

Portrayal of Womanhood in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and Shashi Deshpande's the Dark Holds No Terrors

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to make an analysis on the theme – Gender bias in Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" and Deshpande's "The Dark Holds No Terrors". Gender bias is the separation of gender in a way which prefers one sex over the other. Markandaya and Deshpande are the feminist writers who concern with the psychological crisis in the lives of Indian Women in their novels. Gender issues signify the deplorable condition of women in the Indian society and the other various forms of exploitation and gender violence which are linked to the attitude of womanhood. Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" and Deshpande's "The Dark Holds No Terrors" portray the emotional imbalances of Indian women. Markandaya's heroine, Rukmani proves herself to be an epitome of Indian wives through her tolerance and submissive nature, while Deshpande's protagonist, Saritha proves herself to be a dogmatic character, one who seeks for self quest and self exploration and struggles to free from the restrictions imposed on her by society, culture and nature. Both of them are exploited by male chauvinism but enshrines as an ideal women in our Indian society.*

I. Introduction

Gender Bias is a preference or prejudice toward one gender over the other. Bias can be conscious or unconscious and may manifest in many ways both subtle and obvious. When examining gender bias, it is important to define and understand the term. 'Gender' is defined as "classification of sex" and 'bias' is defined as "preference or inclination that inhibits impartiality; prejudice". Thus gender bias is a separation of gender in a way which prefers one sex over the other.

It is highly evident that there is a patriarchal set up where women are of little significance. According to the Laws of Manu, a woman is valuable only as far as she is the possible begetter of a male offspring. In her childhood, a woman should always be a subject to her father, in youth to her husband and after his death to her sons. It is also demanded that day and night, women must be kept in dependence by the male members of their families.

The deplorable condition of women in the Indian society and the gender distinction manifested in female feticide, the liabilities attached to the girl child, declining sex ratio, high level of illiteracy among women as inferior and second class citizens, the various other forms of exploitation and gender violence are directly linked to the attitude to women.

In the galaxy of Indian novelists in English, Indian women writers too shine luminously like the male counterparts by their significant contribution to the enrichment of Indian English novels. Of such women writers, Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande are the most productive, popular and skilled novelists and notable representatives of the growing Indian women's writings in English.

Markandaya and Deshpande are primarily concerned in their novels with the psychological crisis in the lives of Indian women who are subjected to physical and psychological trauma in Indian society. They have exploited their skill in projecting the agonized mind of the persecuted women. These writers, being women, dive deep into the inner mind of the repressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and bring to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women's emotional imbalances.

Basically, Men and Women are complimentary to each other. Neither of them can claim any superiority over the other. But the women are the missionaries of civilization. They possess the power of endurance, love and foresight which contributes to the happiness of others. In those days, they were merely portrayed as the souls of dependence. Women in general are considered as weaker sex to men.

As far as the women are concerned in Indian set up, the moment they get married, they become the slaves of their husbands. They should also remain faithful and sincere in taking care of their husbands however bad and cruel their husbands are. The male has a voice whereas the female has no voice. The nature of an Indian wife is such that she readily accepts life with all its vagaries. In a male dominated society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent home maker with multifarious roles to play in the family.

kamala markandaya's heroine Rukmani, the protagonist in Nectar in a Sieve is the fulcrum and the sustainer of the family bond. The novelist has delineated the character of her heroine to the most miserable rural

conditions. Rukmani, the youngest of the four daughters of a village Headman, is married at the age of twelve to a tenant peasant, Nathan, who is far below her status. She enjoys her marital life with whatever her husband earns whether plenty or scanty due to draught. She concedes, "This, mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch was my home. My knees gave...and I sank down"(6).

She learns to be proud of her domestic space and enjoys her married life at all planes whether sexual, physical or psychological. She is uncomplaining and moulds herself thoroughly into the frame of a traditional figure who works from dawn to dusk for her family. She belongs to a generation of self-sacrificing women for whom the mere happiness an satisfaction of husband is "be all and end all" of life.

Soon Rukmani becomes the mother of five sons and a daughter Irawaddy. When the daughter was born , not only her husband even she too regretted over the birth of a female child. She is literate but her bias for a girl child is that of a conventional grandmother or great grandmother. She reacts unpleasantly at the birth of Ira and shed "tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first born"(15). She wants to give birth to a male child to her husband because a son can "continue his line and walk beside him on the land"(16).

Rukmani's daughter, Ira is married to a peasant boy at the age of fourteen. But after five years of marriage, her son-in-law abandoned her for being barren. Rukmani and her husband, Nathan tolerate it with equanimity. Nathan blames his own daughter and supports the action of his son-in-law. Rukmani too did not protest the behaviour of both her husband and her son-in-law but she behaved in a sensible way by taking her daughter to Dr.Kenny to be treated for barrenness. This shows that despite of being deeply rooted in traditional Indian values, Rukmani is well aware of herself and seeks herself within the orbit of family ties.

Rukmani's image of a self-sacrificing woman and conceding to woman's subjugation with a spirit of nonchalance becomes evident when she comes to know of Nathan's extra-marital affair with Kunthi. As an Indian woman. she struggles by all means to protect the honour of her husband and to save him from the bewitching tangle of any women. Even though Nathan betrays her, he is her treasure. She says, "I need you, I cried to myself, Nathan my husband I cannot take the risk because there is risk since she is clever and I am not". This shows that she is unaware of her rights and she even does not have the courage to list an objection to male oppression. She never finds fault with him for his inability to care for his family. She submissively shares all misfortunes with Nathan till he dies and she even accepts her fate designed by her husband.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani proves herself to be a silent sufferer and finds no quest for autonomy in her character. It is her passivity which stops her from asking anything for her sake as she realizes, "Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons on the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change". Even when her heart is torn apart in her endless battle against relentless nature, changing time and dirty poverty, she never thinks of protesting against the situation. Her attitude enlightens her willing surrenderness to the male dominating society. Kamala Markandaya offers, at the beginning of this novel, a famous quotation from Samuel Taylor Coleridge "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve / And hope without an object cannot live" and thereby represents Rukmani as an epitome of Indian woman who knows herself to be tampered in the flames of responsibilities and circumstantial pressures.

The treatment of women in Shashi Deshpande's novels is focused in an entirely different way. Unlike Kamala Markandaya, Desapande projects a realistic picture of the middle-class educated women of the contemporary Indian society. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a story of Sarita(Saru) who is a victim of her mother's biased behaviour towards her. Saru defies the dark side of her religion, casts off the wrong belief and creates a new world of her own where she is not subdued to any patriarchal rule.

To Saru, the darkness is no longer a sign of fear for her instead she transforms the latter (fear) into mere challenge. The experiences she faced during her childhood days influenced Saritha heavily. She was always found fault for her doings right from the time she entered this world. Even after getting a boy, Dhruva as their second child, Saru's parents never stopped scolding her. She was sensitive enough to realize her mother's attitude of discrimination on her being a girl. This discrimination leads her to become a rebellion. She talks to her mother rudely:

"Don't go out in the sun. You will 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 is different. He's a boy..." .(45)

On one rainy night, Saru takes an adventure to go out. Dhruva follows her and gets trapped in a mushy land and falls into a pond and gives his life. As a little girl, she is unable to save her younger brother from drowning. For this unexpected tragedy, Saru was blamed as a murderer by her mother. Her mother's bitter words - "Why are you still alive...Why didn't you die?" (34) - leave an indelible scar on her soul. To that extent, a son is regarded as something indispensable in an Indian family. The absence or death of the son makes the parents' world empty.

And in another circumstance, Saru's mother says, "You are growing up ...You should be careful now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it's only your father who's around"(62). Why is it done so? Perhaps all mothers have done this to their daughters since time immemorial. The behavioural attitude of Saru's mother shows how women are so hard upon women and how rights are denied to get a room of her own.

Preference of male child is inherent in our patriarchal society. Female feticide is a product of this obsession with the male child. It is assumed that since girls are married off, the boys stay with their parents. Thus parents would depend on them later in their old age. Another thing is Dowry. The tentacles of the vice called dowry is so deep that even after a large population has been educated, it remains. When a girl is born in a household, it is considered that she is a debt, a liability whereas when a boy is born, he is considered as an asset. Thus any expenditure for a boy does not seem much but when it comes to girls, there is always a thought at the back of their mind that they have to pay a huge sum of money as dowry for the girl.

Saru has right to choose nothing, not even her career. Her decision to take up medicine as a career stuns her mother who opposes it. She moulds her future all by herself and joins a Medical college. Later she gets married to a literary fanatic - Manohar in spite of much opposition from her mother. For sometimes, all goes well. When she starts her married life, she tells herself "If there is a heaven on earth, it is this" (40). But Saru's personal life with Manohar was not good enough though it looks complete from outside. She always toils herself so much for the family of two children and for a husband who earns much less than her. Though theirs was a love marriage, Saru's steady rise in status hurt the male ego of Manu as no male can ever like his wife to be superior to him. Manu's sense of male superiority could not tolerate that his wife "earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well".

Manu does not question Saru's ways but to ascertain his masculinity, he takes revenge on her by behaving sadistically towards her in the nights and sexually tortures his wife and turns the darkness as a terrifying one. No matter how much love the man claims for his wife. When it comes to difference in earnings and status, he always expects that he has to be superior to her.

Over the years, men have used violence to express their dislike and hatred. There have been cases of violence against women in various forms - domestic violence, female feticide, dowry deaths etc. But, for too long, the existence of marital rape has remained unacknowledged.

After Saru's mother dies, she gets shattered to hear it and decides to meet her father after a long time. One day she reaches her father's home and hesitates to open up discussions about her mom and her husband. After so much hesitation, Saru asks him number of questions like: "Why didn't she wish to see me at her last days?", "Why didn't she love me as she loved Dhruva?", "Why haven't I given a chance to prove myself to her?"(202-204). To all these questions, her father did not have answers.

Later when her father receives a letter from Manu asking Saru to return back, he understands that his daughter is in deep trouble. Saru then blurts out the truth to her father that Manu behaves so violently with her at night. Her father tries to console Saru and advises her not to be resilient but to face anything boldly. The realization that Saru gets after nearly a fortnight stay in her father's house is that it is her life that she is living and she has to live for her own happiness by forgetting all about the past. She says, "It is my life and I have rights to live in my own way"(220). Thus the novel ends with an optimistic note.

At the end of the novel, Saru gets the courage to face the Dark and begins to know that the Dark holds no terrors. She wants to make a new beginning. She is willing to forgive Manu, her mother and all of them who made her alone. She is also willing to explore new possibilities. She has also come to realize that her profession as a doctor is her own and she will no longer be a puppet. She is ready to face life and confidently waits for the greatest terror of her life, her husband. Thus there is a transition from subservience to self-assertion and from anonymity to identity.

Shashi Deshpande encourages her female protagonists to build a harmonious relationship between man and woman in a spirit of compromise and reconciliation. She maintains that man and woman are like the two wheels of a vehicle which needs both co-ordination and a mutual understanding to lead a very happy married life.

Thus, in both the novels, Rukmani and Saru are seen as the contrasting portrayal of womanhood in an Indian family. Markandaya's protagonist, Rukmani never shows any superiority over her illiterate husband even though she is literate whereas Shashi's saru is very stubborn to some extent and makes her not to surrender

before the negative social forces. While Rukmani shows extra-ordinary patience and submissiveness, Saru reaches to the stage of self-actualization and self-confidence where she feels that she is not merely an appendage to man but more than that.

The only familiar thing which is common to both the characters is that they never want to break up their marriage bond. Rukmani succeeds her marriage ties through her tolerant nature while Saru wins by giving up her dogmatic manner. Though the male chauvinists subscribe to the Biblical reference that woman has to play a subservient role as they are created from the rib of man by God, the protagonists - Rukmani and Sarita (Saru), prove themselves as the true images of tradition-bound women with the attributes such as submissiveness, gentleness and docility etc through their endurance and confidence by coming out of a man's rib and not from his feet to be walked on or not from his head to superior over but just from his side to be equal.

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