

A FEMINIST STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SELECTED WORKS

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Abstract

The novels of Shashi Deshpandey reveal the struggle of women and are based on issues of women who are unvoiced fighters. Whether it is That Long Silence or Ships That Pass she endeavours to prove herself in this patriarchal society. The conventional woman who is a embodiment of goddess in Indian society but is sarcastically treated as a unimportant being in a family. So it's appalling and lamenting position where she is in the margins of the society. The present paper is a study of the selected works of Shashi Deshpande who has written various significant works on feminist study and raised the voice of women who remain in the domestic four walls and continuously in quest of their identity besides their being a house wife or a mother or a daughter. A woman's psychology has been revealed in almost all the novels of Shashi Deshpande where she is striving hard to come out from the periphery she has been put in. Her unheard voice is easy to hear in the novels of Deshpande. Her writings are simple and regularly focus on issues concerning middle class women whose lives are deep-rooted in distress, subjugation and predicament. Her stories are the voice of the lives of many suffering women who have not expressed their emotions.

Keywords: Identity quest, Patriarchy, Margin, Feminist Study.

The feminist always tries to change the monotonous representation of the woman and re-establishes it. One strong characteristic of all the contemporary women writers in Indian writings in English is the revolutionary spirit with which they attempt to write. Time to time now they express their concealed desires and unexpressed feelings through their writings. Women writers have proved that their writings are serious as well as worth and call for consideration. In Indian society they handle things well and adjust between tradition and womanhood. To be a feminist is to be able to create a specific feminine mode of writing, fighting for the liberation of womenfolk in subjugation and all those forces within and outside the society that troubled the neat categories of the family and mutilated the feminine side of a woman. There is a great impact of the western culture in today's scenario due to which the women who were holding the image of a conventional creature now getting transformed into women in search of their sole identities and in search of an unconventional independence. Pamela Allen in her book *Free Space* writes:

First I believe that women are oppressed by society and by individual men, that they are beginning to rise against that oppression and have the potential of forming a social movement of historic proportions. However, for this to be successful we must develop an ideology and learn to think autonomously. Secondly I believe that there are basic differences in perception between men and women because women do not have the social and economic advantages that men do. Although we may live intimately together, men and women relate in terms of men having the ultimate power. There is a women's point of view, a women's reality. It is the reality of an oppressed people and it is not acknowledged by our society because this would attest to the fact that women's and men's equality is a myth (7-8).

The works of Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande are significant since they have focused on the psychoanalytical study of women in their works. They have mainly focused on the psychological sufferings, oppressions of the frustrated housewives whose only option was to suppress the predicament inside the unavoidable existing quandary of women in a male dominated society. These writers made society aware of the women's needs and demands and have become a medium for self-expression and assertion. Earlier the works of Indian women have been underestimated and devalued on regular belief about the superior worth of the male but today she has attained the recognition among mainstream of the contemporary Indian writers. The neglected women as characters in their novel attempt for better way of life mentally and physically. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity of their own as well as to raise the voice of women in Indian traditional society. The theme is from childhood to womanhood-developed society respecting women in general. Now women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of women where she is an epitome of enduring self-sacrificing women. But now these female characters searching their identity no longer regarded as and defined simply in terms of their sufferer position. As a contemporary author, Deshpande presents the realistic picture of the male-dominated middle class society of India. Her protagonists are caught between the tradition and modernity but they try to strike a balance between the two. Deshpande is very realistic in the sense that suggests marriages are not based on love but convenience of the Indian society.

The emergence of prominent Feminist writers in Indian Literature has been seen chiefly for last three decades. Shashi Deshpande is the second daughter of the eminent Kannada dramatist in Karnataka and Sanskrit Scholar Shriranga. She did a graduation in Journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Mumbai and worked for some time as a journalist for the magazine '*On Looker*'. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* was published in June 1999. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akadami award for her novel *That Long silence*. She reveals the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings exhibit the culture in which she is born and brought up. Her remarks are very insightful and she gives everyday events in her writings and also gives an artistic expression to something that is simple and ordinary. She particularly portrays Indian feminism in the sense that it is borne out of the predicament of Indian women placed between conflicting

identities. The women characters are with traditional approaches trying to knot family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture. Her novel *A Matter of Time* is an extension of her investigation of the many facts of the feminine experience in writing. In this novel, she has displayed the themes of submission, silence, gender discrimination and familiar associations into much deeper sense. This story is surrounded with three generations of women coming to terms with their life in and all female worlds. The relation of women characters with their men is filled with silence, deficiency or indifference. The pain of disintegration of the family troubles Aru, who considers herself for her father's action and sets out to undo it. It is in this troublesome atmosphere the characters grow and come to a newer perceptive of their lives. The role of rage and fate are playing as main themes around which Deshpande weaves her tale. Deshpande's simple yet powerful writing like a grandmother's tale that penetrates deep into heart and settles. At one point, the use of sensible narration exasperates the reader since the narrator highlights the events but does not share until time and plot unfolds it. Human relationship is the primary theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels mainly those ones that exist between mother and daughter, husband and wife, father and daughter. In all associations, the women occupy the essential point and considerably, the narration shifts through her feminine consciousness. She does not want to be recognized as feminist writer although her stories and novels talk about the sufferings of women in a male dominated society and her writings are of the feminist perspective. Her concern is for the human relationship in her works. She opines that Western feminism is entirely different from Indian feminism. She feels that the Western Feminist theories cannot be applied to the real life situation in India. The set up of Indian society, its culture and traditions are entirely different from Western society. She exhibits Indian costumes and traditions in her writings and she feels that Indians have a wrong observation of feminism. It clearly seems in her writings that walking away from tradition, and throwing tantrums do not constitute feminism. She thinks that many women have feminism in their lives but they are unaware of it. That's why one should have a clear idea of what role feminism play is in their lives. For her, feminism is using the stamina used to endure the torments for the betterment of life.

Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande are portrayed in different facets. Mainly in her novels, three types of suffering women characters reoccur with subtle changes. The first type belongs to the protagonist's mother or the mother figure, the traditional woman, who believes that her place is with her husband and family. She is ready to sacrifice her desires for her husband and family. The second type of woman is bolder more self- dependent and stubborn. She cannot confirm to mythological, submissive and surrender vision of womanhood. As radical feminist, ideology expressed, for example, Sarah's friend Nathan in the *Dark Holds No Terror*. The third, type of women characters, are the women in between neither traditional nor radical in their ideas and practice. For Example, Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home. Being a woman herself, she sympathises with women.

Radhika who is the main protagonist of the novel *Ships that Pass* represents the group of those young girls who have their upbringing with modernism and have influence of a modern girl. Therefore, when she chooses a life partner according to the wish of her family

she is in a dilemma that whether she is doing right with her or not “Oh hell! I’d begun thinking like the self-sacrificing heroine of a B grade tearjerker, ready to do anything for the family...” (STP 23). Even after the spread of education all over the world and modernism, woman still comes as an article which can be used by the male oriented society. A girl since her childhood faces disparity in the lifestyle of a boy and girl. She is restricted to do several things and told to follow old customs of the society. Radhika is a young and educated girl still she is inherited with the old way of thinking and restricts herself to do what she desires. Education and modernity some for example now-a-days the media is very influential and in media women have got sufficient exposure but here too she is presented as a commodity. The soap-operas, which are frequently full of women dominant topics, present her in vivid ways but in all ways she is portrayed as traditional woman or if she is shown as a rebel, she also comes in the margin of presentation. So called developed societies can also not claim to provide the women deserved freedom and rights. Here too, they are tortured, tormented and exploited in various ways. Violent incidents may be seen occurring against them. Though there have been a lot of feminist movements taking place in these societies in order to liberate women from male oriented and male dominating societies, women still have to go a long way to conquer absolute freedom. Radhika after knowing his brother-in-law’s affair with some other woman is completely disappointed from the so called institution of marriage and her own charm for it is shattered now:

I thought of my own idea of marriage- it seemed so puerile now, as if I’d really believed in the huge lie of ‘they lived happily ever after’. Whoever did? There was disappointment, disillusionment, disenchantment- so many ‘dais’s. Yes, and affairs. How far’d travelled from that silly girl who thought marriage was the solution to problems. On the contrary, it was the beginning of problems, some so bad that they could never be resolved (STP 68).

Radhika remains no more under illusion after knowing this bitter truth. Women in India especially carry on the relationship of marriage for whole life as it is considered the matter of family respect and society’s prerequisite made for her. But with the advent of education of women and feminism, they are no more in societal margin. With the passage of time women have also learnt how to come out of their margin. Earlier where she was yielded and submissive to the society, now she is dauntless, self conscious and awakened. Earlier what was her weak point today she tries to make it her strength. For examples earlier she was prohibited and refrained from doing any work which was believed to be done by man, today she is getting the chance to do that work by taking either the advantage of reservation or government’s support. Like in education where earlier due to being a girl she did not get entry in schools because of the traditional customs according to which women were just for the household works and did not need any education. But today in order to motivate her to take entry in schools she is being provided free education and other related facilities for education.

Today’s novels act as a mirror reflecting the protest and the outburst of the suppressed feelings of women which has never been taken care for ages. Shashi Deshpande’s novel *That*

Long Silence begins with the sentence "To achieve anything, you've got to be ruthless." Deshpande's *The Long Silence* revolves around the on-going troubles and quandary of the middle class family. She depicts the case study of women with reality. The women characters that she describes in her writing are so relevant to the women in actual life that any woman can relate herself with her women characters present in her writings. One can imagine with lucidity, the struggle and trauma they face in their relationships pertaining to their surroundings, their society, their families, their children and especially with their husbands. In *That Long Silence* the revolutionary spirit of the contemporary women of India has been shown.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* is an educated woman who represents a middle class house wife who is respectful and dutiful to her husband and loving and affectionate to her children as well as good for her in-laws. But many a times her feelings and emotions are neglected and her genuineness, sincerity and devotion are not recognized by anyone due to which she ultimately is sunk in silence. Her silence is symbolic to most women in the world who are unable to express themselves as an individual. She then is in quest of her identity due to this silence. She says, "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony"(p.4). She desperately wanted a change and fought for it. Deshpande teaches women to combat the silence and express themselves. Deshpande is always concerned about Indian reality in respect of the lot of women, but she is not a loud and aggressive kind of feminist who sees the male as the sole cause of all her problems and this makes her different from other writers. She portrays different women characters in her writings but every time she shows a kind of different situation to the readers. We can see a big change in the women writings with the passage of time. Women writers have moved away from the traditional, age old portrayal of self-sacrificing women towards conflicting female protagonists searching for identity and self-respect. A major concern in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In Indian culture individuality and remonstrance have often remained strange ideas and marital happiness and the woman's role at home is a central focus. But now there is new beginning of Indian sensibility and changes in psychology of society due to which women's presentation is more assertive, more liberated in the view of writers and they more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past is.

As a feminist writer, Shashi Deshpande is clearly aware of the male - female imbalance in society. In her novels women are in search of their identity. Women in her novels can be seen in several roles like mother, sister, wife, daughter and an individual who should be treated equally. We come across facets of feminism in her novels like - *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *If I Die Today*, *The Binding Vine*, *A matter of Time and Ships That Pass*. Her novels portray the problem of middle class woman who is educated but faces problems in Hindu patriarchal society. This paper proposes to examine three novels of Deshpande - *That Long Silence*, *Roots and Shadows* and *Ships that Pass*. In *That Long Silence* Jaya maintains silence throughout her life. The novel centres round the inner perception of Jaya, woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who, "finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and

attempt to decide who she really is"(3). Jaya is not happy with her married life as marries with Mohan who has withdrawn with her to a small suburban flat in Mumbai due to suspected of business malpractice. It allows Jaya to reflect on her own life and understand her changeable roles like daughter, sister, wife, mother, daughter - in - law, friend, mistress and writer of genteel 'feminine,' newspaper pieces. In the company of Mohan and two children she is lonely. She feels herself alone even in the company of Mohan because he doesn't understand her feelings. She is not happy with her married life she describes her marriage as, "a pair of bullocks yoked together --- A man and woman married for seventeen years", (18) Jaya is estranged from Mohan. Their married life is punctuated all along by matrimonial silences. She realizes that a writer which is inside her cannot come outside due to her husband who neither he shows any concern to her writing nor understands her and she feels suffocating in such a married life where she has to suppress herself. Hence she quits writing she is crushed under patriarchal conventions. So her child she hopes must be a boy. She is tormented by an abortion concealed from Mohan. When her young son runs away from home she is crushed by a sense of inadequacy as a mother. She breaks out of the long silence; I am not afraid any more. The panic has gone (191). She reevaluates her life. She decides to remove the silence between her and Mohan. It is this erasing of the silence that symbolises the contention of her feminine voice, a voice, with hope and promise, a voice that articulates her thought. It is in this novel the feminist struggle for liberations is looked upon within the framework of the freedom crisis. It is the quest of Jaya for an authentic selfhood and finds through her rebellion against the patriarchal core of Society.

In most of the novels of Shashi Deshpande the motif remains the same. Though *That Long Silence* is apparently different from the other novels as far the theme is concerned but the motif remains the same. Jaya also comes from middle class family background and there are traditional influences in her characters. She is not different from other female characters of Deshpande. Like other female characters she has same relationship with her husband who does not understands her. Jaya is in no way different from that of the other female characters of Deshpande in regard to her critique of her relationship with her husband, with her mother, brother, the society and her strong resentment against the social taboos. Mohan, her husband, is full of praise for his mother who silently bore all humiliations heaped upon her by his father but Jaya has a different elucidation for this. She sees the silence in Mohan's mother 'a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon (36). Jaya too tries to fall into the same pattern by suppressing her own wishes and act according to her husband's intentions. She follows him so closely that finally she's left with no identity of her own, 'just emptiness and silence' (144). She is up in arms against the traditional concept of an ideal marriage. She aggressively projects her resistance to such a tradition:

If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything (61).

For last three decades Shashi Deshpande has been a prominent feminist in Indian Literature. In her novels we find three types of struggling and suffering women characters with slight changes. The first type belongs to the motherly figure, the traditional woman, who

believes that her place is with her husband and family. Who dedicates her whole life for her husband and her family. The second type of woman is bolder more self-trusting and rebellious. She cannot conform to mythological, submissive and surrender vision of womanhood. She has a different approach for her own life. The third, type of women characters, are the women in between neither traditional nor completely modernistic in their approach, ideas and practice. Her feminism is particularly Indian in the sense that it is borne out of the dilemma of Indian women placed between contradictory identities. The women characters are with traditional approaches trying to tie family and profession to maintain the virtues of Indian culture. The example of these three types of women is present in Deshpande's recent novella *Ships That Pass*. Where the mother of both protagonists is a traditional woman who believes in absolute family devotion by a woman while the elder daughter Tara is a quintessence of a revolutionary woman who does not want to end her desire as well as seek her own identity and the younger daughter Radhika remains in dilemma whether to go on with family tradition or practice the same conventional figure of a woman.

Roots and Shadows is the story of Indu and her feminist approach. Indu, a middle class young girl, brought up in an Orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka (the mother surrogate in the novel), struggles to liberate from the circumscriptions of the traditional and the tradition-bound institution of marriage. The novel comes out with its feminist approach in Indu's exploration into herself. The novel begins with Indu's return to her ancestral house. It initiates her into an understanding of the meaning of human life. Her journey of self-discovery starts from here. Here she discovers what her roots are as an independent woman and a writer, and what her shadows are as a daughter, a mother and writer. She revolts against Akka, her conventional world, her strict and rigid values and marries Jayant. Indu, represents modern, educated, middle class working women with independent mind set, capable and willing of making independent decisions. She is against the traditional modes of finalizing marriages which are not decided on the basis of compatibility. Since her childhood, she has perceived women performing their duties blindly. They do not recognize their true potential and devote themselves completely for others. According to her in her family the girls are merely puppets. Indu, in the novel, does not want to become the replica of traditional woman. Hence, she marries with Jayant by her choice. Gradually she realizes she has lost her true self. Indu in the novel symbolises the new woman who is educated and who lives in close association with society, keeping aside all its narrow conventions. Married to Jayant, Indu freely moves with him. But ultimately, her inner feminine voice of ideal woman awakes her conscious. She realizes that she has been chasing shadows leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant, Naren is nothing more than a mere shadow to her.

Thus in these three novels, we find the position of the girl child and the attitude of mothers towards their daughters. The women like Jaya, Indu, Tara and Radhika break the long silence that had become the prominent feature of feminine existence. Their painful and stifled struggle ends with the assertion of their individuality. Among these four women Urmila is a different woman. Sarita, Jaya and Indu are involved in fighting only their own battles. But Urmila fights for others a symbol of sacrificing Hindu womanhood. Shashi Deshpande, in her novels, gives voice to a kind of female subjectivity which rejects to

resolve and identify herself with a patriarchal and male dominated society. Jaya decides to make adjustments wherever possible, through an objective analysis of the situation. As she herself admits, "I've always thought –there's only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. But in this life itself there are so many crossroads, so many choices" (191-92). She resolves to try to be more contemplative and find out means to live life fully instead of blaming Mohan for every failure of hers. She realizes that everyone should fight his or her own battle, through a balance between ego and self. She is aware that changes don't occur overnight but there is always scope for development. She admits at the end of the novel "But we can always hope .Without that life would be impossible. And if there is nothing I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible" (193). Deshpande in her novels explores and exposes the long suppressed scream of the women, captive inside the four walls of domesticity. In her novels the female protagonist finds herself between tradition and modernity, between illusion and reality. Shashi Deshpande has dealt with the problems that meet a middle-class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. Deshpande is not the revolutionary kind of feminism which sees the male the cause of all predicaments. In her works feminism has emerged as a broad movement to protect women's social, political, legal, ethical and cultural rights and give her love, respect, sympathy and understanding in the family. The works of Deshpande elucidate the concept of women liberation emerging against male domination and the marginalization of women.

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