



**GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN INDIRA PARTHASARATHY'S
ASHES AND WISDOM**



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ABSTRACT: *Gender discrimination occurs when a person is treated negatively or unequally based on gender. It is an age old evil where women are made to suffer in many aspects of their life and are denied the freedom to choose their path because of stereotype. Gender discrimination is an evident not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. Women throughout the world are fighting against the gender discrimination with little success. Indira Parthasathy is a pen name of Professor Ranganathan Parthasarathy, a*

versatile and prolific writer in Tamil. He has dealt with many burning issues of our society in his novels, plays and short stories. The humanitarian writer Parthasarathy in his novel Ashes and Wisdom has meticulously, cautiously and consciously described how women are treated as possession even by educated men. The present paper will focus on analyzing discrimination against women based on the gender.

KEY WORDS: *Gender, Discrimination, stereotype, Marriage, Expectation*

RESEARCH PAPER

The novel revolves around four lives, Arun, an ambitious businessman. Vimmi, more than his wife she is one of his possessions and his favourite doll. Radhika, is a senior executive in Arun's company. Damodaran, a physically deformed artist-intellectual who later became friend of Vimmi

The novel begins with Vimmi having a dream, where she is standing in a desert amidst people who are unfamiliar to her and are not different from one another. They are busy in their work. Vimmi also finds herself, busy in the same work of filling the sacks with sand loading them on to carts unloading and emptying them over and over again. This dream of Vimmi is symbolic of her life in the novel.

Vimmi attends business parties with her husband without any interest. She maintains a smile on her face throughout the party on her husband's demand. Like a doll she used to keep that smile on her face and talked nicely with people in the party. It created a false image of Vimmi that she was a 'Happy Wife' which was wrong, "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self"(Butler 140).

Arun comes from a rich family. Highly educated man and enjoys a highly paid professional career. Arun loves his wife but for her beauty. It was only her beauty that made Arun to marry Vimmi who comes from a middle class family. Before marriage she worked in a bank but after marrying Arun, she had quit the job to be the 'admirable wife' of Arun. Who is liked and praised by everyone. But inside she was troubled she did not like the frequent round of parties. Her interest was in painting, literature and so on. Vimmi being a daughter of widowed mother had never got any chance to express her 'Self' before marriage. Her mother's sacrifices had silenced her. And after marriage she had to adjust with Arun's life style and his expectations. On the other hand we see that Arun never made a slightest effort to know the likes and dislikes or opinion of Vimmi. For instance, Arun had the habit of having a bed coffee. Vimmi didn't like it and told him the same. But then Arun had laughed and told, "It is your middle class mentality. You have to change, adapt yourself to my tastes" (Parthasarathy 13).

Arun was a jovial man at parties. There was always laughter around him. He spoke in low voice with women and never misbehaved with them even when he was drunk. But it didn't mean that he had a great respect for women. For him women were like things that he can buy with money as he had used many women to get his work done in the office. He had lot of confidence in himself that he can get anything and everything he desired. As far as women are concerned he

boosted himself and proudly said that “I have this self- imposed restraint that I should be a one-woman man” (Parthasarathy 13). He also expected Vimmi to be proud of him for not having any extra marital affairs which was obvious with one who had money and opportunity. Radhika was waiting for such an opportunity. She was a senior executive in Arun’s company. At a very young age she had reached great heights in her career. Other women commented that more than intelligence it was her beauty that was her capital. Radhika didn’t want to marry but married because her father wanted to fulfill his “duty” of getting his daughter married. It is “The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so”(Simon DeBeauvoir 502). Women face lot of pressure from both parents and society. Ramesh was a “clever boy” according Radhika’s father. But “that suitable boy” treated her indifferently. Her son was always engrossed in reading.

Arun and Vimmi were still childless after six years of their marriage. First three years Arun was against having children and later he took her to couple of doctors. They declared that there was nothing wrong with her. She was perfectly all right to have a child. But Arun did not undergo any medical examination. She always wanted to have children but was left to answer the different questions related to her pregnancy. Sometimes she imagined Arun standing at bus stop with their kids to send them to school by looking at other kids with their father. He didn’t seem to bother what Vimmi wanted. Whether she wanted to have children or not? He never tried to understand her emotional needs.

One day vimmi met Dmodaran, a dwarf with misshapen body, a huge hump on his back, piercing eyes and extremely well read artist. She didn’t see his physical deformity but saw an artist who can enkindle inspiration. It was only after meeting him she discovered her talent and started painting. Once, Vimmi came home late night. Though Arun was away from home he learnt it from his servant that she came home with some ugly looking man and went with him. Even vimmi’s maid servant didn’t like Vimmi coming home with another man. She was her servant but she registered her disapproval by giving an indifferent look. Arun got angry and jealous. He felt cheated. She had shown Damodaran her paintings and later went his home to see his paintings. All these days she attended late night parties and spoke with many men with a smile. He was happy with her then as she was acting according to his expectations. Being a modern and educated man he could not tolerate Vimmi coming home late night. He had no trust on Vimmi. He suspected that something definitely had happened between Vimmi and Damodaran. In order to take revenge on her he established a physical relationship with Radhika. Thus his so called self restraint of one woman- man was shattered. By doing so he had cheated not only Vimmi but also Radhika. Next morning after coming home Arun had asked many questions to Vimmi, Where was she? What was she doing? What happened between her and Damodaran last night? Vimmi told him that nothing had happened between her and Damodaran but he didn’t believe her. He was not in a position to judge Vimmi as he himself was a culprit. He had also told Vimmi that he had a terrific time with Radika, justifying his action. As a

husband he could do anything and get away with it. Vimmi being a wife was not allowed to meet her friends as and when she liked to meet. After spending all these years with her he didn't even know that she could paint. According to him art was waste of time. He was of the opinion that after marriage husband's interest should be wife's interest.

After this quarrel the marriage was weakened. Vimmi was no longer accompanying Arun to the parties. As a result of another quarrel Vimmi left home and went to Damodaran's home to stay with him. Damodaran's home was not only Damodaran's it also belonged to all his friends. He had no objection for her staying there with him except she should get accepted by his friends. He had also put some conditions like, she should never be untruthful. She should always speak her mind and have no secrets. She should not suffer from any kind of inhibition. She was attracted by the socialist idea behind the conditions and happily agreed to them. Damodaran's friends also welcomed her with their open arms to their group. Next morning Arun came to take back vimmi to their home, but she already had made her mind to stay there and follow her passion of painting. It was too late for Arun to realize that he could not have suspected his wife unnecessarily. For Vimmi it gave opportunity to quit her role play of happy and smiling wife. It gave her an opportunity to give free expression to her feelings and imagination which was silent and hidden inside her.

After six years Arun accidentally meets Vimmi and Damodaran Along with Radhika at a hotel. By then Arun was number one in his company. Vimmi with Damodaran's encouragement had excelled in painting and got recognized as a fine artist. The media had begun to call her "A great artist who had made her mark in a short time" "A genius..." and "A new age woman..." (Parthasarathy 120).

Meanwhile Radhika had moved with Arun as her husband had left her. Before leaving he had told his son that he has doubt being his father. Her son too didn't like her. He was only economically dependent on her until his Principal took his responsibility. Radhika was a successful business woman but not trusted and loved by her family. Women ridiculed her talent of communication skill as "great at handling people."

Everything was well with Vimmi and Damodaran. He was her friend and mentor. But after the first exhibition of her paintings Damodaran wanted to celebrate it by having sex with her to which she had opposed. She didn't want to demean their relationship. For her their relationship was like a fragrance of incense stick. It was pure. She didn't want to spoil it. But Damodaran took it personally. He thought that Vimmi opposed him because of his physical deformity and ugliness. For others Dmodaran was a great artist and intellectual who spoke of women's liberation. But inside he was an average man of common needs. He could not express his physical needs with his other friends because for them he was like God. He went to other room and was so much drunk that he died of a heart attack. Next morning Vimmi woke up to

find him dead. For Vimmi, Damodaran was a true inspiration and an intellectual beyond comparison. But Damodaran could not see her beyond his physical need or expectation. There was not much difference between Arun and Damodaran, both could not tolerate when Vimmi asserted her Self. The husband told her to “get out” of the home and friend got “himself out” of the world and left her to repent on the sin which she could not commit. At the end of the novel Vimmi finds herself again standing in a “desert filling sacks with sand, loading them on to carts, unloading them opening them and emptying them, over and over again” (Parthasarathy 150).

Whether it was husband or friend Vimmi could not escape from their expectations. Arun wanted his wife to be different from other women by being angel of the house. He never asked her opinion, likes or dislikes. He always thought that Vimmi has always identified herself with him and she should be happy as she has handsome husband and money. What else she could ask for? One who came from a middle class family should be fortunate to have him as husband he thought. For him Vimmi was just another possession rather than another Self with feelings and emotions. He dominated her as a husband. Damodaran came as a dawn in the monotonous life of Vimmi but filled her life with darkness and meaninglessness as he too could not understand her feelings.

Both Vimmi and Radhika suffer because of gender discrimination. Even after being intelligent and talented they were looked down because they were not fulfilling the role of being a “perfect wife”. Radhika was always ridiculed. Her husband was indifferent to her and suspected her. Her family was torn apart. Vimmi got tired of playing the role of happy wife. She got herself escaped but again she was caught to fulfill another need or demand from another man.

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