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WOMAN'S STRUGGLE FOR A VISIBILITY AND A VOICE: A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SELECTED WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Chaman Nahal, a noted critic defines feminism as a mode of existence in which a woman is free of the dependence syndrome. The feminism as it exists in India today does not blindly follow its western counterpart but is in response to the issues related to Indian women, in a society where they play a variety of roles – that of a daughter, sister, wife, niece, aunt, grandmother, mother-in-law. But the same society denies them any individuality, identity and assertion. Indian women writers have now through their works, started questioning the age old traditions and patriarchal domination.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique position among contemporary Indian novelists in English. She has successfully delineated a realistic picture of the present-day modern, educated, career oriented, middle class Indian women. Their search for freedom and self-identity is a recurring theme in all her novels. She deals with the inner worlds of her characters-their fear, self-doubt and the mental trauma they go through due to their marital disharmony and their estrangement from their own self and society. But Deshpande's characters have inner strength and courage and they refuse to buckle under the weight of their personal tragedies.

In their search for self-realization and self-definition they may temporarily withdraw from their families-be it Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* or Indu from *Roots and Shadows* or Jaya of *That Long Silence*. They analyse their circumstances objectively and finally come to a new point of understanding which they had formerly ignored or rejected. They return more in control of themselves, confident and mentally mature. Rather than rebelling, Shashi Deshpande's protagonists adapt themselves to a male dominated society and try to strike a balance between the social conventions, predetermined role of women and the contemporary issues. Considering marital relationship as worthy of maintenance they return, but at the same time they refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role model of a woman as prescribed by society.

This paper is an attempt to portray through selected works of Shashi Deshpande a woman's struggle for a visibility and a voice in this andocentric society.

Key Words: Feminism, identity, isolation, contemporary, compromise.

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A writer especially a novelist is by definition a socio-political being. Her or his significance lies in formulating and fostering certain principles, which make the earth a better place to live in. The writers therefore cannot use their words merely for entertainment; they need to address more serious issues and problems. They not only reflect the various discourses of the society they live in, but also make an intervention to reform the society as well.

A major contemporary issue faced by all the societies is the question of woman. It is a truth universally acknowledged that women, who are physically and mentally equipped to perform on par with men, have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, but also deprived of the opportunities to give expression to their feelings, thought and anguish.

A patriarchal social set up firmly asserts man's superiority over woman and is not based on mutuality but on oppression. It makes a dichotomy between genders; masculine means power, domination, authority, independence and self-assertion and feminine means helplessness, subjugation, docility, dependence and annihilation of individuality. This categorization has led to the oppression, repression and suppression of women.

Simone de Beauvoir very aptly expresses this phenomenon when she says;

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.....It is a civilization as a whole that produces this creature (282).

Women are treated as commodities to be used by men. A woman has no identity "apart from the one that man gives to her." (260) Even in literature women are depicted as the inferior beings, passive and helpless victims at the mercy of men. The reason being that literary tradition is also primarily patriarchal. The concept of 'proper woman' as presented in the male authored text was of a selfless, self-effacing, submissive creature:

who was prepared to internalize the idea of her own inferiority, an 'Angel in the house' who accepted without questioning the gender defined roles assigned to her by the patriarchal society. (Armstrong 9)

The feminist movement which started in the west in the 1960s went a long way in arresting the injustice meted out to women. The credit for providing an impetus to such a movement goes to pioneers like Simone de Beauvoir, who sought to shatter the myth of femininity in her book *The Second Sex*. She studies in detail issues like a girl's education, marriage, prostitution and domestic chores which she describes as unpaid drudgery. Though her book sowed the seeds for revolution, it is Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 which sparked off the movement.

But in India, a population deeply steeped in religious beliefs, superstition and tradition did not readily get influenced by this movement. In fact the first generation of Indian writers in English-MulkRaj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao missed out a great opportunity by letting a wealth of material in the form of freedom struggle and the women involved in it escape their notice. The women in their novels are victims of domestic injustice and tyrannical tradition, but they propose no solution to their dilemma.

Thus while writing about women, men tend to go to extremes- either highlighting their weakness or defying them and putting them on a pedestal, making the characters seem unreal. Women writers on the other hand, have a peculiar sensibility and a thorough understanding of the inner self of a woman, this helps them present the woman protagonist in her encounter with the quotidian problems of her day-to-day existence quite realistically.

Indian fiction in English has been enriched by several talented women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Shashi Deshpande. They have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. As John B. Alphonso Karkala observes, "They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world" (78).

Even though Shashi Deshpande is not an avowed feminist, she occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women

and their quest for identity. She herself admits in an interview that, "If others see something feminist in my writing I must say that it is not consciously done, it is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world (Prasad 129).

Her protagonists are modern educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male dominated and tradition bound society. A reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals a deep understanding of the female psyche particularly their fear, self-doubt and the mental trauma they go through due to their marital discord and their maladjustment with themselves and society.

A common thread running through all Deshpande's novels is the struggle that a woman goes through for a visibility and a voice in this andocentric world, be it before marriage or after. Even in the parental household a girl faces bias and is made to feel belittled. She finds herself adjusting twice; first in her parents' house and then in her in laws house.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Saru, the protagonist faces sexist discrimination in her parental home. She reflects on the events of her earlier childhood and the gender differences of her mother's treatment of her and her brother which used to enrage her. She remembers the sense of joyous excitement which pervaded their house on the occasion of the naming ceremony of her brother. How his birthdays and other religious rituals related to him were given top priority and celebrated with great pomp and show, whereas her birthdays were barely acknowledged. Even when she wanted to go for higher education and become a doctor her mother tells her father:

Don't forget medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding....let her go for a BSc. You can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over (130).

This statement reflects the general Indian view of the girl as a liability. Sarita resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it would give her freedom and respite from her mother's domination. She revolts against the age-old traditions of orthodoxy and conservatism, in order to assert her independence

and identity. She defies her mother first to join medical college and then to marry out of her caste. But then she realises that in marriage too:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A you must 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....(137).

In spite of being educated, a man can never come to terms with a woman's success. He is mortified, insecure and intolerant with the rising status of his wife. As Saru says;

And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me inches taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband. (42).

Manu's inferiority complex at her success exhibits itself in the form of sexual aggression and in spite of being modern, educated, intelligent and financially independent Saru finds herself silently suffering the violence of her husband night after night.

In the novel *Roots and Shadows* Shashi Deshpande highlights the agony and trauma experienced by women in a male dominated and tradition bound society. The ultimate destiny of a woman in a patriarchal setup is marriage, and education is secondary. She is brought up to be diffident, meek and quiet and is inculcated with the so called virtue of sacrifice, self-abnegation and weakness. But the new woman has started a crusade against these long preserved notions and in this fight she has to face a lot of resistance from patriarchy and even the women of older generation.

Indu the protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* is this new woman. She brushes aside all the age old beliefs and superstitions to become independent and complete in herself. For this she has to rebel against the suffocating authority of the narrow-minded Akka, a senior member and mother surrogate in the novel and the oppressive atmosphere of the family where women have no

choice but to submit and accept their lot. Right from childhood it had been put in her mind by the women members of the family that she has to conform to the pattern of behaviour expected of females, but Indu resents it:

As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said, it is the only way.... (58).

She rebels against the narrow conventions and more particularly, the tyrannical authority of Akka on matters of education, love and marriage and seeks fulfilment in education and career. She marries Jayant, a man of different caste but of her own choice and leaves her parental home with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. She hopes that her marriage with Jayant would enable her to realise the need 'to belong' to be 'wanted,' 'needed and loved.' But she painfully realises that she has walked into just another trap. She is physically and spiritually dissatisfied with her husband who takes her for granted and expects her to submit to his will.

Indu who considers herself independent and intelligent, who is proud of her logical thinking and who sets out to reform Indian womanhood has become after marriage, one of those prototypes, submissive Indian women whose identity is only an extension of her husband's. On the other hand, Jayant in spite of his seemingly western style of life behaves no different from an average Indian male:

It shocks him to find passion in a woman. When I am like that, he turns away from me. I have learnt my lesson now. So I pretend I am passive and unresponsive(95).

Indu recalls that she has surrendered herself to Jayant step by step, not mainly for love but to avoid conflict. She looks upon marriage as a system which makes one so dependent. For a long time she leads a life with her feelings unexpressed, silently accepting Jayant's wishes.

In *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the crisis of a middle class Indian woman. Jaya, the protagonist is an intellectual who finds

herself out of place in a society meant only for men. She is a writer who is supposed to present her views and ideas before the society but still remains silent probing into her past, struggling with her present and trying to establish a rapport with her future. She has learnt to act according to her husband's wishes, suppressing her own desires so much, that she even stopped writing on real life experiences to keep Mohan in good humour.

Not satisfied with her married life Jaya recalls her upbringing, the environment in which she grew up, the preaching that were thrust upon her e.g. she has been taught that "a husband is a sheltering tree."(44) The novel begins with gender differentiation of which the telling example is Ramukaka's sketch of the family tree. Jaya's paternal uncle tells her;

Look Jaya, this is our branch. This is our grandfather- your great-grandfather and here is father, and then us- Laxman, Vasu and me. And here are the boys- Shiridhar, Jaanu, Dinkar, Ravi.... (142).

When Jaya asks him where she was in that family tree, he looks at her with irritation and impatience. Exclaiming at her stupidity he says;

How can you be here? You don't belong in this family! You're married; you're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here (142-143).

But this was only half the truth as neither her mother nor her kaki, not even her grandmother Ajji, "who single handily kept the family together"(143) had a place in the family tree. Jaya to her dismay realises that her name and existence, along with those of other women in the family, are completely blotted out of the family history. This loss of place in the family tree symbolizes the loss of identity of a woman. Jaya wants to find a place in Mohan's family and heal up her wound but to her surprise finds that here too she is taken for granted and Mohan fails to be "a sheltering tree."

Secondary roles of women in Indian household are further displayed when women in Jaya's household are supposed to clear up after the meals. On her asking why one of the boys couldn't do it, mocking faces were the only answer to the question raised by a girl.

The novel shows how traditionally it is the man who leads and the woman is simply to follow. Her life is a series of endless waiting as if she has no independent will and power to regulate her life. As Jaya says;

But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch, carrier man...(30).

Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, Jaya was lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings, as a result of which she was torn from within. At all stages of her life she has compromised, first to her father, then to her elder brother and finally the most to her husband in order to secure her position in the family and for fear of compromising her marriage.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are conscious of the great injustice and social inequality meted out to them, first as daughters and later as wives and during the course of the novel we see their characters developing. They are not prepared to compromise with male domination and are always questioning and evaluating the attitudes, actions and reactions of people in their own personal relationships. Trapped between tradition and modernization they undergo great mental trauma and in search of self-realization and self-affirmation, they temporarily withdraw from their families. Their parental home becomes their refuge as they relinquish their roles as wives and mothers. Passing through the process of self-introspection, they free themselves from traditional barriers and cultural shackles and their own conflicting emotions. They emerge confident and more in control of themselves and their lives.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* realises;

Alright so I am alone. But so is everyone else. Human beings.....they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on

trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk(220).

She knows that she has to confront Manu if she wants her true identity in life and her resolution to speak signifies that she will no longer let herself be crushed.

Similarly Jaya in *That Long Silence* revolts against the encrypted and preordained role of a woman as she has realised that, "in life itself there are so many cross roads, so many choices"(192). When Mohan walks out after a fight, Jaya finally resolves to speak and break her long silence by putting down on a paper all that she has suppressed in her 17 years of silence. She has to speak if she wants a space for herself so decides to resume her writing.

In *Roots and Shadows*, mounting dissatisfaction and unhappiness compels Indu to break her silence. Introspecting over her life, at her maternal home she realises that only by speaking openly will she be able to carve out a space and command dignity for herself. She quits her job and is ready to write her book.

Though Shashi Deshpande's protagonists overcome their feelings of estrangement and bitterness after re-examining their pasts and evaluating their actions and decisions, they do not revolt against the male but adapt themselves to a male dominated society. Their problems remain unresolved but their attitude towards them changes. They confront their real "I" and choose to be themselves. Rather than escape from their situation, they now seek to assert themselves and have a voice within their own relationships.

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