

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SELECT NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is one of the living dynamic women writers in Indian English literature and she published many novels and collections of short stories. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing, searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. The novels emerging in the twenty first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. Deshpande writes mainly about everyday India. A society in which we breathe, a culture to which we belong. Her major concerns emerge from our own environment, from our immediate world, holding up mirrors to our own lives. She does not simplify India but presents India as it is to her readers. Even though her writing is very Indian in its framework, the themes honour no borders.

KEYWORDS: Shashi Deshpande, Literature

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a truthful expression of life through the medium of language. Its success lies in blending both art and morality in such a beautiful way that art, in the long run, becomes the thought. Novel is a product of post colonialism in India. It has come through English language and western education. Its progress in India is due to the liberal thought from the west, which again is a product of post colonialism. The image of woman in Indo English novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which showed woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. The post colonial writers of Indo English novels equipped with a new education and sociability have different perspective of the images of woman. In the post colonial period liberal thought was brought in to our country and it was also propagated by western education. The woman novelists were responsible for the new image of woman struggling against the oppressive social norms of the male dominated society. The image of the woman in the postcolonial fiction is a crystallized form of the two different cultures. The image of woman as a custodian of extraordinary moral virtues incorporated with devotion and sacrifice has become an archetype. The image of woman in quest of her identity has emerged from the archetype.

In this respect there occurred changes in theme, emphasis and design in the literature of the twentieth century. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changing world view and the questioning attitude thereby developed by it. Great novelists like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Anitha Desai, Manohar Malgankar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kushwant Singh, Nayanthara Sahgal, Anitha Kumar and Shashi Deshpande besides the unmentioned numerous others contributed a lot to the development of fiction. These Indian novelists deal with the society in its rich and varied customs and view the predicament of women in

different dimensions. The attitude to women has changed in recent times. Their writings are based not only on observations of external behaviour but also on the internal journey. In the psychological realm of the feminine sensibilities, women novelists like Anitha Desai, Shashi Deshpande make straight journey into the psyche of their women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray her in their novels.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the living dynamic women writers in Indian English literature and she published many novels and collections of short stories. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization.

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s, producing novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. These writers were born after Indian independence, and the English language does not have colonial associations for them. They generally write about the urban middle class. Many of these authors, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi and Anuradha Marwah-Roy present an alarming picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. However, the English language can alienate a text from its culture of origin, a view put forward by the Indian author Shashi Deshpande. She bases her argument on the idea that the English language is in some ways harmful to Indian culture not because it is the language of the ex-colonizers, but because it has become the language of the privileged, elite classes in India. Shashi Deshpande as a writer offers feminist reviews of the patriarchal Indian society and selects the situations with which most Indian women can identify. Her focus is on the woman within marital, domestic relationship.

For the predicament of women, their inner conflict, quest for identity, issues pertaining to parent-child relationship, marriage and sex, and their exploitation and lack of expectation, Deshpande has been labeled feminist. But after analyzing her work it might be said that she is not completely in the favour of overthrowing the patriarchy and establishing the matriarchal system. She has made her utmost efforts to balance the relationship between man and woman. In the context of contemporary Indian writing in English, Deshpande, Sahitya Academy Award winner, is one of the most literary personages, has a strong hold among contemporary Indian novelists in English. She deals with the middle-class Indian woman who represents the overwhelming majority of Indian women and is struggling to adjust in it rather than get freedom from the traditional world.

The objective of my thesis is to examine Quest for identity in Shashi Deshpande's selected novels *That long silence* and *The dark holds no terror*. The study wishes to find out if compromise is the key word in Shashi Deshpande's heroines' vocabulary. For the purpose of this study, two of her novels have been considered. In this thesis an attempt is made to study Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists, as by her in her novels, with a view to understand and appreciate their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. It critically analyses their response to the emerging situation in life so as to fit themselves in the contemporary

society. Without probing deeply into the novelist's conviction of what would serve as the ideal panacea for the different kinds of challenges, the study considers the problems of her characters which have had to contend with the given situations. Shashi Deshpande's stories are about a woman, her travails and privations, tensions and irritations, pains and anguishes. Her stories suggest that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run of the middle class women in India. Unable to defy social conventions or traditional morality, the middle-class women themselves are enmeshed by desires and despairs, fears and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, marital discord and male chauvinism. Indeed, Shashi Deshpande's chief thematic concern is with a woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as a human being. And accordingly in her novels the operative sensibility is distinctly female and modern.

Shashi Deshpande feels embarrassed to be called a woman writer and she is not very enthusiastic about the label feminist. She considers herself as a feminist in personal life but not a feminist writer. Women writers are expected to write for women's magazines and be read by women readers only. Males generally do not want to read women writers. Such statements flowed in abundance, perhaps personifying her womanhood. Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Dharwad, India. She is the second daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shriranga. At the age of fifteen, she went to Mumbai where she graduated in Economics. She then moved to Bangalore, where she gained a degree in Law. The early years of her marriage were largely given over to the care of her two young sons, but she took a course in journalism and for a time worked on a magazine.

Her writing career only began in earnest in 1970. Deshpande began her writing with short stories which later developed into writing novels. Her first collection of short stories *The Legacy* published in 1972 had been prescribed for graduate students in Columbia University. Shashi Deshpande now lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband and has completed her M.A. in English Literature. She is regarded as one of the most accomplished contemporary Indian women writers in English. Her output is by no means inconsiderable. Eight novels viz, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980); *If I Die Today*; *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983); *Roots and Shadows* (1986); *That Long Silence* (1987); *The Binding Vine* (1993); *A Matter of Time* (1996) and *Small Remedies* (2000). Shashi Deshpande has written four volumes of short stories, viz., *The Legacy* (1978); *The Miracle* (1986); *It was Dark* (1986), and *It was the Nightingale* (1986), and books for children too.

Literature was a common fare at her home from her early childhood as her Father Adya Rangacharya was an eminent play wright, author and scholar of Sanskrit And Kannada languages. She started her literary career in England by writing shortpieces on her Stay there, moved on to writing short stories which were published in leading Indian magazines. In 1978, *The Legacy*, the first collection of short stories was published in India. Since then, she has brought out four other collections of short stories, has written six novels, two crime novels, which makes it altogether eight novels and four books for children. Her work has been translated into various Indian and European languages.

Deshpande is gifted with an inborn literary bent of mind which matured with Her experiences in life. Even her graduation in Economics and Law did not seem to have much Impact on her writing. Though she is the daughter of Sri ranga, the famous Kannada playwright, Who is known as the Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre, yet she never got any guidance from Him in this field. Not many readers of Shashi Deshpande may be aware that her

first Experiments in writing fiction started with the short story. Over the years, she has published About a hundred stories in literary journals, magazines and newspapers, in between writing her immensely popular novels which are now read all over the world, and taught in universities wherever Indian writing has an audience. Shashi Deshpande is at her best, writing with subtlety and a rare sensitivity about men and women trapped in relationships and situations often not of their making. Written over the past three decades, the stories provide an insight into often forgotten aspects of human feelings and relationships, weaving a magical web of emotions that is testimony to the unusual depth and range of Shashi Deshpande's writing.

Whether she writes short stories or novels, Deshpande writes mainly about everyday India. A society in which we breathe, a culture to which we belong. Her major concerns emerge from our own environment, from our immediate world, holding up mirrors to our own lives. She does not simplify India but presents India as it is to her readers. Even though her writing is very Indian in its framework, the themes honour no borders. True she writes mainly about women, but it is the human being that lurks behind her characters. And that human being is often a lonely one though not one who is alone. There are myriad facets to loneliness in life, and Deshpande has explored many of these facets in her short story collection, *The Intrusion and Other Stories* published in 1993 by Penguin. All within her fragile frame, Shashi Deshpande is a profusion of creativity.

Amorphous thoughts and thought-provoking issues, a defying captivity of simple but powerful words with which she strings an effortless prose while writing or speaking is a lesson in learning for all those who come in contact with her. Shashi Deshpande is well 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. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained to them by society. Her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels and stories.

Shashi Deshpande believes that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually women have reserves we are often unaware of. But for the woman the situation is made more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength, because a woman's strength seems to weaken a man. She says that women are the main support of the family, though the male is the titular head. Women are better at dealing with emotional traumas. This is because women, unlike men, have never had to suppress their emotional selves, they are more open about these problems both in articulating them and understanding them.

Shashi Deshpande has dealt very minutely and delicately with the problems of middle class educated women. She always had in her mind people from the real India to write about, but as she proceeded, spontaneously and involuntarily, woman became the focus of her writings. She is uniquely Indian and her use of Marathi words very evidently presents the customs and traditions of the people belonging to Maharashtra and Karnataka. For example, words such as *Kaka, Kaki, Atya, Dada*, and so on, are essentially Marathi words and might be a bit difficult to grasp by the readers who do not know the language.

Shashi Deshpande cares more for literary qualities of her creative works. Her language is transparent. It does not draw attention to itself, nor does it come in the way. She is basically Indian and writes for the Indians. She does not see males as the cause of all troubles as some Feminists do, she deals with the inner mind of women. Education and experience in foreign countries sets women writers apart from traditional Indian women. The traditional Indian women suffer, submit and adjust themselves to the circumstances. The women novelists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prasad Jhabvala have, in their novels, portrayed this aspect of women's life without having the first hand experience of it.

Shashi Deshpande has projected this aspect of Indian women with more sensitivity and instinctive understanding as she belongs to this category. Unlike other women writers, she is born and brought up on this soil, gained her education in India itself and wrote about India. The projection of the woman's world in her novels is more authentic, credible and realistic. She knows what Indian women feel. Shashi Deshpande does not want to be categorized with other Indian writers writing in English. She has a unique place among the novelists writing in English. She declares that she is just like any other regional writer but her medium of writing happens to be English, as it is the only language she knows well.

Shashi Deshpande believes that a writer gives to society a mirror image of itself, so has she tried to do in her creative writing. The urge to find oneself, to create a space for oneself to grow on one's own, that seems to be the major preoccupation. That's every woman's problem as well. That's where Shashi Deshpande has touched a chord. The study tries to understand and perceive the real dilemma of middle class educated women in her novels. Deshpande has not tried to make her women characters stronger than they are in real life. Rather she has exposed their transitional state. The educated women demand more sexual freedom and independence but are not very sure about what they should do with the same, which leads them to a bitter confusion, anxiety and tension. Their psychology is still wedded to tradition. They have started recognizing the need for change, but at the same time they continue to cling to the old values as they have been brought up with them.

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. Shashi Deshpande uses irony in the majority of her stories and novels to satirize the morals and manners of our society although she is not an ironist. She employs situational, attitudinal and verbal irony to telling effect. Her language is simple, direct and terse; close to the speaking voice. Sometimes, instead of full and long sentences, she uses words elliptically and minimally and this makes for force. Shashi Deshpande's two novels have been critically analysed with a view to understand and appreciate the quest for identity. Different kinds of challenges faced by her female characters are studied in detail here. The novels have been analysed individually and commented upon in detail in the following chapters.

Among Indian women English novelists Shashi Deshpande occupies a prominent position. She has sensitively treated typical Indian themes and has portrayed contemporary middle class women with rare competence. They represent the overwhelming majority and struggle in the traditional world of the society. Her every novel starts with people. Characters occupy a pivotal position in her fiction. Her characters are not wooden ones. They are modern ones. They are written in a psycho-analytical way. They have strength of their own and in spite of challengers and hostilities remain uncrushed. They are sensitive, self-conscious, brilliant and creative. They revolt against the traditional parental family and run away from the suffocated atmosphere of the narrow minded society. In *The Dark Holds no Terrors* and *That Long*

silence ShashiDeshpande has tried to search for self identity and self affirmation through different female characters she gives the message that human nature itself is the hardest to bridge, the hardest to accept, to live with. In Indian English fiction, ShashiDeshpande has a distinctive position as a writer of women centric novels, with a special drive to unveil the gender imbalance in society; she ventures to explore the life of Indian women with socio cultural and psycho ethical paradigms of human existence. female protagonists are sensitive, self conscious, brilliant and creative. They revolt against the traditional parental family and run

Deshpande in her novels has chronicled and strengthened feminist movement by her deep analysis of man woman relationship ShashiDeshpande is very much influenced with the psycho analytical characters of Virginia wolf. She reveals the subconscious and unconscious psyche of her characters. Her away from the suffocated atmosphere of the narrow minded society. In *The Dark Hold no Terrors*, Saru is the heroine. The novel is the story of a marriage on the rocks, Sarita called Saru is a "two in one woman", who in the day time is a successful doctor and at night a terrified trapped animal in the hands of her husband, Manohar.

He is a English teacher in a third rate college, is a jealous husband and is the victim of inferiority complex. Saru is not happy in his company and is unable to fear the sexual sadism of her and her problems ensue because of her outsized ego and innate love for power over other. She defies traditional code at the slightest threat to her importance as that in what she missed and craved for in her mother's house. She is a broad minded woman and realizes that economic independence alone could be an insurance against subordination or suppression. Her husband is not an ordinary male chauvinist. He has absolutely no reservations about treating his wife as an equal and as a person. She reacts against the traditional concept of society that single purpose of a woman is to please the elders and especially the male ones. Through her Character the novelist wants to project the post modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her individuality and identity. The antagonism is faced mainly from two person- Saru's mother and Manohar, saru's husband. Both of them represent the values and norm established by the patriarchal society. She wants to be a strong woman in all the three angels, biological, psychological and social in the end of the novel. She identifies herself with the roles fulfilled. She decides to cut off the traditional bonds of marriage and home and walks into the wide world. It is her comprehensive realization of "self" in which the consideration of family society and personal relationship assume a pigmy position It is her final withdraw not only from society or parents or Manohar but form a sense of nothingness with an exclusive feeling of negation towards life itself. She jails to make spaces for herself both as an individual and as sensitive woman.

In the novel *That Long Silence*, the narrative is fabricated at two levels:- one represents the inner world of Jay's consciousness reflecting her discontent of personal life and on the other, ShashiDeshpande reflects on the various dimensions of problems of women in the traditional society of India. Mohan, the husband of Jaya is an engineer by profession; Mohan's concern is basically with the externals such as money, status, material comforts. Jaya is a very bold lady. Her father taught her to have confidence in herself and has taught her lessons of morality Jaya is not one merely a housewife but she is also a career woman. She is successful columnist and an aspiring writer of fiction. She writes serious stories and sends them to magazines. But her husband is a materialist man and has no craze for her creative genius.

Apparently Jaya adjusts with it but gradually it becomes a burden to her. There is no bridge of understanding between the wife and the husband. Though they were living together, but there had been only emptiness between them. This emptiness draws Jaya towards Kamat who is opposite in nature to her husband Mohan. Though Kamat is not a handsome young boy like Mohan but he is an intelligent man who understands the psychology of woman. Jaya is happy in

his company because she can exchange ideas with him. Being an intelligent middle aged man he always appreciated her creative power.

He encouraged her to write on the issues related with the suffering of woman in society. Jaya is conscious that in gender based social system even basic human sensibility and emotions are classified on the basis of gender assigned roles. Kamat's suggestion to express female anger through her writings baffles Jaya and she ridicules the whole issues, "A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either." (148) The anticipation of the reaction of Mohan, Rati and Rahul scared her writing and therefore instead of searching space for herself in the outer world, she withdraws herself to her private world. It was a self chosen shield to avoid the blow of despair and conflict.

When Kamat dies she feels heartbroken. Even her corrupt husband has lost his highly paid job and thus she has come to the end of the road. In the moment of crisis, her husband expects her to share his anxiety. He wishes to use his wife as a buffer on opiates to soften the impact against himself. But Jaya reacts to the situation differently. She wants to burst out in anger, but she fails to break her silence. When repression of anger continues for a long time, ego, self crisis reaches its climatic point. Mohan becomes frustrated and leaves the house. Now Jaya was alone she bears him two children and third was aborted. She suffers from isolation. Her marriage is loveless which causes the wife and the husband to drift away from each other. She is ever haunted by the memories of the past, her earlier life and her marriage with Mohan. In the end of the novel she decides to put an end to her long silence. She recollects the triumph with the present with which her father had named her Jaya, 'Jaya for victory.' She is renamed as Suhasini. Now she is soft, smiling, placid motherly woman. She tries to remove her long silence and struggle with the problems of self revolution and self estimation. She has decided to come out from her house to the open world and decides to show her talents. She reminds the words of Kamat which he said her long ago that "pursuit of happiness is meaningless and loneliness is the essential condition of human existence. Everyone has to fight his own battle.

