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SOCIETY AND ANGLES OF THE HOUSE: LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The hardest profession to take in life is being a girl child. Discrimination and discrepancy are two most important factors that hamper the journey of every female from the earliest stage of life. Starting from her presence into her mother's womb to infancy, childhood and finally to adulthood, she is outnumbered by the male dominating society of the country. Gender is a social and cultural construct. Socialization plays an important role in the construction of gender. Socialization is a very influential method. It has enormous power in moulding a girl's psyche. Its influence begins early in childhood. The novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Kashmira Sheth are the few Indian English women writers who have portrayed the girl child with deliberation. Notable among them being Saroja and Lalitha in Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins*, Raka in Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain*, Leela in Kasmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner*, Saru in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, Kalpana in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, Mira in Kamala Markanaya's *Some Inner Fury*, and Monisha in *Voices in the City*. There is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonists. The aim of my paper is to observe in these novels how the girls are treated in society. They are called the angles of the house but how society finds one or the other way to oppress them.

Key words: Patriarchy, Discrimination, gender equality, oppression, socialization,

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In literature the girl children are depicted to contain, withhold, conceal and suppress their real self. In literature the plight of girl children is shown by presenting them as subordinated, exploited, oppressed and as the victims of different violence. They are presented as the caged birds, trapped in patriarchal cultural values and paradigms. Patriarchal forces do not begin to operate upon a grown up woman alone. The forces intensify at the onset of puberty, the recognition of the beginning of womanhood. Society prescribes new codes and forms of conduct for the adolescence girl. The purpose behind this is to prepare her for her future role of a woman in a patriarchal society. The goal of

these forces is to enforce traditional, stereotyped role of woman on a girl's psyche from the very beginning of her life. These are the forces that actually build and form the psyche of a traditional woman. . M. Mani Metei says,

Childhood experience is of vital importance in the study of mind's behaviour, for that lies embedded in the individual consciousness as latent content that appears and reappears as drives and urges in the individual's unguarded moments. If the person is fully or partially under control of this aberrant mental process, he is subject to neurosis or hysteria, according to

the degree of the force of drama that is inside the mind. (76-77)

In our Indian society that is basically patriarchal, the female child is under the continuous observation of the parents. She is persistently trained for her would be master. It is taught to her that she should find her acceptable according to his expectations. The girl is taught that marriage is her greatest ambition and the ultimate goal. Traditional feminine virtues are enrooted in a girl child to make her fit for the marriage market. The principal desire of parents, particularly mothers is to mould the daughters to that single purpose of pleasing a male. From the childhood, a girl's life revolves around the tips of satisfying her husband. An archetypal image of woman cherished for ages has been the 'angel-in-the house' which Virginia Woolf has elaborated in the following manner:

Intensely sympathetic.....immensely charming, utter unselfish, excelled in the difficult arts of family life, sacrifice herself daily...In short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathies always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all... she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty... her blushes, her great grace. In those days... every house had its angel. (Woolf: 39)

Patriarchy accustoms certain ideas in women from childhood. Some of the conditions are as a family is divine, the woman is responsible for household responsibilities and she is just a wife at home. Society expects a woman to be obedient, humble and overflowing with love. Conditioning of female mind becomes essential as she communicates with the world through the institution called family and hence creating certain psychological images in her is necessary. Such conditioning in the male dominated society also screens her from understanding her subjugation. According to Jasbir Jain,

Women in fiction are cast in ready-made roles- of wives who need protection, of widows, who are rendered asexual- of women who stand in the shadows, who cook and sweep and cater to the male world. (79)

Apart from patriarchal codes and conduct imposed on them discrimination against female children has been a topic of debate. It has been a subject of concern and sociological significance. This subject raises the cultural aspects about the role of a female child in society, what her human rights are and the number of other sensitive issues. The issue is important because there is a nearly universal need for gender equality. Gender based discrimination against female children is pervasive across the world. As Simone De Beauvoir has said,

Because she is woman, the girl knows that the sea and the poles, a thousand adventures, a thousand joys are forbidden to her: she is born on the wrong side.(Beauvoir, 2011: 322)

There are different types in which society discriminate a girl. This partial behavior against girl child is enrooted in Indian society. In India boys are always preferred than girls. The girl child is brought up with the typical societal values imposed on her by patriarchal society. When she grows and comes in contact with the outer world, through education and marriage, she realizes herself as the victim of discrimination and becomes aware of her lack of identity. Gradually gender becomes a cultural construct, instead of biological distinction of men and women. And thus the characteristic features of behaviour are established in this belief of discrimination which is not acquired one, but inherited.

Traditionally, the work of Indian English women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space, and women's perceptions of their experience within it. In the 20th century, women's writing is considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements. The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writing of Indian English literature. Today is the generation of those women writers who have money and are mostly Western educated. They describe the whole world of women with simply stunning frankness.

The novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kashmiri Sheth believe that childhood experiences are lasting and that they have a crucial role to play in the formation of a healthy personality. Their novels reverberate with childhood imagery and experiences. A close study of their novels reveals that their girl characters had peculiar and uncommon childhood experiences. Through the girlhood of their girl characters these novelists show different facets of girlhood in India.

The novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Kashmiri Sheth are the few Indian English women writers who have portrayed the girl child with deliberation. These novelists have redeemed the gloomy situation by creating some memorable girl characters. Notable among them being Saroja and Lalitha in Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins*, Raka in Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain*, Leela in Kashmiri Sheth's *Keeping Corner*, Saru in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, Kalpana in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, Mira in Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, and Monisha in *Voices in the City*. There is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonists.

In *The Binding Vine* Shashi Deshpande shows the violent and repulsive picture of tyranny of society towards girls. Kalpana and Mira both are rape victims. Rape is a tool used by man to ruin the self confidence of a lively and energetic girl. Society compels a girl to be frightful and submissive. Rape of body makes a girl remember of her state in a male dominated society where a man wants to dominate a girl if not mentally than physically. As Andrinee Rich says:

It is not rape of the body alone but rape of the mind as well. The feeling of being victorious and gloating over the act makes the rapist even more detestable. (qtd. in Indira: 61)

In male-dominated society, men always find one or the other way to discourage girls or to prevent her being herself. Lalitha in *Two Virgins* also is a victim of rape. She goes through the dirty face of this modern age, where girls are used by men for their pleasure. She is left pregnant by Mr. Gupta. These works demonstrate that the patriarchal society finds

one or the other way to belittle girls. The novelists have presented many girls who are victims of various societal suppression.

Leela in *Keeping Corner* also is the victim of oppression. In the novel Kashmiri Sheth depicts the evils prevailing in India, called child marriage and child widowhood. Child marriage is another way to suppress a girl. A girl, when she is of an age of playing with her dolls and going to school, gets married. Girls like Leela become widow before going to her husband's place. Leela, a widow is ill-treated by the society. She is ignored and excluded from the rituals. She is believed to be the bringer of ill luck. Society tries to make a widow feel that she is inferior to everyone in the world and even a widow does not have confidence to face the challenges that she will come across as a widow.

Gender Discrimination is another hurdle that a girl passes through during her life span. Various types of bias are seen in the Indian society. Girl children are deprived of different opportunities. Indian society plays a role of hurdle in the healthy development of a girl as an individual. Kalpana, Mira (*The Binding Vine*) and Monisha are girls who could have done certain great things in their life if they are given equal opportunities. Sarita also is a victim of gender based discrimination. Though she is a doctor, the partiality shown by her mother in childhood, influences a lot in framing her psyche. The result of this distorted childhood is the sense of guilt, fear of rejection and her disability to set harmony in her other relations.

Raka in *Fire on The Mountain* is the victim of the vagueness of life in her short life span. Raka's childhood has motivated her to be isolated and autonomous, which is rarely found in a small child. Loneliness and privacy become essential part of her life. Raka's silent withdrawal is the upshot of her mother's anxiousness and her father's brutal behaviour. Raka has had no bliss of parental affection. Raka's silence and solitude is the expression of her revolt against the societal norms. Raka tries to conceal her strong longing for love and concern. Her act at the end of the novel of burning the forest is certainly a violent expression of her frustrations. In this respect it has been pointed out by Shantha Krishnaswamy,

Her [Raka's] childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now a young girl up here in the mountains...her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting. 'I don't care, I don't care anything.' (Desai: 73) The conventional sweet smells and sounds of girlhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fire tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen edged explosive to set fire to the mountainside. (261-262)

In *Two Virgins* Kamala Markandaya attempts a study of the basic dilemma of the teenager girls in modern India. These girls want to escape from the world of rigid adult control, from the rustic frontier into a wilder world of luxurious life, glamour and pleasure. In *Two Virgins* Saroja represents the concept of didactic girlhood. Saroja stands in rich contrast to her sister Lalitha. Kamala Markandaya shows how two sisters born and brought up in a similar environment and share similar background, have opposite beliefs. As Alice Drum points out:

It is the economic difficulties that create problems in the later novel (*Two Virgins*) but the difficulty of growing up in a complex society where new ways encroach upon the old and create new conflicts, especially for the young who have not elected one set of values or another. Young Indian villagers like Saroja are confronted daily with the erosion of traditional values, the ascendancy of Western technology, changing roles for the family and society's increasing control over the individual. (124)

Family is the chief institution to provide the girl child with space and opportunity to grow and develop into healthy adults. On the other hand damaging home conditions can exert a paralysing effect on the girl child. Saru and Monisha both are deprived of love in their girlhood. In the formation of one's character and value structure childhood plays an important role. Childhood experiences and atmosphere form one's personality. The innocent child is like a little plant which is shaped and moulded the way it is nurtured. If it is well nurtured,

then it turns into a confident, fearless and healthy grown up human being, but if it is not nurtured well it turns into an immature, fearful character that cannot face the challenges in life. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reveals the protagonist Saru's life, showing how because of her distressed childhood, she cannot establish and sustain healthy relationship with her husband and children in later life. Saru is a victim of childhood grooming and is an example of how the girl is marginalized and how she ultimately fails because of her childhood grooming and indoctrination. Saru is epitome of girls, who are rejected, alienated and discriminated.

In this novel Deshpande's focus is on the role and significance of family in shaping the psyche and attitudes of an individual towards self, society and life in general. Willful discrimination and disastrous girlhood of Sarita is responsible for her feelings of fear, loneliness, bewilderment and a sense of insecurity. Thus, the impact of family member's behaviour on the psyche of the child is the strongest one in her formative years. A pernicious home environment becomes the cause of psychological distortion and a girl like Sarita faces many problems in establishing relationships and in adjusting to societal norms. Shashi Deshpande has very artistically depicted these realities of the life of a girl, how discrimination against girl causes serious damages to her psyche, influencing her life not only as a daughter but also as a wife and a mother.

Monisha in *Voices in The City* is a typical example of girls who are deprived of love and care. Her parents are indifferent towards her. Often girls like Monisha are pushed into marriage without proper inquiry, never taking the girl's interest into account because, marrying off a girl in proper time is often just a matter of prestige. Tried after her long struggle for selfhood in Jiban's home, Monisha burns herself. Such unwanted girls develop a sense of loneliness and rejection and carry that into their marriage. As R.K. Gupta remarks:

Monisha's plight depicts not only her individual state but also the state of so many daughter-in-laws who become jail birds in the house of their husbands. Even husbands fail to understand and

communicate with them because of their father's or mother's domination. (96)

After the study of girlhood presented in the novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kashmiri Sheth it has been found that the plight of a girl and treatment given to her by the family and society is similar in all classes. Be it a higher class, higher middle class, middle class, or lower class. Girls born in any class or caste do not enjoy freedom. The girl protagonists presented in the selected novels belong to different classes. Mira (*Some Inner Fury*) belongs to rich class, Leela and Raka are from the higher middle class, Lalitha, Saroja, Premala, Sarita, Monisha, Mira (*The Binding Vine*) are from the middle class and Kalpana is from a lower class. In each class the condition of girls remains the same. Class or caste does not make much difference in the treatment given to girls. The problems they face may be different, but they have to face the challenges of patriarchal society in the same way.

This gender sensitivity can be observed in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Kashmiri Sheth. The role of girls is significant in the human world from the ancient time not only as a human being but also as an inseparable entity to take the mankind ahead with the time. She contributes to make progress in the family, society as well as a country through her active participation same as the male counterpart. As Lipkin has said:

...keeping a girl from school has long ranging impact on her ability to provide for her present and future family, on the economic growth of her society and even country, on gender balancing as girls move into more positions of power and influence, and on her sense of self worth. (198)

Through the girl protagonists like these novelists put emphasis on the different ways used by the society to tyrannize a girl. The medium used to suppress all these female children is different in each instance. In India girls are waiting for such a time when girls from all classes are provided with equal opportunities, freedom of choice and chance to flourish like free birds. They don't want a society where, " One Indira Gandhi in charge of the nation

and a country full of women not allowed to take charge of their own lives."(*The Binding Vine*: 38)

Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Kashmiri Sheth and Shashi Deshpande, as modernists pinpoint that, for the new self-concept to emerge girls' psychological needs have to be fulfilled. The preconditions necessary for the satisfaction of these needs include the freedom to speak, freedom of action, freedom to express oneself, freedom to seek information and freedom to move around without fear. Only an impartial and robust society can provide fulfilment of these needs. It nearly sounds like a utopian concept in the case of Indian girls. Then what are the ways open to a girl to achieve wholeness? If the preconditions are highly imbalanced, how can a girl satisfy her psychological needs? How can she achieve an identity of her own? What is it that will give her a voice and an image of her own? These are the questions that are being debated, evaluated, subtly and partly in the novels of Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Kashmiri Sheth and Shashi Deshpande. All these novelists have definite answers. But they do not become didactic nor assume the position of social reformists. They present girls' life in its infinite variety, exposing the darker and brighter sides of existence.

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