



PICTURIZATION OF WOMAN'S DILEMMA IN A MALE-DOMINATED SOCIETY AND EXPLORATION INTO THE FEMALE PSYCHE AS PROJECTED IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper neatly portrays woman's dilemma in a male – dominated society and exploration into the female psyche as projected in the fictional world of Shashi Deshpande who can be considered as an eminent and popular writer in the realm of Indian English fiction who significantly covers various subject matters under the sun giving the readers a sense of variety and individuality and her novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonists place in it.

Universally recognized as an eminent and popular writer in the realm of Indian English fiction, Shashi Deshpande is a gifted novelist with extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. The way in which she narrates each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular, is superb. Being different from other women novelists, she believes in very frank narration of incidents and absolute open-heartedness. No doubt, she has won accolades with regard to her superlative narrative technique as well as subject-matter. One outstanding quality of Deshpande as a novelist is her intimate understanding of the psyche of woman and her problems, focussing on the predicament of the contemporary middle-class woman.

Indian English writing got cherished in the hands of woman writers after a lot of efforts owing to the prejudice that they wrote what they experienced. They basically dealt with female subjectivity, domestic space and personal sufferings. These women writers made fruitful attempts in experimenting with various genres in the recent times making them stand tall strong and unique in their stand pont. Their writings did significantly cover various subject matters under the sun giving the readers a sense of variety and individuality. Several distinguished personalities made efforts for years to bring literature to the present status. Today women's writing is considered as a dominant and influential medium of modernism. The phenomenal achievement of carving the niche for themselves by these writers has brought a change in the way women's literature is looked at today. These writers deal with not only domestic spaces and personal experiences but also openly describe the women's world with striking honesty. They deal with the most burning issues, sensitive aspects of life and bridge the gap between tradition and modernity”.

Having honestly realized the need to project feminist consciousness in their writings, the modern women writers have brought home the print that modern women are no longer confined to four walls for they are the part and part of the social, political, domestic, economic and academic scenario. The writers have been continuously making strenuous attempts to handle innovative themes, techniques and styles to make their writing more relevant in the present literary scenario, with a focus on the male-dominated societies, the sufferings and trauma faced by women, exploitation, complexities of man-women relationship, social and personal dilemmas and other such related important issues. Indian English writing started flourishing by leaps and bounds in the hands of many such notable women writers as Toru Dutt, Laxmi Debi, Corenelia Sorabji, Attia Hossain, Santha Rama Rao, Dina Mehta, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, Gita Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai and Shashi Deshpande, of whom Shashi Deshpande has emerged as “one of the main stream women writers in India and has drawn critical attention because of her detailed, sensitive and realistic representation of Indian middle class woman in the domestic sphere” (Nasifa 196).

Being essentially wedded as a feminist writer to treatment of the predicament of the contemporary middle-class women, Shashi Deshpande, like Nayantara Sahgal, does out and out concentrate on women's problem giving a novel approach to them. As a modern feminist writer, she is an adept at recognizing the displacement and marginalization of women and constantly tries to shatter through her writings patriarchal hegemony by raising a voice of protest against male dominance. Born in 1938 in Dharwad, South India, Shashi was educated in Bombay and Bangalore, taking degress in both Economics and Law. Her writing career began comparatively late. At the age of thirty, she spent a year in England with her family and by her husband's promptings, she penned the sweet memories of the trip in three articles and handed them over to her father. Her father Sriranga, being a great playwright, found the glow of a writer in his daughter and so handed over the articles to a publisher. The major factors in the life of Shashi Deshpanda that shaped her writing career are her father, her English education and her growing up in “a home which was a harmonious mixture of languages” (Deshpande 30). Gaining confidence in writing, she started writing in spontaneous way. In 1990, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for her



novel **That Long Silence** (1988). She believed that her works have an impact on women's lives. To attest proof to this fact, Shashi Deshpande herself said:

“I think over the years It is certainly making a difference and I think my books have been very empowering for women, because I have more and more women coming and telling me about how they felt kind of liberated after they read, and I think they say it does give them courage and I also had a man who wrote me a long letter saying that I never knew what women thought of until I read your books. Hopefully It has opened up certain areas” (Web Source).

Shashi Deshpande came to limelight in the beginning of the nineteen Seventies. She began with short stories publishing in various magazines and today she has to her credit publication of such notable novels as 1. **The Dark Holds No Terrors** (1980), 2. **If I Die Today** (1982), 3. **Come Up and Be Dead** (1983), 4. **Roots and Shadows** (1988), 5. **That Long Silence** (1988), 6. **The Binding Vine** (1992), 7. **A Matter of Time** (1996).

Deshpande's novels, like those of Jane Austen, have a narrow range, appearing more or less to be a made-up story from personal experiences for most of her novels deal with the middle class family housewife's life and problems. The description of characters in her writings is simple, the narration is in a speedy style and her language is fresh, brisk and easily understandable. Most of her characters are seen suffering either sexually or professionally and most of her novels revolve around family relationship especially husband and wife relationship-their difficult positions and their conflicts. No doubt, family life establishes a sense of continuity in human life. Domestic life, all over the world, has been the centre of persistent pleasure. The institution of the family is of utmost importance. In the words of Gerard R. Leslie,

“The family is, as far as we know, the toughest institution we have It is in fact, the institution to which we owe our existence. We know no other way of making human beings except bringing them up in a family” (Jha 54-55).

Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anjana Appachana, Gita Hariharan and Bulbul Sharma have successfully presented authentic pictures of domestic life in India. Family life and domestic ethos got beautifully depicted in the fictional world of Jane Austen in British fiction. The mother, wife and the daughter all play an all-round role in shaping the lives of individuals. Like Jane Austen, Deshpande's too has women characters as protagonists in her novels. Indira Nityananden rightly holds:

“Shashi Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of women-the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Unable to fully defy traditional patriarchal norms of their identity not only as women but also as human beings” (Dharkar 50).

Shashi Deshpande has beautifully explored the problems a woman faces in day – to-day life. Domestic life is portrayed in almost all her novels. She says:

“I've always been fascinated by human relationships; the locale within which the relationships are looked at is immaterial. In fact, relationships in families are most intense and most complex” (Pathak 159)

Deshpande's first novel **The Dark Holds No Terrors** (1980) presents a middle class woman's dilemma in a male dominated society. The novelist marvellously depicts the sexual harassment of the protagonist Sarita (Saru) at the hands of her husband, Manohar (Manu) Saru strongly resists the attack on her personality by her husband who represents the patriarchal society. She suffers humiliation and faces some psychological problems in her own family. The critic P.Venugopalan rightly holds:

“The novel is by and of a woman. It traces the heroine Sarita's growth to womanhood through a bitter, claustrophobic girlhood, followed by an industrious studentship idyllic romance, and finally a horrific wifehood” (Reddy 150)

The Dark Holds No Terrors tells the harrowing tale of Sarita, referred to as Saru. Deprived of parental care and affection, she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother but hates her. And when he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own:

“You killed him. Why didn't you die?
Why are you alive, when he's dead” (DHM 34).

This is the plight of not only Saru but millions who are born girls. The fault lies with their gender, not with them. When Saru expresses her wish to stay with her mother all life, her mother says: “You can't” (P 45). But her brother Dhruva can stay, for



“he is a boy” (45). This gender difference in her mother’s treatment of her son and daughter enrages Saru. She rebels against her: “If you’re a woman, I don’t want to be one” (63). It is this which makes Saru resent the role of a daughter. She looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it will give her relief from the oppression of the mother, it will give her freedom:

“I had come away from my parent in a fever of excitement after the last battle.
The die was cast, the decision taken, my boats burnt” (P 37).

But this decision proves to be anti-climax. Her second home becomes the very prison she had escaped. She is soon disappointed with her husband. Saru scorns the word ‘love’ and refuses to believe that such a thing can ever exist between man and woman. She hates the man-woman relationship which is based not on love but on attraction and need. All love and attachment disappear from Saru-Manu relationship. Saru admits:

“theirs was not a case of love dying, nor even of conflicts. Instead, it was as if a kind of disease had attacked their marriage. A disease like syphilis or leprosy, something that could not be admitted to others. This very concealment made it even more gruesomely disgusting, so that she was dirty and so was he and so was their marriage” (PP 69-70).

The happiness of early married life vanishes soon. The married life of Manu and Saru is dull and drab affair. Her husband is a sadist who bullies her. While she provides bread and butter to the family, he feeds on her earnings and tortures her both physically and sexually. Her family life with Manu gets disturbed, for she is too busy in her profession to look after her children. The working wife stands isolated from familial ties and obligations. Manu cannot bear people greeting her and ignoring him. Saru begins to loathe the man-women relationship which has no love in it. Saru’s feminine consciousness crumbles and love disappears from her life, cut off from her husband and children. Deshpande has portrayed the protagonist Saru as self-assertive, anxious, eager, ambitious and career-oriented woman who fights for her self-identity.

Gender is the creation of patriarchy and it serves the male flair for domination. The novelist has presented Saru, as a victim of patriarchy undergoing pain and the sense of alienation. As Seema Jena has put it, “The technique of withdrawal becomes a means by which woman rediscovers her personality and digs up her hidden potential and learns not to repress her talents” (P 28). Manu’s male ego is hurt by her superiority complex. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon Saru. Thus, the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns out to be a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night. Saru becomes a mute sufferer wallowing in self-pity and choked silence: “I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day, I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death” (96). Saru’s feminine psyche becomes the arena of several warring forces. She is torn between her obligation to her profession as a doctor and her duties of her family as a housewife.

Throughout the novel **The Dark Holds No Terrors**, Shashi Deshpande probes the inner recesses of Saru’s psyche in order to discover the root of her silent suffering and passive resistance. The conflict between Saru and her mother represents the clash between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, since her mother is an obstruction in her path to self-realization. The feminine consciousness as endowed by Deshpande seems to be a fusion of the polarities of being: acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality, rebellion and reconciliation. All this gets blended in Saru, a typical middle class woman. Saru’s conflict is every woman’s conflict between the desired and the imposed, the willed and the unwilled. Her education makes her recalcitrant and militant. It makes her reluctant to accept the unreasonable and the irrational. A new emergent woman of the modern age, she declines to remain within the four walls of her house. She hates a cloistered and immured life and that is why she protests against all undired and unwilled obstructions and hindrances in life. She broods over the imponderables of human predicament:

“All right, so I’m alone. But so’s everyone. Human beings... they are going to fail you. But because there is just us, because there’s no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk” (P 200)

Thus, Saru’s is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self. As a new emergent woman, Saru wants to liberate herself from the shackles of tradition and exercise her rights for the manifestation of her individual capabilities and the realization of her feminine self through identity-assertion and self-affirmation. To attest proof to this she says: And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can” (P202). Saru, thus, epitomizes the struggle for the liberation of the feminine self.

In **That Long Silence**, Deshpande’s exploration of female subjugation in patriarchal family structures takes on a larger dimension:



“She creates, in fact, a mosaic of marriage; women come and go, aunts, cousins, mothers, mother-in-law, friends, acquaintances, each providing a different slant on marriage, a dozen sub-texts to the main text of a protagonist whose marriage is collapsing” (Dharkar 57).

Quest for identity, the inner struggle in making decisions, and the silence of an Indian wife are the concerning things of the protagonist in the novel. In her own words, Shashi Deshpande says about the novel:

“And I wrote *That Long Silence*, almost entirely a woman’s novel, nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own” (Jain 210).

Deshpande reveals the feminine consciousness of Jaya, the protagonist through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and situation. Playing the role of an ideal wife, Jaya follows her husband into exile. Her husband described women being treated cruelly by their husbands and he calls it ‘strength’. She comments:

“He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fires, but I saw despair...
I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender”
(P 36).

When he scrutinizes her life closely, she realizes that to achieve this state of fulfilment as wife, she had deliberately suppressed many traits of her personality. However, Jaya doesn’t suppress her writing career and her relationship with Kamat, her neighbour at one time. In the early years, Jaya’s writing was a matter of pride for her husband Mohan. Later her imaginative writing is condemned by him who asks;

“How could you have done it?
How can you reveal our lives to the world in this way”? (P 144).

Jaya loses her identity as a writer and she compromises with writing silling things for a woman’s magazine which doesn’t satisfy her intellectual hunger. She had neglected her real self but now at the end, she decides to come out of the nest, because life has become rather intolerable for her. She suffers from alienation and mutters in anguish: “I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling placid motherly women. A women who coped” (P 16). She reappraises her own role-enactment placing the sacred icons of marriage and family life under the light of a mercilessly honest scrutiny. Through her protagonist, Deshpande is fulfilling an implicitly feminist’s function, a consciousness-raising similar to one carried on by woman’s groups in America in the 1960’s during the early years of the radical feminist movement. The protagonist Jaya had to suppress her emotions as Mohan warns her – “my mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her” (P 83).

Jaya is a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensures out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings. Jaya succumbs and surrenders to mohan without revolting silently. She wills to her will. She never says, ‘Yes’ when her husband asks her whether he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently in the emotion that governed her behaviour to him, there was still the habit of being a wife of sustaining and supporting him. Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya’s married life- “A pair of bullocks yoked together”(P 8). Jaya wants to escape from the confines of an incarcerated domestic life in her quest for selfhood. There is no communication between Mohan and Jaya:

“Nothing between us...
nothing between me and mohan
We live together but there had been
only emptiness between us” (P 185)

In Jaya, Deshpande presents not a woman who has a desire to revolt but one who has reconciled to her lot. Towards the end of the novel, Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman. About this novel, the scholar-critic A.N. Dwivedi writes:

“A feminist reading of **That Long Silence** leads us to believe that it is primarily a domestic novel, like the fictional works of Jane Austen. The novel does not strive towards match-hunting or match-making, as in the novels of Austen, but towards peace-making between the stung, sensitive wife and the pompous and self-centered husband” (P 146).

The title of **That Long Silence** is symbolical as ‘silence’ is a recurring feature.



The novel *Roots and Shadows* does beautifully explore the inner struggle of the protagonist, Indu. She is depicted as one trying to learn the truth about her, deserting all the shadows that she had thought to be real self. Indu presents a set of modern women, who are educated and very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems of love, marriage, sex, settlement and individuality. In the words of O.P. Bhatnagar, “the novel deals with a woman’s attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with the male world and the society in general” (Gupta 64). Being very sensitive Indu longs to be free and complete in herself. She finds dominant Akka, identified by Indu as mother-figure after she had lost her mother, and her family, a great hindrance to achieve her goal. When at college, Akka did not let her meet the boys and cultivate friendship with them. Later she leaves her house and marries Jayant, a man of her choice. She leaves her parental home and enters the house of her husband to achieve freedom and completeness but soon realises the futility of her doings and decisions:

“Jayant and I... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize” (P 14).

Indu speaks about her own incomplete status:

“This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not known it ... that was somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone” (34)

Indu hates her womanhood and after full realization of her married life, she looks down upon marriage as a trap: “A trap? Or a cage?... a cage with two trapped animals glorying hatred at each other” (P 67). This sheds a brilliant light on Indu’s awareness of her autonomy and her realization that she is a being and not a dependant on Jayant. She fights to know the life in reality, with a hurt feeling that her image of assurance, confidence and certainty is being ruined in the presence of Jayant. When Indu tries to talk of such feelings to him, he would call it only ‘nonsense’ and nothing else. Jayant never tries to understand her and her feelings. Thus, there is no real communication between them:

“Love, that’s a word I don’t really understand.
It seems to me an overworked word...
Sometimes I wonder if I will leave him...
the only way in which I can be, myself,
my whole self again” (P 97).

As a consequence of it, instead of leaving Jayant, she goes back to him with the vain hope that things will change for betterment. Indu is always in a chaotic state of psyche and combating with the circumstances to reach a final solution. Confronting her real self, Indu knows her roots. Thus, Deshpande has presented her protagonist, Indu as a representative of the traditional Indian women who suffer, submit and adjust themselves to the circumstances, making a quest for identity coupled with individuality in the family as well as in the society. Suneetha Rani rightly remarks:

“Like the contemporary Indian woman who is liberated in every possible sense except emotionally, Indu frantically searches for solace. While doing so, she victimizes herself and stands head bent before her own conscience” (PP 53-54).

The novelist Deshpande here pinpoints the inner struggle and distress of the new class of Indian women through the character of Indu, a modern woman, aspiring to enjoy freedom of all sorts. The scholar-critic Prasanna Sree aptly comments:

“Indu’s acceptance of western values and her search for liberty with a precondition of unfettered growth and maturity of personality, despite the insidious conflict between tradition and modernity, ultimately results in her emergence as a human being evolving basically as a Woman of determination not yielding to the dictates of the patriarchal society” (P 44)

Thus, a beautiful blending of tradition and modernity submission and dominance gets explored in **Roots and Shadows**. In **The Binding Vine**, the novelist explores various feminist issues like rape, woman’s subjugation and obsession to man, Indian marriage, woman’s career family tradition, and so on. The existential trauma pictured leads to nothing but loss and despair, still Deshpande leaves space for the redemptive power of love. Through the feminist perspective of the protagonist Urmila (Urmi), the innermost recesses of a woman’s heart are brought to light. Urmi wants her husband Kishore to be with her, to understand her needs and fulfil her desires which he fails to do, being away from her. She feels cheated of love and intimacy which gives her a sense of loneliness and overburden. She is unable to articulate her feelings for him, making the relation more troubled. Urmi fights with the memories but realises that forgetting is a betrayal. Urmila, like other protagonists of Deshpande is educated and a career-oriented woman. She is economically independent and has capacity and courage to take her decisions in every matter. She is a feminist who believes in being self-reliant and self-independent.



To conclude, it may be said that Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self, an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. All her women protagonists - Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmila reorganize themselves in new kinship patterns with every change, and when their woman's space is eroded within these changing patterns, they revolt against the traditions and in their quest for liberation and freedom of all sorts in life.

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