

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 11, November 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Challenging Masculinity in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and Shashi

Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*.

Abstract: The paper reads two contemporary African and Indian novels of Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande from the perspective of feminism and masculinity. It studies the portrayal of women protagonists and the representation of masculinities exhibited by the male characters in each novel. The women protagonists overshadow their male partners in terms of academic excellence, social recognition and financial stability. The paper finds out that these characters are in complete opposition to the typical traditional concept of being a man, the head or the breadwinner of their family. These male characters are in juxtaposition of the hegemonic masculinity which are representative of the patriarchal society and occupy

the position of the 'other' from the writers' perspectives. The present paper is also an attempt by the two novelists to show and prove that gender should not be an obstacle and the whole patriarchal set up can be dismantled by the empowered female characters, thereby, occupying the centre, rather than playing the second fiddle in the family. Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande challenge the stereotypical role of man as the authoritative head of the family who is solely responsible for decision making in the family while relegating the woman to the periphery.

Keywords: feminism, masculinity, patriarchy, tradition, women

I. INTRODUCTION

Changing Nature of Masculinity:

Since time immemorial, man has been the provider and protector of his family. He acts as the supreme head of his family and has been in charge for the welfare of his family and the society at large. Women and children have been his followers on whom he exercises his authority. In every patriarchal society, man is at the centre of power and action. His decisions are treated with utmost respect and cannot be questioned. In the patriarchal society, woman is second to man. Simone de Beauvoir in her famous text *The Second Sex* (1949) truly opines that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 273). According to her, the society made woman the second sex of man. It is ironical that while man is getting to define as the whole, the complete human being the woman is defined not by her individuality but in relation to man. She is identified as the wife, the mother and the

daughter of male members of her family in the patriarchal set up. To further quote Simone de Beauvoir in this context:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute-she is the other. (p.16)

The social institution of marriage brings forth the performance of work based on sexual division of labor. George P. Murdoch (1973) affirms that ‘sexual division of labor’ is “the most fundamental basis of marriage and the family and hence the ultimate source of all forms of kinship organization” (p. 203). In other words, marriage assigns the duties of a husband and wife as per their gender such as the husband is expected to perform works which demand more physical strength and fulfill the social role of being the head of the family while the wife’s duties are to perform household chores and bear children. As society is in a constant state of change, the position of power play also changes. Feminism has enlightened women to voice their rights in the women-oppressive society. In other words, women uphold the notion of equality with men in every field. This also implies to the concept of equal ‘sexual division of labor’. The role of women and their contributions towards the society is one of such changes brought by the postmodern and post-colonial era. Women share equal space in the work front as well as in running their families. Feminism has led to the contestation of the traditional concept of gender, sexual division of labor and their roles in marriage. The women-centered movement has helped women to rethink about themselves and their positions in the male dominated society. Women challenge the patriarchal doctrines which have led to the discussion of hegemonic gender working in favor

of men. With this philosophy, the feminist discourse is a challenge to the ideal representations of masculinities by women writers. In the African context, the Nigerian critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi defines Black womanism, African feminism, as:

a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood. (p.72)

According to the Australian sociologist, Robert W. Connell (2005), there are a variety of masculinities and femininities, and that “masculinities are configurations of practice structured by gender relations,” which means that masculinity exists only in relation to femininity. He argues that masculinity is a part of “the process of relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives” (p. 71). He concludes:

. . . masculinity, to the extent that the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture. (p. 71).

T. W. Reeser, in his book *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (2010), provides a groundbreaking introduction to the study of masculinity. What Reeser tries to state is that masculinity is not fixed but ever-changing in nature. It can be stated here that masculinity does not always mean dominance over women physically or psychologically but also silent acceptance of women’s attributes, contributions and achievements. The silent action hints to the loss of manhood in the real sense. Suraj Gunwant and Rashmi Gaur (2016) point out that

loss of manhood is due to the “diversion from the sex role or stereotype” (p. 194) assigned by the society. The post-colonial women writers of twentieth century such as Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande interpret the changing nature of masculinity inherent in their male characters. The writers contest the concept of ‘masculinity’ in their women-centric novels *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) and *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980).

Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017), the then Nigerian-British novelist echo her own experiences and reflects the place and people connected with them in her novels. Her second novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) chronicles the life of the woman protagonist Adah Obi. The novel reflects the discrimination of a black woman based on her gender and race in the traditional African patriarchal society as well as in the highly racist country of the time- the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938) is a contemporary prolific woman writer from India. In her writings Deshpande focuses on the inner psyche of Indian women. Generally, her women characters are quite vocal at times to assert their individuality in the patriarchal structures and are desperately trying to find their own identity within the marauding forces of marriage. Her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) portrays the inner self of the protagonist, Sarita. The novel depicts the contradiction of life before and after marriage caused by the silent patriarchal dominance of her husband. The paper is an attempt to study and contrast the depiction of masculinity exhibited by the male characters and the privileges sanctioned to man by the African and Indian cultures.

Social Rejection in Childhood for being born a ‘Girl’:

In the novels, *Second-Class Citizen* (SCC) and *The Dark Holds No Terror* (TDHNT), Emecheta and Deshpande highlight the social rejection of girl children for being

born as 'girls'. Emecheta's protagonist Adah Obi's birthday date is not remembered by her parents, her immediate family and her Igbo tribe because "She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy." (SCC, p. 1). Deshpande's central character Sarita (Saru) too was born when her society was expecting a boy. Hence her birthday is neglected by her parents. The unreceptive nature of the births of girl children reflects the traditional African patriarchal society and the Indian patriarchal society which place high premium on male children. It can be stated that from early childhood, the society shapes certain male preferred qualities over female which in turn result in the celebration of masculinity as the standard and stronger quality over femininity. The social rejection of both Adah and Saru in their society leads to a graver rejection or negligence by their own family. They are often compared with their male siblings to highlight their value. In terms of education, Adah's brother Boy is preferred by her parents while she learns for a few more year at school so that "she can write her name and count. Then she will learn how to sew." (SCC, p. 3). In Deshpande's novel also such gender based discrimination during childhood is apparent. Saru's mother warns her for going in the sunlight and links her skin color with her prospect of marriage. Saru's mother believes in the typical social concept that fairer women are generally preferred for marriage more than the dark-skinned women. Saru's mother warns her but is unperturbed towards her brother Dhruva:

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. (TDHNT, p. 45)

It can be noted that Saru's equation with her mother worsens after the death of her brother Dhruva. Her mother blames Saru for the negligence that caused Dhruva's death. Deshpande depicts the inferior position of a girl child compared to a boy child in the Indian society and the mindset of typical Indian mother in whose heart and mind the son is dearer than the daughter. Y. S. Sunita Reddy (2001) truly states in this context:

Saru's mother's attitude is typical of most Indian mother and a common enough phenomenon in the Indian context. (p. 51)

'Ideal' marriage and the 'Real' marriage consequences:

It can be seen in both the novels that marriage takes place to fulfill certain wishes and dreams of the protagonists. Adah Obi marries Francis, an account student, out of compulsion since she has no place to live after her father's death and her mother inherited by her paternal uncle. In the traditional Igbo society, no girl was allowed to live all by herself. With marriage, she secures herself a house for her stay and a means to visit London, her dreamland. Saru, on the other hand, marries Manohar (Manu) to hurt her mother who was against the marriage to a lower caste man as they belonged to a devout Hindu Brahmin family. Saru uses marriage to avenge for all the hatred and ill-treatment towards her. Emecheta and Deshpande show that Adah's and Saru's early part of marriage were sailing

smooth. However, their happiness was short-lived. Friction rises in their marriages due to their husbands' masculinities. Francis feels that since he is studying while his wife working, his colleagues will laugh at him. Francis feels the societal pressure and mockery over having a wife and earns while he only studies. But, Francis' insecurity is shunned by his father saying:

Let her go and work for a million Americans and bring their money here, into this house. It is your luck. You made a good choice in marriage, son. (SCC, p. 20)

Francis' father's flattering comments on marrying an 'earning wife' imply that Francis can sit and enjoy without any worry. Later in the novel, Francis is delighted to escort his wife with her 'fantastic sum' of salary. He declares:

'We are ahead of all our colleagues, you know'. (SCC, p. 21)

The notion of masculinity is inherent in Emecheta's novel when men like Francis' Pa and Francis get to decide for their family marginalizing their women. The superiority of masculinity is emphasized and witnessed in the form of decision-making of Francis' family by his Pa. Pa's decision of sending Francis alone in London for study is one of the traits of hegemonic masculinity. Pa's firm decision and acceptance of the decision by both Francis and Adah reflects his superior authority in his family. Francis explains the reason for Pa's decision:

Father does not approve of women going to the UK. But you see, you will pay for me, and look after yourself, and within three years, I'll be back.

Father said you're earning more than most people who have been to England. Why lose your good job just to go and see London? They say it is just like Lagos. (SCC, p. 24)

Emecheta's portrays harsh reality of marriage in which African women like Adah suffer from husband-wife relationship and the burden of bearing many children. Helen Chukwuma (1999) opines that:

Modern African women's works do not show the romantic aspects of marriage. They rather portray the stresses and problems aimed at sensitizing women to harsh reality. (p.82)

In Deshpande's novel, Saru's marital relationship with her husband Manu brings out the concept of masculinity in the modern Indian society. Earlier, Saru considers herself lucky to have married the man of her choice. She believes that Manu is the rescuer of Saru from her dominating mother and unappreciative family. She marries Manu in order to escape from the unloving environment and reclaim the lost parental love in the form of love between a husband and a wife. However, she soon realizes that happiness is temporary. Saru gains popularity in her locality due to her medical dedications to the nearby local patients. This social recognition generates a sense of inferiority complex and jealousy in Manu. Her success as a reputed doctor becomes the cause of her strained marital relation with her husband. She voices the difference of her past and her present life:

He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (TDHNT, p. 42)

On the other hand, Manu feels insecure with his wife's success. Saru's rise in social and financial status, after she sets up her own practice in a posh area through her boss Boozie's help, in contrast to Manu's status of an underpaid lecturer sets in great discomfort in their marital relationship. As Saru grew in social esteem and became the main economic support of the family, Manu's behavior began to change. This change of attitude causes Manu sink below the level of a hegemonic masculinity. A tactless remark of one of Saru's friends further hurt Manu's ego. She asks:

How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but the bread as well? (TDHNT, p.35)

Deshpande's views are echoed by Saru's comments on the husband-wife difference in social, physical, professional and financial status. Deshpande presents Manu's characters simply to dwarf the age old tradition that man is the sole provider in the family and woman is the only receiver. Deshpande tries to project women characters who can eclipse the personality of their male counterparts by their lustrous academic career and profession or in short strong and independent female characters who can engineer their own fate and destiny. Manu resists the idea of Saru giving up on her job. When Saru insists on giving up on her job, Manu questions:

‘And how will we live?’ . . .

‘On my salary? Come on, Saru, don't be silly. You know how much I earn. You think we can live this way on that? . . .

‘Can you bear to send the children to a third-rate school? To buy them the cheapest clothes, the cheapest of everything? To save and scrape and still

have nothing after the first few days of the month? No, Saru, there can be no going back. We have to go on.' (p. 81)

Manu is aware that the comforts which his family enjoy mainly come from Saru's salary. He too enjoys the high perks fetched by Saru's profession and still tries to avenge for the hurt ego unconsciously at night. What Deshpande tries to reflect here is that though man is by nature the provider of a family in patriarchal society, woman can also contribute equally and meaningfully in building up their family not as competitors rather as equal partners. David D. Gilmore (1990) hints for a changing nature of masculinities in a changing society:

Male ideology (manliness) is a symbolic script, a cultural construct, endlessly variable and not always necessary. (p. 230)

So, it is not necessary for a man to possess all the values and characteristics which are considered superior to woman. Deshpande tries to suggest that the assigned values of masculinity need to be reconsidered and change from time to time.

Marital Rape as a Symbol of Hegemonic Masculinity:

'Sex' as a marital right is apparent in the novels. Francis and Manohar see that sexual domination over their wives is one of the ways to dominate over them. Their sexual dominancy shows that they are able to exercise their masculinity at the fullest. Emecheta's male character Francis sees marriage as a legitimate outlet for satisfying his carnal desire. Their first sexual intimacy experienced in London is described by Emecheta as follows:

They made it up that night, forgetting, in the intense disappointment and loneliness which was fast descending upon them like a gloomy cloud, that they were not supposed to have more children for some time. . . . But how could she protest to a man who was past reasoning? The whole process was an attack, as savage as that of any animal. (SCC, pp. 38-38)

Emecheta has connoted Francis' sexual act similar to those of 'animal' without any human feeling because for Francis, "marriage was sex and lots of it, nothing more." (SCC, p. 45).

Emecheta depicts Francis' stubborn mindset:

He had been used to being worked for, by a woman he knew belonged to him by right. (SCC, p. 174)

Francis even goes to the extent of hunting for willing women at night when Adah is unwell with frequent pregnancies. Adah encourages as it will at least give her some peaceful nights. Oha Obododimma (1996) terms Francis-Adah's relationship as those of a 'master-slave relationship'. Oha states:

Adah, as the female "slave", has to toil to feed her "master" and also endure his uncontrollable sexual aggression. The master-slave relationship also makes it almost impossible for Adah's voice to be heard in the home, since voice and power are synonymous to a male chauvinist like Francis. Above all, as in the slave tradition, Adah once in a while receives a series of beatings from her "master". (p. 293)

It can be argued here that Francis exercises the authority to dominate his wife and behave like her master. This authority is lent to Francis by patriarchy which allows him to show his masculine superiority over Adah's helplessness as a woman.

On the same note, a psychologically hurt Manu tries to regain his lost manhood by assaulting his wife at night. A low esteem Manu becomes a sadist every night. Saru cries out:

He attacked me like an animal that night. I was sleeping and woke up and there was this. . . this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth his whole body. . . I could do nothing against him. I couldn't fight back. I could not shout or cry, I was so afraid the children in the next room would hear. I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure. (TDHNT, p. 201)

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) describes the relationship of men and women as 'sexual politics' which she defines as "power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (p. 23). By sexually dominating Saru, Manohar enjoys the superiority sanctioned by patriarchy in their marriage. The husband-wife relationship changes into the master-slave relationship in which the direction of control is always from the master to the slave. Manohar's masculinity suppresses Saru's femininity despite the fact that she is way ahead of him professionally and socially. Manohar balances his hurt ego of daytime with his sadistic behavior at night. The routine follows every night and there is no escape for Saru. Deshpande depicts that the wife in the context of Indian society is still bound to her husband for good or for worse. But in the case of Saru, it was for the worse.

Breaking the Silence: Empowering Self

In both the novels of Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande, the female protagonists, Adah and Saru, try to challenge the cultural and traditional norms which treat women as meek, passive, subordinate and inferior. This kind of stigma is deeply ingrained in our social and cultural norms and set up so much so that women can come out from this grip and that they become torchbearer and trailblazer and create a niche for themselves and be classic example to others. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah realizes at the end of the novel that her life with her abusive husband will no longer work so she files for divorce and wins the custody of her children even though Francis believes in the law of his land and culture:

In our country, and among our people, there is nothing like divorce or separation. Once a man's wife, always a man's wife until you die. You cannot escape. You are bound to him. (SCC, p. 182-183)

Adah replies in 'loud' and 'clear' voice to the Magistrate in the court and takes the lone charge of taking care of her children. Adah's confidence in taking the responsibility of her children shows that she is strong enough to take care of her children thus subverting the parochial masculinity of Francis. Her statements mark her confidence:

Don't worry, sir. The children are mine, and that is enough. I shall never let them down as long as I am alive. (SCC, p. 185)

Adah's empowerment to challenge Francis comes from various sources in the text. Her education, financial stability, children, sisterhood with her other co-working staffs and most importantly her will and self-determination to become a writer push her to choose a life free from suffering than to struggle silently in her meaningless marriage. Finally, Adah is free from Francis' torture and exploitation. Lisa H. Iyer (1996) states on Adah's evolution as an empowered woman in the novel:

Ultimately she is able to envision herself as a whole woman without a man by her side, and the fact that Francis is a sorry excuse for a husband presumably makes her task easier. Adah emerges from her trials a prouder and wiser woman, potentially a *mélange* of progressive African and Western cultural modes, increasingly free from the reactionary baggage of both cultures, and embarking on a journey of transcendence and self-definition. (p. 132)

Similarly, the evolution of empowered woman can be seen in Saru also. She comes back to her paternal home to seek solace and inner peace for herself. Because at her paternal home, she is free from her sadistic husband. Earlier, Saru told her father not to open their door to Manohar if he comes to take her home. She repeatedly asked her father to 'promise' her not to open the door. Saru was just scared to face Manohar and to go back to the dark part of her life. It is through her father's wisdom and words that Saru is finally enlightened of the real situations. Saru realizes the importance of strengthening her inner will to overcome the traumas of her marital relationship and her various extra-marital affairs. She finds that

'escape' is not the solution to her myriad problems of life and thus takes charge of facing them boldly. She tells her father:

And, oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can. (TDHNT, p. 221)

Deshpande's novel suggests the notion of discovering the self for inner peace and contentment through the epigraph written from The Dhammapada at the very beginning of the novel:

You are your own refuge:

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

In the context of the modern society, the meaning of marriage for women is also changing from the domestic space to sharing the egalitarian working space. Susan Arndt (2002) truly states that women whether married or unmarried "should be able to realize and define themselves beyond wifhood and motherhood." (p. 72). And this impression can truly be seen in both Adah and Saru.

Conclusion:

The plight of the African and Indian women is pertinently captured by Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande in each novel. These two women writers have made

significant stride in attempting to redefine the role of women in literature. The writers try to map the existing inequalities of men and women based on their gender in modern societies which begins from birth itself. The writers have been greatly influenced by the western feminism. However, they endorse their own brands of feminism to suit their plight. The writers had work upon the inner psyches of their women protagonists to contradict the ideal from the real characteristics of men in the changing society. The realization is in complete opposition to their expectations. Francis and Manohar are represented as possessing marginalized masculine characteristics and deviate from the patriarchal stereotypical image of male as the stronger gender though they try to retain their masculine power through sexual dominations. They resign from the role of breadwinners to their wives. They represent the passive nature that is supposed to be the woman's bent from patriarchal point of view.

Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande not only contest the masculine and patriarchal values, they also dream about new literary models of manhood who are more relational and sensitive. Through the analysis of the male characters in each novel, the paper offers a new understanding of the African and Indian women's' attitude towards their male partners in the fictional works of Buchi Emecheta and Shashi Deshpande. The study has examined the notion of masculinity through the reading of the two texts. The paper finds that men are known mainly through their relationship with women. The authors portray the male characters in diminutive way. They also suggest qualities which are admirable in men. The writers draw their stories from a series of experience which is partly universal to all women to create such male characters. In the words of Jane Miller (1986), the writers offer "an outsider's vision of s culture" (p. 3) by portraying the male characters from their perspectives. In order to cope with the masculinity the protagonists challenge the patriarchal

power structure. They empower themselves through education, self-determination and enlightenment. By subverting the traditional patriarchal norms the writers challenge the masculinity inherent in their novels.

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