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Feminist Consciousness and Feminine Sensibilities in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror and That Long Silence*

¹**A. Anusuya,**

Reg No: MKU21PFOL10188, Ph.D Scholar in English (PT),
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625 021, (T.N) India.

²**Dr. S. Bharathiraja,**

Research Guide, Assistant Professor & Head (i/c),
Department of English, Vivekananda College (Autonomous)
(Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University),
Tiruvudakam West, Madurai-625 234. Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian novelist and short story writer, is known for her feminist perspectives and explorations of the lives of middle-class Indian women, with notable works including *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence* and *Small Remedies*. The women characters of Shashi Deshpande's novels have been studied from the socio-cultural point of view. Deshpande has portrayed a selected class of women and their predicament. Most of the protagonists, as well as, major women characters are middle-class educated working women. Mostly they belong to Brahmin family.

Deshpande seems to have intended to show that, if financially independent and (so called) upper class women have to face problems of identity, the plight of their counterparts in the lower income groups would be still graver. All the protagonists of Deshpande have initially a good married life, but at a certain point of time or during a crisis, they become conscious about their lives and existence. The self-assessment of their lives leads them to the path of identity quest. The woman characters are unhappy with their married life. Their unhappiness provokes them to realize their selves. Identity construction is a socio-cultural issue. A society that does not treat man and woman on the base of equality loses humanitarian outlook. This insensitive partiality results into the subjugation of women.

Key Words: Women, Subjugation, Oppression, Culture, Society, Feminism.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is known for creating women characters who are contemporary. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. She is one of the reputed women novelists of Indian Writing in English Fiction. She is among the group of the women writers who have emerged with a different subject matter and voice of woman in the changing time. She has moved

from city to smaller towns during her life. And her experience of life in smaller towns is reflected in her novels, especially in minor women characters. She has written novels, short stories and children's stories.

Nature assigned numerous functions to humans when they were created. In both literature and culture, the man-woman relationship has been a major preoccupation. In both her short stories and novels, Shashi Deshpande has explored numerous elements of the man-woman connection. She has captured the beauty and ugliness of the relationship in all of its varied colours and complexities in her stories. Men and women, she claims, have two separate ways of relating to one another: acknowledged and unacknowledged. The social institution of marriage is the most well-known and recognised kind of man-woman connection. Shashi Deshpande is concerned with women's subordination in marriage and society, as well as their

emotional and psychological deprivation as a result of patriarchal criticism. She demonstrates how traditional Indian society is skewed against women, recognising that the idea of male hegemony is frequently applied to women, particularly women in matriarchal roles. All the novels are widely read and admired for the truthful account of women's sensibility. Her novels are not only popular among the readers, but they have drawn critics' immediate attention also. By her writing she has made her place among the eminent novelists of Indian writing in English.

In all her novels, the protagonist is an educated middle class woman. Her novels are a psychological portrayal of Indian women. The reader finds keen observation of social changes and deep knowledge of Indian tradition in the novels. Deshpande's approach to women's problems is distinct. Most of the contemporary women novelists protest the prevalent social customs and She is also not an exception. Her Women protagonists are the mouthpiece of criticism of male dominated society. Their language sometimes sounds harsh as it comes out of angst of age long predicament of Indian women. Nevertheless, she uncovers women's problems with mild tone without losing severity of the issue. Her protagonists, though educated and financially independent, do not seem to be developing anti-male attitude (www.litchats.com).

Unlike others, she rather blames the system that shapes the mindset of an individual. A traditionally Indian woman mostly inclines to defend the set rules of the society and does not dare to think beyond it. For her, giving voice and choice to her individual existence is not advisable. She is supposed to support the 4 male partner and share his happiness and sorrow.

Breaking tradition is not in her interest and will lead her only to mess. The system moulds her mind in such a way that she is made to think that protecting customs is the solution to lessen her plight.

The term 'Indian women' is common, but in deeper sense, it is as varied as the number of regional cultures. The issue related to women liberation in India is very complex because they are traditionally fixed in a particular set up which vary family to family, region to region and caste to caste. In literature, woman in Indian society was duly portrayed by partition novelists. In many novels of Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal and Govind Nihlani women's restless and traumatic condition during the period of partition is depicted.

Gradually, women writers also came into the centre stage and wrote stories around women. Novels of Amrita Pritam, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Kundanika Kapadia raised the women's problems of inequality, self-identity and free-

dom. The major difference in the movement of liberation of women in India and the western countries is that it has not disturbed old institution like marriage or family. Marriage and family is given maximum importance even today. But with the education and awareness, the relation and domestic life have undergone change.

The total submission to husband and family has been decreasing because of financial independence. But, so far, the Indian women have not achieved the highest goal. They suffer a lot in their family lives and fight against many inside and outside problems. The movement of emancipation of women in India and in the West passed through a long process. The

concept of women equality has undergone radical changes. In India, condition of women and beliefs regarding the status of women were moulded on the base of social and historical condition. Therefore, women enjoyed equal status and freedom in the Vedic period, declined to the restricted and slave like life in the medieval period. And again with the western influence and with the effort of social reformers in the 19th and 20th centuries, process of

women emancipation was intensified.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French Writer and existentialist philosopher, is the leading among the feminist writers and activists. She wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949 which was translated in English in 1953. She uncovers the issues related to oppression of women. *The Second Sex* is considered as the bridge between the two waves. Though it is criticized for some of the remarks, it has laid a very indelible impression on the later feminist writers. She rejects the very idea that man and woman are made different by Nature. The difference between the two sexes is made by society. As she says,

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychological or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine (De Beauvoir, 2011:293).

The inequality between man and woman is the result of social system which benefits mostly man. Man defines himself without the body of Woman.

Man thinks himself without woman, but woman does not think herself without man. She writes in the introduction of *The Second Sex*... ..man defines woman not in herself but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being.... For him, she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the sub-

ject; he is the Absolute. She is the other (De Beauvoir, 2011:6).

Thus, she observes the status of woman as other to man. Her role is purely supportive, not essential. Woman is not woman by birth but she is made woman. Woman is physically weaker and this is the main reason for her subordination. The present study aims at Deshpande's outlook to woman not as man, not equal to man or competitor to man but woman as a woman with equal human sensibility. The women characters have no contempt for cultural values until and unless they obstruct their individual rights and development. On one hand the Indian scriptures lay a number of sanctions on the life of women and on the other hand they advocate revering them as goddesses. These two extremes need to be bridged by a contextual reshaping of customs and tradition.

In the novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*, there are some similarities in the portrayal of the protagonists compare to the protagonists of other novels. During their life, circumstances lead the protagonists, Sarita (DHNT) and Jaya (LS) towards attaining self-realization. As soon as the process of self-realization is over they decide to change the way of their life. Sarita (called Saru) in *The Dark Hold No Terrors* decides to give one more chance to her husband, Manohar to resolve the issues between them. She also thinks to manage her life without ignoring her profession and independence, and also maintaining fine balance between the two sides of her life. Jaya remains silent for a long time but the course of her life makes her break the silence and she decides to be more self-assured and questioning.

Saru is in search of her own identity. She does not want the dominance of other over her. She wants to make her own identity. In the end her trust on human relation is shaken. She finds herself in a vacuum....it's true. We come into this world alone and go out of it alone. The period in between is short. And all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dewdrop (DHNT 208).

Indu realizes the necessity of her being courageous and sensitive for self in order to bring her family out of the problems. Deshpande's portrayal of these characters is moderate in a sense that outwardly there is little change in the way of life, but the protagonists underwent a tremendous change in their attitude within. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a story of the introspection of protagonist, Sarita. She is a successful medical practitioner. In the beginning, she is happy with her husband, Manohar, who is a Lecturer in English and once was a promising poet. She was in love with him and marries him against the will of her parents. She becomes mother of two children.

Manohar is also a loving husband and caring father. But gradually the success and popularity of Saru as a doctor makes him uncomfortable. He becomes jealous of her wife's achievement. During the day, he shows off his wife to his friends, but shows severe reaction of her envy at the night. He turns monster in bed, abuses her, bruising her and creates such terror that she cannot even scream for help. Saru realizes dual personality in her husband; during the day he shows no sign of brutality, but in the night, she experiences his terror. Initially, she cannot understand what is wrong, and hence she tolerates it.

One day she comes to know that her mother who has been disgusting her all these years, for the death of her brother, died. She thinks that she can find her place at her father's house. She goes back there with a hope of warm welcome. But her father welcomes her without showing pain or pleasure. She comes here as an option to escape from the brutality and sadist nature of Manohar. Saru undergoes a process of introspection and becomes conscious of her position in the house of her parents and her husband. The lack of emotional attachment leads her to self-realization. The process of introspection happens on both the sides – Saru and Manu. As part of that he writes a number of letters of apology to her which she does not reply. She remains obdurate till the end of the novel (www.enotes.com).

Finally, he personally comes to her father's house to bring her back with the promise of a fresh start. Deshpande gives a suggestive end to the novel that Saru, who has determined not to open the door, rushes to open it. This symbolic act of Saru exhibits the emotional characteristic of an Indian woman. She accepts to go with him, but this time with the

commitment of not bearing any torture from her husband. So, in the end there seems a radical change in her temperament. Thus, the change is psychological.

Like all other novels, Shashi Deshpande delineates predicament of the middle class educated woman in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Her preference for the portrayal of educated middle-class woman is appropriate for her subject matter because she herself belongs to that class and hence can realize their inner aspirations and angst, and secondly, it is the middle-class women that experience the suffocation of socio-cultural bondage more compare to the rich and the poor class women. It perfectly exhibits the feminist angst by the character of Saru. She is obsessed with the fundamental question of her identity. She cannot be a good daughter to her parents, and therefore, she tries to make her identity as a good wife. The failure of her marriage makes her more disappointed. She expects love

from her mother but cannot have it; she expects love from her husband and fails again. This twice failure makes her think about her own identity.

A woman is either a daughter, or mother or a wife. A woman has to adjust herself twice in her life. First as a daughter in father's house and then as a wife in husband's house. She has to mould her personality according to the need of other, especially male. From postcolonial point of view, she is a subaltern and she cannot have her own voice or her own identity as well. Her identity is reduced to somebody's wife or daughter.

Saru reverses this concept and becomes a reputed doctor. She is not wife of a lecturer, but she was a lady doctor and he (Manohar) is her husband. She finds, $a + b$ they told us in mathematics is equal to $b + a$. But here $a + b$ was not, definitely not equal to $b + a$. It becomes monstrously unbalanced equation (DHNT 42).

Saru suffers a dilemma of emancipation and subjugation. The burden of keeping together tradition and modernity has further complicated the lives of women in India. It is all the more difficult because there seems to be some kind of intellectual sanction for drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. Saru finds her way through this confusion by reconciliation. She decides to return to her home with Manohar, but with a change in attitude.

That Long Silence is a portrayal of predicament of a woman writer who wants to voice her feeling and also wants to express her desire to search self. Jaya, the protagonist is a housewife. She is a writer also and writes wonderful realistic stories. She aims to uncover the issues of contemporary women, her predicament and her struggle. But she is prevented to write realistic stories. Thus, she is forced to keep silence and not to express her views about life of a woman. This makes her think about her identity in her life. She is left to live a life like puppet in the hands of her husband. She has to follow a life the society has prescribed for women. The burden of restricted life is felt mostly by middle class educated women and Jaya represents them. Despite she is educated and being brought up in a good atmosphere she cannot do what she wishes. The circumstance of her life and long-time conjugal life with Mohan force her to think about her past, present and future. As she is educated, she is sensitive about her life and so, finds herself no place of her own. She is meant to support her husband and share her pain and pleasure.

The role is not reversible. The way she is supposed to tolerate imposed rules in her house, Mohan is not bound to follow them. Deshpande has used the device of first person narrative to make the story realistic and authentic. The device succeeds to bring the reader deeper into the psyche of the pro-

tagonist and experience the turmoil within. The novel

opens with Jaya and Mohan, her husband shifting from their present house to a flat in Dadar, Mumbai. The sudden shifting of the house took place because of Mohan's involvement in malpractice in the company he is working in. He is involved in the matter of tender etc. with the provocation of his colleague Mr Agarwal. An inquiry is in progress and Mohan is likely to be proved culprit. This may result not only in losing the job but also losing social

reputation. They may also face financial crisis. To avoid all these, they shift to Dadar flat. Here in Dadar, Jaya cannot easily adjust and therefore, sits in contemplation of her past and present. Thus, the novel continuously fluctuates between past and present.

Traditionally, a woman's role assigned by the society is of subordination to man. Her life is restricted in the roles of a daughter, a wife or a mother. In each case she has to lead her life looking at the wishes of father, husband or son. A woman's feelings and her desires are never considered seriously. She is always subordinate, inferior and dominated. She has no place of her own. Even in the family tree woman's name is not mentioned. It grows only by man.

Therefore, Jaya once asked Ramukaka pointing the family tree, —I'm not here!! and he replies, How can you be here? You don't belong to this family! You're married, you're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here. (LS 143) Jaya wanted to ask further, but she did not. She thought, if I don't belong to this family, what about the Kakis and Ai? They married into this family, didn't they, why are they not here? And what about ajji, who single-handedly kept the family together, why isn't she here? (LS143).

A woman has lost identity in the virtue of sacrifice that has been taught to her over centuries. Jaya also realizes that despite her effort to fulfill the expectations of Mohan and his family, she has lost her identity. Her father named her Jaya' which literally means victory while her husband changed it and named her as Suhasini at the time of marriage. She feels her split personality between the two names. The names are suggestive – Jaya means victory

and Suhasini means soft, smiling and loving woman. Like Monohar and Sarita, the married life of Jaya and Mohan is apparently happy and without any severe problem. There is no drunkard husband, no wife beating, no poverty, no dowry case or no adultery. Nevertheless, Jaya is unhappy because she does not find what she expected and she is dissatisfied because her talent as a writer is not allowed to blossom. Home, for Jaya, is captivity.

Both Jaya and Saru are the victims of age long issue of male dominance. The relation between husband and wife is in other term power politics within four walls.

Jaya tolerates Mohan's anger; adjust with his success and failure. As long as silence is maintained and the dominance of husband is not challenged, everything goes well. But as soon as Jaya attempts to raise her voice and expresses her feelings to grow as a writer, she is silenced. She is considered as crossing the limit of an ideal wife. Owing to the impending danger on his job, he finds his supremacy shuddered and instead of facing the reality he takes coward path of leaving the house and circumvents responsibilities as a husband and father. On the other hand Jaya is left waiting for Mohan to return, getting desperate to find out her son Rahul who has run away from the picnic(P 78).

Mohan does not hesitate to leave the family in critical condition while Jaya, like a true Indian wife, does everything possible to bring them together. Mohan's way of interpreting life is inclining to the framed rules of society. He is of the view that it is in the interest of them and society to follow the rules, while on the other hand Jaya thinks otherwise. She has no disgust with the customs, but she believes to have opportunity to grow individually. In a healthy society a person must be given due opportunity to grow independently. If a person is born to be subordinate or to assist others, then it is injustice to him/her. Therefore, she thinks about her identity and her opportunity to grow as a writer. As she expresses her original idea in her stories, Mohan compels her to discontinue it with an allegation that she has

intentionally disclosed their mutual relation through the stories. Jaya, like other Indian women, has no option but to change her way. Sarabjit Sandhu observes,

In the Indian context, once a girl gets married to a man whether it be a love-marriage or an arranged one the husband takes complete control over her. Whether the husband follows the right path or the wrong one, she has to blindly follow in his footsteps. When Mohan is caught in an act of malpractice and is supposed to be unavailable for certain period, he assumes Jaya would accompany him. Though she is unwilling to follow the example of Sita and Savitri, paradoxically, she is compelled by the situations and circumstances... (Sandhu 38).

Hence, she silently submits to Mohan, a representative of male dominated society. Jaya, though not convinced fully, retreats when her family life is in danger. She continuously thinks about her identity, but unfortunately, is not allowed as the social bondages are antithetical. As Jaya longs to grow as a writer and establish her identity, she does not

want to put her family life into jeopardy. She realizes her condition as, both are yoked together, so better to go to the same direction, as to go to different directions will be painful. For an Indian woman, family comes first in her priority. It is her strength and great virtue that she prefers to sacrifice her aspiration to save the lives of her family member unaffected.

Shashi Deshpande portrays the picture of women in the contemporary Indian society. Despite tremendous change in all the fronts of human life, the predicament of women has not ended. Owing to the dissemination of education, the condition of women has improved to some extent, yet various forms of women oppression are visible. Deshpande aims at showing the difficulties of modern women in building their identity. They have been exploited and suppressed for centuries, and hence, they have lost the courage to raise their demands. Because of this mental powerlessness, they are unable to change the condition of society which may be conducive enough to their freedom. Jaya also belongs to the group of such women who is desperate to come up but ultimately succumbs to her circumstances.

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