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EXPLORATION OF THE FEMININE VOICE IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Feminism has grown up as a worldwide movement to secure woman's social, political, legal, moral and cultural rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from male on the other. In the modern era, Feminism has become a tool to identify the imbalance of male created ideologies and struggle for the spiritual, economic, social, and racial equality of women, sexually colonized and biologically subjugated. Though, Shashi Deshpande doesn't like to be labeled as a feminist writer. She mostly focuses on the issues relating to the rainbow of rights, desires, agendas, struggles, victories, speaking for women. It is also true that she writes mainly about women but it is the human being that lurks behind her female characters. And that human being is often a lonely character, though not one who is alone.

Key Words: Liberated woman, Progressive woman, struggle, conflict, campaign, patriarchal, suppression and suffocation.

It is difficult to define feminism in terms of historical origins and development. Feminism originated long before the term 'feminism' which came into vogue sometime in the twentieth century. All those who campaigned for the rights of women-right to vote, right to earn to be deemed equal of the men- were called feminists. As a matter of fact the term 'feminism' was first used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a male patient whose sexual organs had stopped growing their fullness, resulting in the feminization. But feminists in the modern era are not men with stunted bodies but full grown normal human beings both female and male who have struggled for the rights of women in a largely male dominated society or are carrying on their campaign today. Shashi Deshpande is also considered one of the most accomplished contemporary Indian women writers in English. Her novels depict woman's travails and privations, pain, and anguish. In other words, they present the life of

the middle class Indian women who are not able to defy social conventions or traditional morality. These women are entangled by desire and despair, fear and hope, love and hate, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, martial discard and male chauvinism. Thus the prime concern of Deshpande's novels is with woman's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother and more than anything else, a human being. Almost all in her novels she is obviously concerned with feminist issues. Not only all her protagonists women but also the story is narrated from their point of view. The present paper aims at analyzing Shashi Deshpande's novels in the light of the term feminism and concludes the change in position of women in any society is a reliable index to social change in general.

As a feminist writer Shashi Deshpande is aware of the male-female inequality in society. All her novels are concerned with woman's search for her identity. In her novels woman performs many roles such as of wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right. That is why we are able to find an authentic exploration of female voices in in her novels including *The Dark Holds No Terrors*(1980), *Roots and Shadows*(1983), *That Long Silence*(1988), *The Binding Vine*(1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On*(2004) and *In The Country of Deceit*(2008). Elaine Showalter has categorized the growth of feminism into three phases- limitation, protest, and self discovery. If we examine Deshpande's novels in the light of these phases then all her novels seem to explore all these phases. They also articulate her artistic vision of feminism which is directly concerned with the problems of middle class educated women in patriarchal Hindu society setup.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the first novel written by Deshpande. This novel centers around gender inequality as the protagonist of the novel Sarita (Saru) is made conscious of her own gender even as a child. Saru is a typical middle class woman who is not comfortable with the false rhetoric of equality between man and woman. She wants to free from the clutches of tradition and practice her rights for the presentation of her personal capabilities and the consciousness of her feminine self through identity and self affirmation. Saru is anti patriarchal. Since her childhood she is deprived of parental care and affection and she lives a loveless life. Her mother loves her brother but hates her. When her brother is drowned, she is blamed for her death without any reason. In this way this is the plight of not only Saru but several who are born girls. Their gender is a curse for them. Ultimately Saru against her parent's wishes marries a boy, Manu who belongs to a lower caste. Here we find the sign of her refusal from the patriarchal ways. Her marriage with Manu is attaining of autonomy of the self and it is also assertion and affirmation of her feminine sensibility. Consequently Manu's male ego is hurt by her superior position as a doctor. Saru is 'a two in one' a doctor during the day and a trapped animal at night. Manu is not able to understand

Saru's feelings. So after some time her feminine sensibility crumbles. As a result, she fails as mother and as wife. At the end, Saru decides to take a patriarchal view of life and faces her circumstances in a mature manner. There is no any immediate and acceptable solution to the male supremacy that has taken a concrete form in our society over millennia. Thus the conflict of Saru is the conflict of every woman between the desires and the imposed and the willed and unwilled,

In her novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983) Shashi Deshpande depicts the struggle of an educated middle-class protagonist Indu who culminates in her conformation with her family and society. Indu is brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka (the mother surrogate in the novel). She is fed up with the suffocated patriarchal setup of this Brahmin society and struggles for release from the restriction of the traditional and tradition bound institution of marriage. In this way the novel clearly explores the feminist approach in Indu's exploration into her. When the novel starts, Indu returns to her ancestral home after eleven years to attend her cousin's marriage. She had left the home at eighteen to marry the man whom she loved. After her return from there she tries to understand the meaning of human life. Here she discovers what her roots are- as an independent woman and a writer and what her shadows are a daughter, a mother and commercial writer. Later on, she rebels against Akka, her conventional world and marries Jayant. In this way this novel is an articulation of a woman's attempt to assert her own individuality and realize her freedom. It presents how brings her into confrontation with family with male dominated society. Indu is depicted here as an educated, modern and working woman with her own independent mindset. She is totally against the traditional modes of finalizing marriage which are not decided on the basis of compatibility. Since her childhood, she has perceived women performing their duties blindly. They are not able to identify their true potential. They are just like dolls. But Indu does not want to follow these traditional conventions. That is why, she marries Jayant of her own choice. In this way, one can find Indu as an embodiment of a new woman who is educated and

lives in close association with society, brushing aside all its patriarchal conventions. Even after her marriage with Jayant she freely moves with Naren and develops adulterous relationship with him. Ultimately she realizes that she has been chasing shadows leaving her roots for behind in the family and in Jyant. Naren is nothing more than a mere shadow to her. Thus Indu is an image of liberated and progressive woman in this novel.

*That Long Silence (1988)* is the third novel by Deshpande. This novel is also the story of an Indian housewife, Jaya who maintains silence throughout her life. The helpless and suppressed silence of the modern Indian housewife finds a voice in this novel as it depicts the inner-consciousness of Jaya and her quest for her own identity. Convent-educated, English speaking woman with a literary taste, Jaya is torn in the conflict between her as a writer and a housewife. This novel is an autobiographical story of Jaya. Her husband has withdrawn with her protean roles-daughter, sister, wife, mother, daughter in law, friend, mistress and writer of genteel 'feminine' newspaper pieces. Even in the company of Mohan and two children she feels lonely. Mohan is also not able to understand her feelings as a result of which she is torn within. Her married life is also not blissful as she describes it as 'a pair of bulls yoked together'. Hence Jaya feels suffocated at the house of Mohan and she finds her female identity effaced. She also realizes that the writer in her cannot come to light because of her husband who is not happy with her writing. She is suppressed under patriarchal conventions. She is tortured 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. Finally she is able to break out the long silence and reevaluates her life. She decides to erase the silence that explores the assertion of her feminine Voice, a voice with hope and promise, a voice that articulates her own thought. In this way, the feminist struggle for liberation is presented within the framework of freedom crisis.

Her next novel *The Binding Vine (1992)* is about Urmi, an educated middle class wife. The novel opens with Urmi grieving over her dead infant

daughter, who finds it difficult to let go her memories. In such an aggrieved state she happens to meet Shakuntala in the hospital where her sister in law vanna works. Shakuntala thinks that her daughter has met with accident while Dr. Bhaskar reports that Kalpana has been brutally raped. Then there one can observe Shankuntala's reaction as an oppressed Indian mother in the male dominated Indian society. Urmi escorts Shakuntala home and this starts their association. Urmi visits regularly to enquire about Kalpana, a carefree soul. On the other hand Urmi learns from her in law Mira's diary how she was averse to physical intimacy and how her husband used to impose himself upon her. In an Indian marriage a woman has to reduce herself to a prostitute in order to satisfy her husbands' carnal desires. In this way Mira's diary is a glaring revelation of her intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion for the man she married. Thus this novel also gives us a graphic account female voices in the male dominated society

*A Matter of Time(1996)* is also a prominent feminist novel by Deshpande. It is set in Karnatka. The novel represents the three predicaments of three women belonging to the three generations of the same family. In this novel, the novelist depicts the subtle process of oppression at work in marriage . The novel portrays a woman who is more mature and dignified than her predecessors. While the protagonists of her earlier novels can not think of themselves outside marriage, Sumi, the protagonist of the present novel, finds herself unperturbed in such crisis. She manages her self admirably and becomes self dependent. But like the earlier novels of Deshpande, this novel is also presented in the light of feminist theories by most of the critics.

*Moving On (2004)* is also a novel which is written by the novelist from the perspective of feminism. This novel focuses on the quotidian of life of the average Indian as it seeks to depict the interior world of uncles, aunts, cousins, in-law et al. It depicts a galaxy of characters and a wide range of relationships interwoven in an intricate pattern. The novelist delves deep into the recesses of the human mind to explore the nuances. The narrator Jiji is a

widow looking after her ailing father. She discovers her father's diary after his death and sets out to evaluate her life retrospectively. While her past appears near perfect, her present is riddled with uncertainty. She keeps deliberating the different roles. She can adopt for asserting her independence and keeping herself busy after her husband's death.

Her novel *In The Country of Deceit*(2008) is the love story of a young and relative woman Devayani, who is quite happy with her single status till she meets Ashok, the newly posted D.S.P of Rajnpur, at her friend Reni's house. It is the relationship of Devayani and Ashok that forms the crux of the story. Physical love for Devayani signifies the assertion of her sexuality and the dismissal of prudery associated with it

To sum up, it can be said that Indian women novelists have powerfully focused light on the psyche of women of different strata in modern times of never ending existential struggle in their life. Like other novelists, Shashi Deshpande, an eminent feminist novelist has explored and exposed in her novel long smothered wail of the incarcerated psyche of her female protagonists imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity and sandwiched between tradition and modernity, between illusion and reality and between the mask and face. In short Deshpande's novels give vent to a kind of female subjectivity which refuses to reconcile and identify herself with a patriarchal and male-dominated society.

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