witnessed a whirlwind change in its social, political and economic structure. This transition in Canada had severe impact on the established mind-set of Canadian women as they started questioning the established feminine codes. They started confronting the gender discrimination that set limitations to their existence. Sofia Sanchez-Grant writer in *The Female Body in Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle* about feminine traits which are made to fulfill phallogocentric society:

Femininity is supposedly the 'natural' essence of womanhood itself: to be feminine is to be a woman. By contrast, Conboy et al. argue that femininity is just another social mechanism which is based on male desires and used to curtail the freedom of women. (79)

Atwood exhibits Marian as unwilling to accept the conventional roles set by the Canadian society for women. The social structure of Canada gives an upper hand to men and the roots of gender discrimination are deeply ingrained in it. *The Edible Woman* reflects the period of 1960s in Canada. During this period women were unequally treated in their personal and professional life by men. They were paid less for the same work done by their male colleagues.

Marian, the female protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, inspects her future in the company she works. Atwood discusses the structure and exploitation of the company by giving it an image of ice-cream sandwich. Men get the 'Upper Crust' position on the top floor of the office buildings. Machines and their operators were set on the bottom floor like modern slave labourers. "The goosey layer in the middle" (12) is given to women who are housewives working for low pay in their spare time. Marian knows that she can only become a head or assistant of her department like Ms. Bogue who will retire as a spinster in future. Marian rejects to become one like Ms. Bogue. Marian does not want to follow the path set by the patriarchy for women because it deprived them of the basic rights. The upper crust was meant for men whereas women were relegated to secondary status in professional life.

She rejects the idea of living a demarcated life because of her being a female. This is the first role she rejects. Marian analyses the life of the three office virgins. They dress up in pure feminine way and wear heavy make up to impress others. They want to enjoy life before settling down. They decide to remain virgins till they get married. Marian disagrees with the stereotype image of the three virgins. She shuns the idea of exposing her femininity and lures others.

Marian also tries to correlate her life with Clara, her friend. She seems to explore the meaning of womanhood and motherhood through Clara. Clara bears many children and Marian is a witness to her multiple gestation periods. Clara appears to be finding fulfillment through motherhood. Marian is baffled by the aimless reproduction of Clara. She intricately and loosely watches the body of Clara which looks like "a boa-constrictor who swallowed a watermelon" (25). The reproductive role of Clara humiliates Marian. She rejects the idea of becoming a breeding animal. She perceives the reproductive capability of a woman setting limitations and the women succumb to the demands of their bodies. Marian also observes the discriminating attitude of the society towards

pregnant women. Emily Martin observes in *The Woman in the Body*:

[o]ne cannot help but see the clash with which the two worlds, meant to be kept ideologically separate, collide. A pregnant working woman is an embarrassment, an offence. She is threatened with loss of job or career, or it is assumed she will quit; she is told she never would have been hired if her supervision had been warned, she is told she cannot have it both ways. (197)

Marian loathes the idea of becoming a woman like Clara. She despises the image of aimless motherhood producing children for no specific purpose. She considers such a role of a woman as irresponsible and vulnerable.

Marian finds a fourth alternative in her roommate, Ainsely, who is an example of predatory female. Ainsely represents those women who want to become single parent to their children. She shows no inclination towards marriage but wants to become a mother. She has no faith in the institution of marriage. She impregnates herself through Len Shank. Later, she realizes that her baby will have to bear the brunt of the society in future as it will be labeled as an illegitimate child. Hence she tries to force Len to marry her. She concludes that Ainsely is immoral in her approval towards life and relationships. Marian is perplexed as she is not able to reconcile with any of the feminine roles thriving around her.

The study of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Atwood's novels conclude that a great transformation in the complete outlook of the society is required towards women. Their novels have illustrated how the centuries old man-dominated society does not allow the male ego to actively propagate equality of sexes, and revealed the isolated and lonely condition of Indian women whose rights as human beings are axed by it. It expects women to be vassals, sidelining their self-identity and individuality. Their novels convince us of the need of social restructuring in the light of gender equality.

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