

Struggling to Find A Voice: Women's Struggle to Find Self Identity in Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is one of the popular women writers in India. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with women belonging to Indian middle class. Her novels deal with the inner world of Indian women. Shashi Deshpande's novels presents a social world of relationship. In her novels one will find women in search of self and the relationships central to them. She is the recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence* in 1990 and in 2009 she was awarded with the Padma Shri. Feminism is, indeed, a serious attempt to analyse, comprehend and clarify how and why femininity is or the feminine sensibility is different from masculinity or the masculine experience. Feminism brings into perspective the points of difference that characterize the 'feminine identity' or 'feminine psyche' or 'femininity' of woman. It can be studied by taking into account the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of femininity vis-a-vis masculinity.' The male writers have mostly seen women as inferior and weak. Gendering and some sort of misogyny are evident in the texts written by men. They see men as 'superior sex' or the 'stronger sex' while women are seen as are the 'inferior sex' or the 'weaker sex'. Men are considered as logical, rational and objective, and, women are perceived as emotional, inconsistent, intuitive, subjective and lacking self-confidence. But the modern woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her by the system. And it is their pronouncement in an overt tone that has created the difference also in textuality. It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the contemporary feminist ideology evolved and the female voice was heard with special concern.

Keywords: Emotional, Marital life, Motherhood, Humiliation, contemporary

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Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist. A look at her novels will reveal her treatment of major women characters and will show how the themes in them are related to women's problems. Deshpande's women characters also signify the changing time with the change in their private lives. It has been significantly pointed out that marital tension and adjustment problem of a woman within marriage is one of the notable features in Deshpande's novels. So many obligations were imposed on them by their

mothers and aunts – as a result they were disgusted. They needed some private space – a space of their own. Their constant deprivation by the patriarchal society made them bound to walk out from home and to search a world of their own. But surprisingly the fathers of these women characters do not impose anything on them in the true sense of the term. But the husbands played the leading role. Their private lives were altered to a great extent. Deshpande questions the adequacy of the accepted social norms. She questions the conceptual construct of a woman and tries to de-construct that image of the same woman.

Motherhood is not a compulsory requirement for Deshpande's women characters. This is a revolutionary thought of the novelist to liberate her women from the "burden" of motherhood. Often we say that a woman cannot be a woman in the proper sense until and unless she is a mother. But we never find that Saru is enjoying her motherhood, nor does Jaya feel that motherhood is mandatory. But surprisingly all of them have experienced the pain of child birth. The changing world is significant of the changing faces of women. They cannot restrict their role in enjoying motherhood or doing the domestic chores. Both the home and the outer world are equally important to them. Sometimes the outer world is prioritized. Deshpande's women are autonomous, iconoclastic beings. Trying to view it from the post colonial dimension Deshpande tries to concentrate on the autonomy of women irrespective of their class, caste, and race. Not that she creates scope only for the women who are privileged – the working class; poor, underprivileged women have also occupied space in her novels. That is definitely a fair judgement otherwise Deshpande would have been labelled as a writer of the elites. So her attempt to bring all kinds of women from margin to the centre is very significant. Deshpande is a third world woman writer although her position is different. But it has to be admitted that somehow she may also have faced the dilemma of a woman writer.

The present article is about her novels *The dark holds no terror* and *A matter of time*.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, her second novel, is about the traumatic experience the protagonist Saru undergoes as her husband refuses to play a second-fiddle role. Saru undergoes great humiliation and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife. Deshpande discusses the blatant gender discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters and their desire to have a male child. After her marriage, as she gains a greater social status than her husband Manohar, all begins to fall apart. Her husband's sense of inferiority complex and the humiliation he feels as a result of society's reaction to Saru's superior position develops sadism in him. Her husband Mann vents his frustration on Saru in the form of sexual sadism, which has been vividly portrayed by Deshpande.

Commenting on the position of the woman in India's male-dominated society, Shantha Krishnaswamy writes:

"she is a creature who, as a child, is sold off to a stranger for a bridal price, or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family, or who as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati-Savitri' as an immortal"

Deshpande refers to the myths, epics, puranas as well as other holy books in which women, even though innocent, have been presented as the embodiments of pativatra - obeying male persons and submitting to their wishes. As long as Saru is a student, her husband, Manu is the bread earner. They had peace at home despite its different kind of obstacles. But the problem begins at that moment when Saru is recognized as a doctor. Her economic independence makes Manu feel thoroughly insecure and this casts a shadow on their married life. Saru emerges as a successful and reputed doctor and almost every morning there is a knock at the door and her visitors demand medical attention. As new in the profession, she feels thrill in the profession, but Manu's behaviour begins to change. He feels totally ignored as Saru gets all the attention Manu's earning now makes her feel that it barely covers her needs.

Her profession keeps her away from Manu for longer hours and she reaches later at night. His male ego feels inferior and cool, calm husband becomes treacherous rapist at night and tries to assert his masculinity through sexual assaults upon Saru. She scorns the world of 'love' and refuse to believe that such a thing can never exist between man and woman. Saru changes her attitude towards Manu as well as from her marital life. The world around her life becomes insignificant and Manu's position and place also becomes relatively unimportant. She becomes so unhappy over the situation she desperately takes the decision to sacrifice her lucrative profession. To Saru, the idea of men going to work, and women staying at home to work, clean, scrap and sweep staying at home to work, clean, scrap and sweep appealed as she finds a kind of harmony in these tasks performed by women who stay at home. The suffering that Saru undergoes makes her consider of writing to the young

students of her friend Nalu. She longs to tell them the rigid rules of tradition according to which:

“A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he’s an M.A you should be a B.A. If he’s 5’4’ tall you shouldn’t be more than 5’3’ tall. If he’s earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care it is unequal in the favour of the husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you: (The Dark Holds No Terror 137)”

This kind of contentment as Saru discovers in her new routine life makes her feel that she has a totally new life and now as Saru discovers herself as a changed person. Neighbourhood women visit her to talk about their ailments. Although Saru’s social and financial status grows, there’s no peace for her at her home. Her feelings on beings economically, independent individual are worse. In fact, her economic independence though asserted by feminists, brings to fulfilment to her. Another extra marital relationship of Saru is with Padmakar, often called as Padma. He was her classmate in medical college, whom she meets years later, but after a few incidents, she dissuades him from doing so as she wants to bring an end to their relationship. This relationship is neither soothing nor comforting to her.

“And I? Now, I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated, but the thing itself. What had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well, were illusions, and not relevant to my life anyway.” Saru understands that it is she, who is self-assertive and that she has been cruel to her people like her own brother Dhruva, to her mother and her husband, Manu. She feels that till her last breath, she will not be able to get rid of the thought that she was cruel to them, You are your own refuge, there is no other refuge. Saru realizes that one has to be sufficient within oneself because there is no other refuge elsewhere and Saru needs to apply to herself what she has cautioned Dhruva once. There is no need to escape from the darkness or curse the darkness.

Shashi Deshpande’s women characters revolt

against the social taboos and old tradition. They struggle for their freedom, completeness and their identity. They fight against the existing system and tradition of society and express their feelings, their anger, their resentment against the social taboos but it does not bring them any satisfaction. She reflects good understanding of the grass root reality and woman’s plight in India. Her focus is on the domestic affairs rather than the political affairs of modern life. She successfully portrays a complex vision of compromised happiness and withered dreams of middle class women’s life.

In a matter of time revolves around The absence of the principal character Gopal from his family. He walks out on his wife Sumi and three daughters. This is set against the Backdrop of the sad tale of Kalyani and Shripati in the ‘big house’. It is the house to which Sumi returns with Aru Charu and Seema when Gopal leaves them. Gopal’s absence from the family scene creates unique tension for the various characters each one of them tries to find out Gopal’s reason. then there is conjugal relationship between kalyani and Shripati. The lack of communication between them impinges on the wider issues of patriarchy that influences the successive generations. history has repeated itself in the life of Sumi. But on both occasions kalyani and sumi are silent. kalyani suffer silently .she fierce a similar fate to Sumi. Kalyani’s fear are based on patriarchal operations that condemns women to the margins of silence. She is made to realise that while losing her son a male hair she has abandoned her motherhood as well as her right as a wife. her punishment is that she has to live with the psychic wound. really it was not her fault. Her predicament is that the woman’s body is not only a text of culture. Her body becomes a ‘site of colonising power’ Kalyani’s mother in her childhood blamed kalyani for not being a son and it is injustice towards female. Kalyani fears about her daughter sumi . In sumi’s life there is a vacuum because of Gopal’s abandonment. Sumi tries to find out clues to their probable motives in his past acts and utterances. Gopal accepts the traditional Hindu view of marriage where God unites both the hearts. he also believes that the husband and wife are described as two halves of one being. but he realises that he was failing the idealistic expectations of his marriage . he

could not feel himself sa-hriday with sumi and was getting out of step with her. the breakdown of sumi's marriage has circumscribed sumi in unexpected condition. Gopal's absence leaves her in a state of vast emptiness .she does not remain a passive mother but an active agent. In the maze of family history what happens to sumi and her daughters ? nothing and everything. nothing because no solution is found to their problem. everything because sumi and shripati are killed in an accident. The 'big house' watches one more generations going down in history and one generation writhing under the impact of relentless fate.

Sumi's daughter Aru is a rebel. she rebels against her father. She approaches Gopal not expecting sympathy for her or for her mother. she wants to unravel the strange behaviour of her father. she asked Gopal "why did you get married at all why did you have children" Her searching question makes Gopal re- examine his motives in fleeing from the family. Aru is disappointed to see the tragedy of her grandmother and mother. out of frustration she declares I am never going to get married she holds strong view on patriarchy and how women in general get victimised as a result of the actions of men. she is critical to Gopal .she wants to see it that it that Gopal does not go Scot free. Aru meets a feminist Sureka a lawyer by profession. However the activist lawyer does not find it a case of the usual marital discord. As this novel revolves around four generations of women Manorama, who was dead, but her presence is felt through her portrait, second generation is Kalyani and third is Sumi and the fourth is Aru. All these women are victims of oppression of male dominating society. Kalyani was victimized by her mother Manorama who never get over the fear that her husband might marry again; because she could never give him a son. She wanted a son but Kalyani was born and thus become a victim of her mother's contempt. She was married to Manorama's brother Shripati to keep the property in the family. Deshpande draws a terrible picture of Kalyani's grief. It is Kalyani; she sees standing before the closed door, banging on it with her open palms, shrieking out something, slumping at last on the door, her head resting against the still closed door. All the sounds fading away, finally leaving a silence that

enclosed the thudding of a heart. She is made to realize that by losing her son, a male heir, she had abandoned her motherhood as well as her right as a wife. Kalyani had bend to the will of her mother but the modern women like Sarita and Sumi rebel against the narrow conventions of the society. Shashi Deshpande flashes some light on the cause of women's education and liberation. Then the whole novel is devoted to silent brooding women unhappy yet lively clinging to their past yet living in the present. The men do not pay an active role in the story but they are the root cause of all suffering Gopal and shripati. Deshpande tries to exonerate the male by bringing in some strong loving and responsible figure. but they come and go fleeting like shadows the real balance is titled by Gopal and shripati. Gopal's exit reminds use of us of Anita Desai protagonist in the story 'surface texture' and Nirode in 'voices in the city' and Arun joshi's Billy Biswas .

Conclusion :

Shashi Deshpande has very nicely highlighted the inner struggle and sufferings of the Indian women who raise various fundamental questions regarding modern women rooted in and moulded by the Indian customs but influenced by the rational ideas of the west. Deshpande develops a feminist understanding of the women's problems and complications of purely Indian climate. Her feminism is rooted in the Indian soil; her reading of western feminists has only helped to place her thoughts of feminism in sequence. The term 'feminism' is applied to Shashi Deshpande in the broadest sense here to refer to the writer's intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her interest in woman's problems and not in the sense that she makes an advocacy for women's rights in her fiction.

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