

HEROINES OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: CHANGING FACES OF WOMENAUTHOR'S

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Abstract

ShashiDeshpande occupies a niche of her own in the later part of the 20th century. She is known for her lucid and simple narration. Her language is simple and elegant. She is known for writing a simple story depicting the struggle of the individual to live in the society despite several forces suppressing his survival. Being an author of the recent past, Deshpande reflects a realistic picture of the contemporary middle class woman. The predominating issues and terms in her novels arise from the situations that focus on women caught in the crisis of a transitional society where the shift is taking place from traditional to modern. In consequence, there are tensions emerging out of this scenario, wherein the Indian woman is caught.

Keywords:- Women, Feminism, Patriarchal society, Gender discrimination etc.

ShashiDeshpande is an award winning Indian Novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Shriranga. She was born in 1938 Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978 and her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in 1980. She is a winner of SahityaAcademi Award for the novel *That Long Silence*. Her works also include children's books. ShashiDeshpande's novels present a social world of much complex relationship. In her novels many men and women living together, mourning across the life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. The old tradition bound world consists with the modern, creating unforeseen gaps and disruptions within the family fold. Women's understanding becomes questionable as the old patterns of behaviour no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become in tense of quest for self-definition, because it would not be possible to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by clarity about one's own image and role.

ShashiDeshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class. She deals with the inner world of Indian women in her novels. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, novel reveals the life of Sarita, who is always neglected and ignore in favour of her, brother, she is not given any importance. In the *Roots and Shadows* Indu, who wants to be independent of every restriction? Having born in an orthodox family such

freedom was denied to her. Her family was joined family and it was maintained and controlled by an old aunt, a widow who did not bear a child. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya the protagonist of the novel, like every other Indian woman within the patriarchal system, suppresses her own likes and dislikes, as she plays second fiddle to her husband during crucial times. Her *Matter of Time* deals with the human predicament of women. It exposes how Sumi, a deserted wife is dauntless in her adversity in the way she evolves herself from utter desolation and bitterness, which was in line with the visible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities. In *Binding Vine*, Urmila, the protagonist is a college lecturer. In novel *Urmila* is Urmi. She is not radical but she tries to live her own. Through her eyes we can see different types of Indian woman around her.

The present paper is reflecting on the five major novels of ShashiDeshpande, and her different women characters, that how they are fighting for their rights. From Saru to Sumi, and from Indu to Jaya, how they are victims of patriarchal society, tradition, modernity and dominance at their homes as well as in society. Their fighting and awareness for themselves and win the life for them; how their faces are changing for the rights of women, they used their education and mental effort to overcome from the critical situations. In all these five novels, ShashiDeshpande objectifies new female subjective experiences with a gynocritique vision. She basically reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. The underlying theme in ShashiDeshpande's novels is human relationships, especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife and also between mother and daughter. Her novels reflect the lives of suffocated women in search of a refuge from suffering. Searching from a solution to their private problems, the female protagonists in her novels shift from their personal pains to the sufferings of the other women around.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is about the homecoming of Saru, the protagonist. The title itself is paradoxical. Darkness is the symbol of Terror. Terrors subdues, hurts, affects one's emotions. Here in this novel terror does not affect Saru but her husband stands for darkness. She returns to her father's home after fifteen years. By doing so, she tries the gap between her and her father. The novel is also concerned with suffering of the modern educated Indian woman who is in search of her individuality. Saru who is such a woman, also tries to fight from the constraints of caste based traditional social system. Sarita is successful well settled doctor. Her husband Manohar is an English teacher in college. She has two children. But she is not happy with her married life. Saru is narrator of the novel. She remembers her childhood experiences and her stay in her father's home gives Saru an opportunity to re-assess her relationship with her father, her dead mother, her dead brother, Dhruva and her children Renu and Abhi. She tries to understand herself and others by redefining her relations. This makes her mentally strong to face realities. The darkness no longer holds any terror and Saru is highly self-determined and discards traditional rules. She rejects her mother to become a Doctor and she rejects caste to marry outside. The novel explores various dimensions of middle class family life and the liability which controls a woman's conduct and responsibility.

In the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, society presented is in transition. The women who are financially independent have always a choice to enjoy their life with pride. Saru, the protagonist finds her position as a married woman and therefore she has certain limitations. But at the end of the story, novelist has shown her character at two levels. Saru is sentimental and emotional; however, she is intellectual. Saru has to keep on struggling her own battle alone, redefine, and rediscover her life. VijayalakshmiSheshadri rightly states:-

“This becomes crucial to the characterization of Sarita, who is presented

as a woman with tremendous possibilities of movement, which match her desire for new places. In the terminology applied by black feminist critics, she could be described as an ‘assimilated heroine’ who has gained control over her life, a woman who apparently has combined career and marriage successfully.” (1)

Saru’s mother always makes unkind remarks about her dark complexion. Therefore, her mother repeatedly tells-“you will never be good looking. You are too dark for that.”(2) Saru is member of middle class society, which observes strictly social taboos-marriage taboos, education taboos, rites and rituals, class and caste. Saru’s mother follows all these taboos. But Saru disowns all social taboos because Saru had seen in her childhood the suffering of her grandmother who used to live separate from her husband and was treated as an extra burden by her family.

Saru’s status of society rose day by day and Manu’s position drowned in the society. He has filled with utter depression and wants to get rid from depression, but how? He is unconsciously wants to revenge to Saru and the only way he can regain that potency and masculinity through sexual assaults upon Saru, which for him becomes an assertion of his manhood leading to a sort of abnormality at night as he is a cheerful normal human being and a loving husband during day turning into rapist animal at night. It terrifies and humiliates Saru so much that, she cannot even speak about him to them, “and each time happened and I don’t speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be hold alive within it and die soon painful death.”(3) She says:-

“He attacked me like animal that night. I woke up and there was this...It happened again? Again?..... Yes again and again and yet again. I have lost count. That first time I woke up in the morning feeling somehow different not knowing why? There was only feeling of pain? I had terrible nightmares after Renu’s birth.”(4)

Saru therefore advocates the feeling that woman should pretend that they are smart, competent, rational or strong. By her life, and despair, she wants to escape from that. Saru’s idea to make herself an autonomous being proves her potential. She is constantly suffering from some dilemma- which way to go-what to do. In a country like India where marriage is the best alternative for most of the women, Deshpande makes her women characters slightly different. They also value marriage but that is not the only choice for them. This gives a dimension to Saru’s life. When she walked out of her husband’s place, she selects an alternative-she pursues her career. She says:- “My life is my own.”(5)

Indu in *Roots and Shadows* feels pain of being a woman because the society makes her feel like that. Right from the childhood Indu was reminded by the women members of the family that she is ‘female’. So her behavioural pattern will not be alike a male. She has certain restrictions which she is bound to follow:-

“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 female. You must accept everything, eve defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive.”(6)

Indu wants to be independent of every restriction. Having born in an orthodox family such freedom was denied to her. Her family was joint family and it was maintained and controlled by an old aunt, a widow who did not bear a child. At the time of her death, she left her

money and family to heroine, Indu. Indu was basically rebellious in nature. She left her home for study in the big city when she was a teenager. She aspired to be journalist and became what she dreamt of. She fell in love with a young man who seemed to be modern and married him. In due course, she realized that her freedom was illusory. She has exchanged the orthodoxy of the village home for the conventions of the 'Smart young set' of the city where material well-being had to be assured by sacrificing principles, if necessary.

Her great aunt dies. Indu returns to her house after the absence of 12 years. As she attempts to take charge of her legacy, she comes to realize the strength and the resilience of the village women whom she had previously dismissed as weak.

Indu went against her family as a mode of resistance to marry a man against her aunt's wishes. Here Deshpande again shows that her women characters can go against their family to fulfill their wishes- if it be the case of marriage or career selection. Every individual being should have the right to take decision in life. So what Indu has done is not unjustified in that sense. She married Jayant because she loved him from the bottom of her heart. But the crucial point Indu walks out of her relationship when she felt that her identity is at stake. At the initial stage of her marriage she could not trace the increasing complexities in their relationship. But later on she realized everything. She is caught up in the marital tension. So, to liberate herself from the tensions she left Jayant.

“This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant I had not known it.... That there was, somewhere outside me, a part of me Without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant..... And lost the ability To be alone.”(7)

This novel pictures the agony and suffocation experienced by Indu in a male dominated and tradition-bound society. Indu lands herself in great mental trauma when she refuses to play the straight jacketed role of a wife, imposed upon her by the society.

To her great disappointment, the man after her heart, whom she has married, turns out to be no different from the less educated and very conservative Indian man. She is even more saddened when she understands that she herself has all along been involuntarily she even gets into an extra marital affair, and finally she realizes that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage.

Indu, who considers herself independent and intelligent, who is proud of her logical and rational thinking and who sets out of reform Indian womanhood, has become, after her marriage, one of those archetype submissive Indian women whose identity is only an extension of her husband. Indu represents any woman placed in transitional period who is torn between age old traditions and individual views.

“I had learnt it at last no questions no retorts, only silence.” (8) Jaya in That Long silence is a creative writer. She gets pleasure to write. At the beginning of the novel she is encouraged by Mohan, her husband, to write but later on the encouragement was transformed into a mental complexity. Jaya, on Mohan's advice, was writing about “light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle class housewife.”(9) But that does not give her satisfaction. Her intense desire to do something of her “own” is to some extent fulfilled only when she confronts life through her fiction. She writes the story about a man “...who could not reach out to his wife except through her body.”(10) but Mohan takes it to be the truth of their life. This creates tension in their relationship.

Jaya's self is torn between her identity as a wife and her autonomy as a creative writer. Jaya remains silent and it is considered by her husband to be her protest. It is basically her silent

protest. Jaya gets support from Kamat, a man living in the apartment near Jaya. Kamat encourages her to write good piece of literature. Here Kamat's role is sounder than the role of Jyant.

Jaya raises her voice when Mohan wants to change her name from Jaya to Suhasini. This can also be considered as mode of resistance. She already killed Suhasini. When unable to bear Mohan's angry accusations, she breaks her silence to retort back unable to restrain her, she points out bluntly that she has given up writing because of him. The altercation between them reaches to a stage where Jaya for the first time in her seventeen years marriage, experiences real anger which robs her of words:-

“But as if I'd been struck dumb, I could say nothing. I sat in my place,
Pinned to it by his anger, a monstrosly huge spear that went through me,
Excruciatingly painful, yet leaving me cruelly conscious.”(11)

When Jaya finds out that her identity is getting blurred for the mental complexities of her husband, she becomes rebellious. But this is not the rebellion in the physical sense; rather it is mental rebellion. Jaya could only recover herself after her long silence-here silence plays the role of a weapon. It signifies that everything cannot be altered only through active protest; sometimes the unspoken words bear much strength than the spoken ones. At least Jaya's silence is expressive of that. Jaya is not out and out the mute sufferer in the novel. She observes her relationship with her husband and speaks through her consciousness. Jay herself contributed to her victimization and so she had to fight her own battle and workout her own salvation. In consequence, she felt it was necessary to break the silence to stamp her identity. From then onwards Jaya lived in her real identity, without sacrificing individuality.

“Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has Good opinion of herself; she is more concerned with life. She does not want pity; She would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. The point is, they are both unusual people. People are puzzled by the abandoned wife not feeling bad.” (12).

Sumi in *A Matter of Time*, becomes the victim of the implicit of patriarchal domination. Her husband Gopal leaves her after long years of marriage without explaining anything. She lives in her utter desolation without knowing her fault. *A Matter Time* exposes how Sumi, a deserted wife is dauntless in her adversity in the way she evolves herself from utter desolation and bitterness, which was in line with the visible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities. It records with courage, responsibility and independent spirit, even after being deserted by her husband, Sumi has reached a stage of self-fulfilment. Sumi proves to be a woman of confidence who can take care of her family even in the absence of her husband.

Like Indu-Jayant, Saru-Manu, Jaya-Mohan and Urmi-Kishore, Sumi and Gopal also enjoyed harmonious relationships during the early years of their marriage. Their too is not the ordinary arranged marriage as Gopal's frequent recapitulations reveal. Their joyous intimate love, physical as well as mental, leads one to understand their conjugal bliss especially in their early years of their marriage.

Gopal deserted her without any reason, she tried a lot to find out her mistake, but she didn't found. At the age of forty, she starts her life afresh. Sumi picks up the thread of her life and shows her will-power and independence, she appears to be a spineless woman and an indifferent moron, too dull to grasp the situation. Though beautiful, educated and courageous, she lacks the spark of Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmi. But this reflects Sumi's modern progressive outlook. She is anxious that man-woman relationship should be sound, equal and non-partisan.

Sumi stands for responsibility, motherly love, care and concern. Every moment she is seen worried about her grown-up daughter's. She who refuses to be treated as an inferior woman in the society boosts her daughters spirit waned by the adversity. She is perfectly aware of her responsibility as a mother-cum-single parent to her daughters. Sumi reveals essentially an optimistic vision of life.

The Binding Vine is a refreshing change from the earlier novels of ShashiDeshpande. The step forward, achieved in this novel, is the introduction of female bonding, the desire of one woman to help another less fortunate one. Urmila dreams society's attention to the plight of the rape victim and is determined to get Mira's poem published. This is a positive development. ShashiDeshpande also takes a bold step forward in projecting a woman's biological needs and also raises the question of women's right over her body which can't be violated even in marriage.

The Binding Vine discusses heroine's sexuality, her 'passion'. Exploring working women's needs of the head heart and further down the anatomy, than her earlier novels. In *Binding Vine*, Urmila, the protagonist is a college lecturer. She is not radical but she tries to live her own. Through her eyes we can see different types of Indian women around her. Urmi is married to a naval officer, Kishore. She is capable of looking after her family with her job in the absence of her husband.

In the *Binding Vine*, ShashiDeshpande makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape. In the *Binding Vine*, ShashiDeshpande portrays a man's obsession with his wife and her intense dislike of physical intimacy with him. The travail of the wife finds expression in a series of poems composed by her and discovered by her daughter-in-law, Urmi, long after her death. Urmi's state of bereavement makes her highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of her long-dead mother-in-law, Mira. She makes a desperate attempt to explore the mind of the young Mira by delving deep into the poems composed by her.

Though the novel *The Binding Vine* chiefly revolves around the individual tragedies of Urmi, Mira, Kalpna and Shakutai, ShashiDeshpande, subtly hints at the suffering of numerous other women in a sexist society. The gross unfairness that prevails in Indian society against women is evident in the marriage of Akka. Akka willingly agrees to marry a widower who is the father of a child though she is well aware of her prospective husband's obsession with his dead wife. Akka's willing acceptance of such a marriage proves the fact that in a male dominated society many young girls accept marriage under any condition because they have been taught that marriage is the most desirable goal for a girl finding the form is the most difficult thing. In a traditional society women are groomed and educated for dependence, for wifhood and for motherhood.

The Binding Vine such thematic dimensions and facets of consciousness in the handling of women characters that force a reader not to accept Deshpande's persistent rejection of the label 'feminist'. If a writer gives such a sensitive and thought-provoking handlings of women's rights with regard to their bodies, he or she bound to be called a feminist writer. The *Binding Vine* has some such thematic foci because ShashiDeshpande probes rape within and outside marriage. Very few women writers have written about these sensitive issues. The novel, therefore, is an improvement upon her earlier novels as far as ideology is concerned.

An analysis of the women characters of Deshpande, the major finding is that, she always liberates her women from all sorts of problems through the means of writing. Deshpand makes an attempt to contest various ideologically encoded binaries like speech/silence, tradition/modernity, male/female, oppressor/victim, dominant/resistant, central/marginal,

majority/minority. Women's stories are most of the time 'silent'. Women have become the minorities. They are supposed to be traditional. But they are not restricted themselves in enjoying the role of wife and mother. They are educated, modern, and courageous women. They can fight for their right, they can raise their voice, though sometimes they are submissive but they are aware of their rights. From Saru to Urmi, all are the representative of modern women. This is the changing faces of women.

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