

WOMEN'S QUEST FOR SELF IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

The present paper is a study of the selected publications of Shashi Deshpande who has written various noteworthy pieces of works on feminist study and raised the voice of women who remain in the home and continuously in quest of their self, besides their being a lady of the house or a mother or a daughter. A woman's psychology has been revealed in almost all the novels of Shashi Deshpande, where woman struggle hard to come out from the boundary she has been put in. Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an examination into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Quest for self, feminism, self-confidence, patriarchy.

Shashi Deshpande's account of personal life

Shashi Deshpande, the female offspring of an eminent Kannada playwright and Sanskrit intellectual Adya Rangachar Sriranga, is a widely highly praised novelist who has written ten novels and five volumes of short stories. Her father is called "the George Bernard Shaw (Irish playwright) of the Kannada Theatre." Like her father, she has also won various awards such as "Thirumathi Rangammal Prize" and prestigious "Sahitya Akademi Award" (A literary honor in India, National Academy of Letters) in 1990 for her novels. She has also won the "Padma Shri" award (contribution in various spheres of activity) in 2009 for her valuable contribution as a writer. She also wrote the screenplay for the Hindi silver screen "Drishti." She is an alumnus (postgraduate) in English literature from Mysore University Karnataka. After her marriage in 1962, she went to England with her husband. Later than when she return back, she started writing short stories which have records of her personal life incidents.

Shashi Deshpande is known for creating women characters that are contemporary. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the customary nasty gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. They are cognizant of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and resist against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their competence 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 depiction of the Indian middle-class

women. Her heartfelt concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels and stories.

Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Academy Award winning novelist, is concerned with the projection of sorrows and sufferings, plight and predicament, pain and anguish, suppression and exploitation of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. She shows her anxiety about women who are agitated on account of orthodox and established norms, beliefs, customs and conventions deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. She raises her voice of protest against injustice done to women in the name of gender-discrimination. She wants her women to set themselves free from male-ego and male-domination. She wants them to rebel man-made laws, rules and ideologies. She wants them to assert themselves by taking their own decisions.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's novels are uptight with a woman's quest for self; an expedition into the female mind and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Shashi Deshpande has divulged the unique and lonely circumstance of Indian women whose rights as human beings are axed by the orthodox society. The orthodox society expects the women to be vassals, thus, their self-identity and individuality are always sidelined. Shashi Deshpande's feminism talks about emancipation of women not only legally but socially too. Women are not going to recuperate from their deprived state until they are socially acknowledged as human beings. Even the economically independent women find their lives torn as under between traditionalism and modernity. Being an Indian, Shashi Deshpande has meticulously and poignantly revealed the Indian social system and the conventional norms designed for its women.

Quest For Self In "That Long Silence"

Shashi Deshpande's "That Long Silence", is the Sahitya Academy award-winning novel tells a haunting story of how Jaya, who is disillusioned with her marriage and her life, rediscovers herself. Who is Jaya? She is Mohan's wife. She is Rahul's and Rati's mother. She was a writer who had given up serious writing, and had taken up writing a weekly column on Seeta, a plump, pea brained but shrewd and deceitful woman. Deshpande's Jaya was a woman who did not ask questions, because she had learnt early in her life that when women ask questions - particularly questions like, "Why, why this injustice?" they would simply hang heavily around in the air, refusing to go away, causing eyebrows around her to raise at her boldness in asking such questions. Jaya was related to mad Kusum who had killed herself by jumping into a well, and had died not by drowning but of broken neck as there was no water in the well.

Jaya was sure of her sanity as long as Kusum had lived, because if Kusum was mad, then Jaya must have been "normal". After Kusum's suicide, Jaya does not know any more who she is. Is she just Mohan's wife who had fragmented herself, who had cut off the bits that had refused to be Mohan's wife? Is she like the sparrow in the bedtime story of the wise sparrow and the foolish crow, which she had heard as a kid? That story goes like this: There was a foolish crow who built his house of dung, and a wise sparrow who built hers of wax.... And when it rained, the house of wax stood firm, while the crow's house was washed away. And so the story goes on, the foolish innocent crow standing out there in the rain, begging to be let in, while Sister Sparrow spins out her excuses...till finally she says, "Come in, you're all wet aren't you, poor fellow?" And she points to the pan on which she has just made the chapatties. "Warm yourself there," she says. And the silly crow hops on to it and is burnt to death. Deshpande uses this story to paint brilliantly how the life of a woman like Jaya is She says that their life's summarized as, "Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and you're safe." Her husband was in a top position, they had two children - one boy -and one girl - and she was yet another wife and mother whose life centered around her family and her home - nothing more.

Jaya's character in this novel is a wonderful creation. Deshpande has portrayed brilliantly the loneliness of a woman living silently in a cage called marriage. The story of Jaya is unfolded for the readers. It is a film in which blame cannot be pointed at any single character for the anguish that flows through the many layers of the story. If there is any blame, it is collective in nature, and all the characters - Jaya's mother, father, uncles, aunts, grandmothers, husband, children, and most significantly Jaya herself - are responsible for the silence that pervades in Jaya's life. The reason why this novel is like a breath of fresh air among writings with similar theme is its ending. Contrary to expectation, Jaya, armed_ with her new knowledge, does not turn her back to her marriage. Instead, she marches ahead with renewed strength to breathe new life into it. According to Jaya discovering one's self does not mean to stand aloof from the rest of the world. Deshpande says through this novel that the solution to problems within relationships does not lie in walking away from them, but rather in rebuilding the relationships in such a way as to give little place for problems to crop up.

Quest For Self In “The Binding Vine”

The Binding Vine was published in India by Penguin in 1992 (republished in 1998), and nearly a decade later it is published in USA by the Feminist Press. The Binding Vine is the tale of Urmi. Urmi the mother who has just lost her baby daughter, Urmi the childhood friend (and sister-in-law) of Vanaa, Urmi the daughter of the beautiful Inni and granddaughter of the beloved Baiajji and Urmi the one comforting light in the life of Shakutai. The narrator in The Binding Vine is the clever, sharp — tongued Urmi, grieving over the death of her baby daughter.

The novel begins just after Anu (Urmi's) baby girl's death. Everybody around Urmi tries to help her, yet nobody knows how to. Vanaa, who has been her closest friend, stays at her side constantly, reminding her of many incidences from their common past, hoping to get Urmi out of her despair. It is not that Vanaa thinks that reminding Urmi of her courage when she fell off a bicycle will now give her courage to face Anu's loss. Vanaa too is desperate, and wants to help Urmi. In fact it is through Vanaa's reminiscence about Mira that Urmi's healing process begins. Urmi gets Mira's poems out of the trunk, which had sat for decades in the attic, gathering dust, and starts reading them. It is while reading those poems written by a college going teenager Mira, who was married off to a man whom she could not love, that Urmi realises the various angle of pain that many a woman has to bear very often silently. Mostly without having any option.

The healing process which begins by reading Mira's poems continues when Urmi accidentally meets Shakutai in the hospital where Vanaa works as a medical social worker. Shakutai's eldest daughter Kalpana has been brought to the hospital after she was brutally beaten up and raped. Urmi feels compelled to help Shakutai, to listen to her, to keep her company. During the long wait in which Kalpana lies in coma, Urmi makes a bold, modern, and a very humanistic statement that she tries to convince Shakutai that it was not Kalpana who did anything wrong, it is not that she invited trouble upon herself by dressing up, by painting her lips and nails, but it is Kalpana who is terribly victimized. For a long time Urmi herself does not understand her need to come and sit with Shakutai, whose world is very different from her own.

It is when Shakutai asks her repeatedly, 'What shall I do, Urmila?' - mirroring her own anguished cry of how she would survive Anu's death -, that Urmi thinks of the awesome courage of the few who tried to find an answer to such questions. She thinks that detachment, love, brotherhood, non-violence - they're just words. We are absorbed in the daily routine of living, that the main urge is always to survive. And as Mira once wrote: "Just as the utter futility of living overwhelms me, I am terrified by the thought of dying, of ceasing to be" the main urge human beings have is always to survive, and in surviving one looks for the spring of life, one constantly searches for love, for support from other human beings.

As much as The Binding Vine is the story of Urmi, it is also the story of Mira, and of Shakutai. Mira is the binding vine between Urmi and Vanaa. Vanaa's father's first wife, she died giving birth to Kishore, Urmi's husband. Writing poetry was for Mira not only a way of finding comfort in her life but also a way of protesting against the way society works. When during the marriage, her name is changed to Nirmala, a protest arises in Mira at the loss of her identity. And then again Mira is the symbol of the relationship between daughters and

mothers, all over the world. She has one question she desperately wanted to ask her mother, a question she never asked: "Mother, why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?"

Then we have a sub-plot in the novel. Shakutai, an attendant at a school, is raising her three children all alone. Her elder daughter Kalpana has been raped, brutally beaten up, and is lying in coma in the hospital. Shakutai is torn between her motherly feelings for Kalpana, and at the same time is afraid of the dishonour this incident would bring to the family. Once she says, 'She was a good girl, I swear to you, my Kalpana was a good girl.' At other times she talks as if the girl is to blame for what happened to her. It is her fault, that she was stubborn, she was self-willed, she dressed up, she painted her lips and nails and so this happened to her. Shakutai mirrors millions of women in India who are torn between genuine love for their children and at the same time are ruled by the ever-present scepter of family honour.

Urmila draws society's attention to her protest, and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. Urmila is seen, at the end of the novel, recollecting the bonds of love that provide the "Springs of Life" for human survival. She is not a rebel against the system because she believes that things are gradually improving though at a slow pace. For example, with just four lines of Mira's poetry, But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? Deshpande does not just open up a rich world of Indian traditions and mythology but she also shows the anguish felt by an unwilling wife who knows what the coming of the night inevitably brings for her.

Quest For Self In “The Dark Holds No Terrors”

Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* undergoes a similar trauma like other heroines of Shashi Deshpande's work. Sarita confronts reality and in the end realises that the dark she feared really holds no terrors. Saru is a 'two-in-one woman', a doctor in the day time and a trapped animal at night. She wants to be free and have an identity of her own. She longs to break away from the rigid traditional norms. She hates her parental home, yet the novel begins with Saru visiting her father after a gap of fifteen years. On hearing through a friend about her mother's death a month ago, Saru wants to visit her father's house from where she had left as a young woman. Opposing her parents to marry the man named Manohar whom she loved. She now returned to it as a well-established doctor and a mother of two children more out of an urge to escape from the hell of life she is passing through. She appears to be confused, hopeless, dull almost thoughtless and an outsider.

Years on Sarita still remembers her mother's bitter words uttered when as a little girl she was unable to save her younger brother from drowning. Now, her mother is dead and Sarita returns to the family home, apparently to take care of her father, but in reality to escape the nightmarish brutality her husband inflicts on her every night. In the quiet of her old father's company Sarita reflects on the events of her life: her stultifying small town childhood, her domineering mother, her marriage to the charismatic young poet Manohar (who turns vicious when he realizes his career is going nowhere and that his wife has overtaken him professionally), her children... As she struggles with her emotions and anxieties, Sarita gradually realizes that there is more to life than dependency on marriage, parents and other such institutions — and she resolves to use her new found truths to make a better life for herself.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a tremendously powerful portrayal of one woman's fight to survive in a world that offers no easy outs. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has childhood scars. She hates her mother to such an extent that she says, "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one." Saru's mother shows gender difference in her treatment of her son Dhruva and daughter. "He's different. He's a boy" — these words establish the traditional Indian mother against whom Saru has to rebel all her life. The childhood experience of watching her brother sink into water and die gives her a sense of guilt that she is responsible for the death of her brother. It is enhanced by her mother's words, "You killed your brother... why didn't you die?" which drive Saru to hate her mother.

Saru rebels against her mother by going to Mumbai to study medicine. The hostel life is a kind of "rebirth" into a totally different world where you don't have to stay outside for "those three days, you are no

longer an 'untouchable'; you can even talk about it;" When Saru falls in love with Manohar, a boy from a lower caste, again she defies the authority of her mother. Saru's marriage is a means to get away from her mother and her home. The departure of the heroine from the mother is the first step towards autonomy; for, the mother is the first pedagogue of the restrictions on the woman.

On return of saru, when she enters into her room, she finds male clothes hanging on the wall and realizes that she has no room of her own. The feeling of being enclosed is associated with the mother's house and the protagonist wants to escape from the enclosure. The image of the enclosed walls suggests the suffocation. Saru undergoes not only in their parental homes but the homes she has chosen as refuge.

The novel is presented in four parts and even in the first part, all the important issues — bitterness towards the mother, insecurity of Manu, Saru's relationship with Manu and children, Dhruva's death — are touched upon. The rest of the three parts elaborate Saru's introspection of and her reaction to different issues touched upon in the first part. Shashi Deshpande works with a dubious world that falls between reality and unreality. The truth behind Saru being the murderess of Dhruva, Manu being the predator and Saru the prey is a matter that lies in this realm between reality and unreality. The italicized description of Saru's traumatic but dream-like experience when she slowly recognizes the predator to be her own husband defines the dubious area better.

The Dark Holds No Terrors presents the inner drama of Saru that has a lot to do with the past. Hence narration is thoughtful sliding across the past and the present through effective "quick cuts". Shashi Deshpande's outlook on human life, grief, happiness, pain, man's aloneness and so on, and these incidents make the novel a bit too wordy. She never leaves anything unsaid to evoke rich suggestions. Some Indian elements like the son's importance in the family, girls getting importance only during haldi-kumkums, a woman possessed by Devi, find a natural place in the novel that deals with a woman's status and the dichotomy within her personality.

Quest For Self In "Ships that pass"

Radhika who is the main protagonist of the novel *Ships that Pass* represents the group of those young girls who have their upbringing with modernism and have influence of a modern girl. Therefore, when she chooses a life partner according to the wish of her family she is in a dilemma that whether she is doing right with her or not — Oh hell! I'd begun thinking like the self-sacrificing heroine of a B grade tearjerker, ready to do anything for the family...! Even after the spread of education all over the world and modernism, woman still comes as an article which can be used by the male oriented society. A girl since her childhood faces disparity in the lifestyle of a boy and girl. She is restricted to do several things and told to follow old customs of the society. Radhika is a young and educated girl still she is inherited with the old way of thinking and restricts herself to do what she desires. Education and modernity some for example now-a-days the media is very influential and in media women have got sufficient exposure but here too she is presented as a commodity.

Ships that pass is the story of Radhika, who decides after graduation to get married first, and then to think about what she wants to do with her life — whether she wants to study further, start a career or whatever else, and who is made to realize the folly of such a decision when she visits the home of her once beautiful sister, Tara, and sees how Tara's marriage that had started in deep love had disintegrated. In this sense this is a story of a young woman growing up to the realities of life, of her abandoning easy escapes, of her recognizing and going after what really matters in life. All this happens with the background of Tara's unhappy marriage to Shantanu. The touch of crime is given in Shantanu's hinting to Radhika that Tara is unhappy, and has tried twice to commit suicide.

Radhika is bewildered when Tara emphatically underlines her wish to live. The question of who is right becomes all the more urgent to answer when Radhika has a intuition while seeing a movie with her nephew Abhi, and rushes home leaving him in the movie theater with his friends. She finds the house to be totally dark, and there was an obvious smell of gas leaking. She rescues Tara who tells her that she never opened the gas. The evidence points to Shantanu who had come home that evening, and had made a cup of tea for Tara. Was

he the one who had opened the gas? Was he the one who had removed the wire from the fuse, and had plunged the house in the darkness?

Tara cannot find answers to these questions even with the help of Ram Mohan, a former neighbor, who is now a doctor in the same place, and has become a friend of Tara. Soon after – in fact a day after Tara proclaims her interest in living - she is found dead. The cause of death is overdose of sedatives. An empty bottle of the sedatives is found hidden in Shantanu's closet. Though he is arrested, Ram Mohan and Radhika help to get him out of the police custody by producing a letter presumably written by Tara. The story becomes an affirmation of the thought that it is the living that matter more than the dead. It is not important to find out whether Tara really committed suicide, or whether she was given the overdose of sedatives by Shantanu. It is not important to clarify why Shantanu tells Radhika that Tara had tried to commit suicide when Tara has no such intentions. It is also not important to clarify who opened the gas, and who had tampered with the fuse. Any why? All that matters is that the livings are more important than the dead. As Shashi Deshpande says, the mystery of human mind is a greater mystery than the mystery of who did it!

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande's novels are realistic depiction of the anguish and conflict of the modern educated middle class women, Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and independence on the other. Deshpande's concern and sympathy are essentially for the woman. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. Besides revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity, the author uncovered the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression. Though Shashi Deshpande's novels bound the focus of middle class women despite the fact she has also taken into consideration the problems of the lower class women. Making women as the heroines of her novels, Shashi Deshpande has undertaken a journey. It is an adventurous and heart rending journey as it involves the process of representing the problems that women grapple without heightening them so that the novels remain objective account of the trials and tribulations of women. She presents the current Indian scenario in the right perspective. Being true to her convictions, Shashi Deshpande is successful in describing the plight of Indian women. The motive of Shashi Deshpande in exposing the intrigues of patriarchal set up to subjugate women implies her deep felt wish that women should be awakened. Shashi Deshpande eventually wants to lead the women out of their subjugated cells into free lands, where freedom reigns supreme.

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