

Women Oppression as a Result of Male Dominated Culture as Represented in Shenoy's Novel '*The Secret Wish List*'

Ratna Dwi Astuti^{1*}, Nurdien Harry Kistanto²

¹Master of Literature, Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

²Master of Literature, Diponegoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

Abstract. Oppression is the name of social injustice. It is perpetuated through social institutions, practices, and norms on the social group by social group. Indian society belongs to the man since a long time ago Indian woman has been given a secondary and inferior position in family and society. She has faced injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation, and exploitation in a male-dominated Indian society. It has been worst because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This study describes how male domination and woman's oppression is experienced by an Indian woman and its explanation to what extent women reject male domination represented in *The Secret Wish List* novel by Preeti Shenoy. The method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative study and uses Derrida's theory of deconstruction to support the data. The main theory used in this study is Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Existentialist Feminism. This study shows that the novel deconstructs its portrayal of male domination towards women. So, by destabilizing the binary opposition in the novel, that are males oppose females, the males-females hierarchy are reversed.

1 INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy has been one of the major causes of women's oppression and exploitation. Male power is exerted directly or indirectly in domestic and social life to constrain the female. The social role assigned to women is that of serving the image of man. Women are required to shoulder all the domestic responsibilities, and they are kept busy with cleaning, cooking, washing, and child-bearing roles. They are given just the status of sex partners. She continues to face injustice, humiliation, torture, harassment, suppression, oppression, subjugation, and exploitation in the name of gender distinction and patriarchy [1].

The Secret Wish List is a novel written by Preeti Shenoy (2012) [2]. The story is about a woman whom her husband oppresses. This novel shows how an Indian woman lives under a man's control in a patriarchal society. The end of the story tells that woman could rebel to show that they could have power, voice, and the right to live their lives and the men. The purpose of the rebellion is for telling that she does exist.

*Corresponding Author: ratnadwi1604@gmail.com

Those things are connected that women are described as "nature", which is characterized by passive, statistical, permissive, and domestic things [3]. It is as if women deserve and naturally accept all the treatment of violence against themselves by men. It makes women feel oppressed and constrained by male-dominated culture.

In her book *Feminist Thought*, Simone De Beauvoir explains from the ontological-existential side of the oppression against women caused by her otherness. For a long time, women have been considered the Other by men. In the system that supports them, women are positioned as objects that are considered unable to determine the meaning of their existence. Therefore, according to Beauvoir, if women want to be Subjects of themselves, women should make themselves what they want [4]. Thus, Beauvoir tries to put women in their real position as a woman who has a will as evidence of her existence. It is no longer The Other, whose existence is only seen as an object of oppression as the "enemy" for men and culture are inseparable, together with makeup life. This study has purposed to explain women oppression as the impact of male-dominated culture reflected in Shenoy's *The Secret Wish List*.

2 METHOD

The writer uses a descriptive method in reporting the result of the data analysis. The descriptive method looks into literary works by analyzing descriptively, interpreting the existing data, and categorizing the selected data [5]. The data is analyzed by applying Beauvoir's theory of Existentialist Feminism.

The data would be the evidence of the sentences showing women oppression due to the male-dominated culture in India. The material object of this study is Preeti Shenoy's novel entitled *The Secret Wish List*, which contains a hundred and thirty-five pages, written in 2012. Its formal object is the study of Shenoy's novel concerning binary opposition, meaning, and relations, which depicted the deconstruction showing the oppression of women and male domination experienced by the woman against the patriarchal culture that leads her to the rebellion to show her existence. Some procedures take the data analysis: (1) finding and describing woman oppression based on a novel (2) making the binary opposition (3) explaining the woman's rejection of male domination to show their existence based on Beauvoir's Theory of Existentialist Feminism.

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Describe the Woman Oppression as Reflected in *The Secret Wish List*

Diksha has been facing oppression from her husband. The oppression could be seen from the way Diksha is being forced to be such a dutiful wife, as in the passage below;

"I feel trapped with Sandeep. Vibha's words hammers into my brain. But I still do not want her to see my pain. After all, she is leading the life she wants. She has a job she enjoys, has good help at home, is independent and smart, everything I am not. So I turn away and busy myself doing the dishes. I am not entirely happy in my marriage." [2].

"I have, over the years, slowly but surely turned into a maidservant and cook. Sandeep and Abhay do take me for granted. But the fact is, that a part of me feels useful too, doing all this. It gives me a sense of purpose, a sense of 'doing something, as though justifying my existence [2].

“I know I am only fooling myself by pretending to be extremely happy cooking and caring for Sandeep and Abhay.” [2].

“I am conditioned to wait on Sandeep and Abhay and serve them day and night. I hate my life as I dully hand over the cup of tea to Sandeep.” [2].

The utterances above show Diksha is not happy being a dutiful wife. Diksha was a clever and open-minded when she was a teenager. After married, everything is changed. Diksha is always at home to take care of the house and raising the kids while her husband becomes the breadwinners. As the breadwinners, it makes the husband has the power to control his wife. Diksha find it is difficult to achieve what she wants. It is always the husband's wants that come first. She wanted to have a job, hang out with her friends and family, being loved and appreciated by her husband. That is why Diksha feels like, her existence is only to be her husband's maid not as the one whom he loves. As an Indian wife, Diksha could not complain, having a discussion, or even talk to her husband about her problems or the difficulty of her marital life. It can be seen in the passage below;

“I cannot bring myself to talk to him about this. He is not a new-age metrosexual. Ours is a conventional Indian marriage. And good Indian wives don't do things like that” [2].

“I want some conversation, some understanding from his end. I feel like telling him, I need to talk and I want him to listen. But, I say nothing” [2].

Every time they have a discussion, it will end in a fight. Sandeep never gives Diksha appreciation or even gives her a chance to talk about what she wants. Communication is all matter in marital life, but Sandeep never wants to have a good discussion. The husband thinks that he is always right, so the conversation is not mattered at all. The wife's voice is never be heard, because she is the inferior one who needs to follow her husband's rule and whatever he asked. The husband as the superior one has a lot of rules for his wife. It can be seen in the passage below;

“I am married to an extremely conventional man and have led a sheltered, protected life. I have never had alcohol, never gone on a vacation alone, and never worn a bikin”. I, on the other hand, have never gone anywhere without the family. I have always dressed conservatively [2].

“I mostly have only *salwar kameezes*. I own just two pairs of jeans and one pair of tights. Sandeep hates any kind of modern fancy clothes” [2].

“I have never gone out with my women friends, leaving my husband and child at home. It would probably sound archaic to her. How can I explain to her that I still take Sandeep's 'permission to travel anywhere?' [2]

There is no freedom to choose what she wants to do, what she wants to wear, and where she wants to go. Those things give Diksha difficulty to enjoy her life and achieve her dreams. The existence of Diksha is only to be a good housewife for her husband and a good mother for her son. Diksha sacrifices her happiness to her husband and son. Instead of getting an appreciation by following the rules the husband made, Diksha experience abuse by her husband. It can be seen from the passage below;

“You stupid girl. What were you thinking? Sex in the moonlight? You fucking slut,” he spits out the words [2].

Ma, everyone is acting like we had sex or something,’ I say and at that moment my father steps forward and slaps me hard across my face [2].

If he is in the mood for sex, he initiates it. There is no foreplay, no conversation, no sweet-talk. He claims it like it is his right. He reaches straight for my breasts and I can predict exactly what he will do next. For society was as conscious of women's rights as they were in the West, what Sandeep did would probably be construed as marital rape. But, here in India, where people hush up even rape and do not speak about it, how do things like 'marital rape' even stand a chance to be discussed. The fact is, I hate sex with Sandeep. But I do my duty as a wife [2].

This time the love-making is animalistic, rough, and savage. It is as though he wants to punish me and claim his ownership of me. He does not even notice that I am crying and sobbing as he thrusts and thrusts [2].

A husband is a leader in the family. Instead of giving his wife protection and affection, Sandeep always makes his wife sad by saying meaningful words and actions. What Sandeep does is totally wrong. Being the superior makes Sandeep think he could do whatever he wants. He does verbal abuse to his wife which is causing his wife emotional harm and he never asks his wife whether she wants to do sex or not. It belongs to marital rape. The fact is, by married a woman, means the husband has the right to do whatever he wants to do with or without her permission. The reason why women are oppressed is that their existence is ignored and she just seen as The Other.

3.2 The Binary Opposition

As the main character, Diksha's characterization at the beginning of the story seems so weak. Time by time, she thinks that she needs to stand up for herself to achieve what she wants and show that her existence is not to be oppressed but to stand for herself. That is why there is binary opposition, such as weak and strong, voiceless and voiced, ruled and ruling. In the beginning, the novel tells that Diksha is a weak character that is always oppressed, has no voice, and is ruled by her husband. However, at the end of the story, time changes. The new Diksha comes. She is being strong, voiced, and ruling her own life.

3.3 The Woman's Rejection of Male Domination to Show Her Existence Based on Beauvoir's Theory of Existentialist Feminism

The use of Beauvoir's theory is to explain the way woman reject her Otherness as the impact of male domination and to show her existence. The first is that woman can have dreams and follow what she wants. It can be seen from the passage below;

"When I am done, my list looks like this: 1. Take a vacation alone, without family, but with a friend; 2. Go snorkeling; 3. Get drunk; 4. Learn salsa; 5. Wear a bikini; 6. Have sex with a guy other than husband, just to know what it feels like!" [2]

The woman broke the rules the man's made. Breaking the rules the man's made is the way to show her existence, that she does not want to be oppressed anymore by the man. As in the passage below;

"See, I wear what I like. And, honestly, I do think it is every woman's right to dress up in the clothes she likes. Not the clothes that her husband or in-laws think are appropriate for her" [2].

"Hmm. What if I get drunk?" I say to Tanu. I take a sip and it is not sweet. Yet it is not bitter. "It is nothing like I have ever tasted before" [2].

"It is about time I started living my life, doing what I want to do [2].

The woman is not weak and realized she needs to stand herself. She knew she has right to live her own life and follow what she wants as equal as a man. She has a right to be happy. The woman finally could be able to decide what she wants to do and make such a big decision, as can be seen in the passage below;

"I do want to end this marriage now." [2].

The quotation above shows that she defied her limits, she breaks the definition that women were considered weak and unequal to men. To achieve her dream, she dares to divorce her husband because she is getting tired of being oppressed and ruled by husband who has never seen her existence as the loved one. The worst thing is even the woman break the rule and norm by cheating and committed adultery, as stated in the passage below;

“I am amazed at how easily I have slipped and committed adultery and gone from being a ‘good housewife’ into a ‘cheating adulterous spouse.’ I don’t even feel guilty. I wonder where my conscience has vanished” [2].

“No, I am fully aware of it. I have never neglected my duties as a wife or as a mother. I have done everything for you these last fifteen years. I have been your subservient, faithful wife who has kept house and raised a child. You have never once appreciated or even noticed me. Have you once spoken a kind word to me? Have you ever told me I look beautiful? Have you ever thought of what I might like and enjoy? You have always made decisions for me and you have presumed I am happy. It is you who forgot that a mother and a wife are also a woman and a human being, just like everyone else, and deserve to be treated right” [2].

The last is about final decision the woman’s made. Her existence is not seen and she never gets appreciation and affection for what she does from the husband. It leads her to a rebellion. The woman needs affection, appreciation, and freedom to live her own life. That is why she made her own decision to show her existence by breaking the rules. She had an affair and want to divorce her conventional husband. She wants to be free from oppression.

4 CONCLUSION

The woman struggles a lot to let herself free from oppression. The oppression comes from the husband who has control in any aspect of his wife’s life, such as; 1. to force his wife for being such a dutiful wife, 2. could not complain, having a discussion or even talk to her husband about her problems or the difficulty of her marital life, 3. ruling how wife’s wear, not let his wife has another life (can not dance and can not hang out with friends), 4. abusing his wife verbally, mentally, and physically. Those things are the problems that the woman faced. Time by time, the woman realized that she should stand for herself. Finally, the woman breaks the rules man-made to show her existence. She shows that she is strong, voiced, and ruling. The male domination leads the woman to a freedom gate. The woman does not want to be oppressed anymore. She wants to be the subject of herself by standing up for what she wants and what she decides—not being the inferior one or the Other.

References

1. Sawant, Tukaram S. (2016). Place of the Woman in Indian Society: *A Brief Review*, 21(9), 21-25. Retrieved from: DOI: 10.9790/0837-2109082125
2. Shenoy, Preeti. 2012. *The Secret Wishlist*. Westland Ltd.
3. Beauvoir, Simone de. 2003. *Second Sex : Fakta dan Mitos*. Surabaya : Pustaka Promothea.
4. Tong, Rosemarie Putnam, 2004. *Feminist Thought : Pengantar Paling Komprehensif kepada Arus Utama Pemikiran Feminis*. Bandung : Jalasutra.
5. Endraswara, Suwardi. 2003. *Metodologi Penelitian Sastra*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Widyatama.
6. Omvedt, G. (1986). Patriarchy: The Analysis of Women’s Oppression. *Insurgent Sociologist*, 13(3):30-50. doi:10.1177/089692058601300305
7. Johnson, A. G. (2004). Patriarchy, the system. *Women’s lives: Multicultural perspectives*, 3, 25-32.
8. Acker, J. (1989). The problem with patriarchy. *Sociology*, 23(2), 235-240.
9. Johnson, P. S., & Johnson, J. A. (2001). The oppression of women in India. *Violence against women*, 7(9), 1051-1068.

10. Chatterjee, P. (1989). Colonialism, nationalism, and colonialized women: The contest in India. *American ethnologist*, 16(4), 622-633.