

Shashi Deshpande's Feminist Vision : A Critical Study of her Representative Novels

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Abstract. A prominent living woman novelist, Shashi Deshpande has contributed significantly to the firm establishment of feminist literature in Indian English Writing. She dislikes being called a feminist writer because she considers it a form of patriarchal design to keep feminist writing and female writers on the margin. However, her novels primarily deal with the issues of feminist misery caused by traditional male hegemony and patriarchal norms governing gender relations. She is a prolific writer who has authored eleven novels besides children's books, short stories, essays and a memoir. The most striking feature of her novels is her protagonists who are middle class urban women of modern India. Though enlightened and to some extent empowered, they too suffer at the hands of patriarchal hegemony. They are educated and economically independent, but they yield to the socially structured roles of a submissive and docile daughter, ideal wife and caring mother preferring these roles to personal aspirations and professional career. As such, they strive for individual identity, freedom of choice and self-fulfilment. They take resort to silence to avoid conflict and unpleasantness, and are given to anguish, isolation, desperation and passive surrender. Deshpande convincingly depicts the clamour for feminine aspirations and clash between tradition and modernity. To unfold Deshpande's feminist stance pertaining to Indian women in general and urban middle class women of postcolonial India in particular, this paper analyses two of her most representative novels — the Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *That Long Silence* (1989) and one of her later novels *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), investigating different aspects of feminine misery and shades of human relationships. It, thus, brings out the tenor of feminist protest and attitudinal change in contemporary India.

Keywords : Feminist; gender; patriarchy; urban; identity; struggle.

Shashi Deshpande, a major woman writer in Indian English Literature, occupies the place of prominence among the powerful writers of feminist literature. Her works deal with a woman's struggle, anguish and suffering in contemporary Indian society. She focuses on the misery and mental agony of Indian middle-class educated women of urban society. Deshpande's female protagonists are aware of their due rights, yet they

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are caught between tradition and modernity. She has profound knowledge of Indian mythology and has presented it in the context of contemporary Indian themes very sensitively, specially in the perspective of middle-class women with competence. Indian women have been victim of custom and tradition and have to suffer a lot without any right to speak. In our ancient religious books an ideal woman of Indian civilization has been defined in this way: “KaryeshuMantri, KaraneshuDaasi, Rupecha Lakshmi, kshamayaadharitri, Bhojyeshu Mata, ShayentuRambha Shat karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni” (Acharya, 351). It means: ‘Like a slave while serving; a minister when counseling Goddess Lakshmi in her looks; the earth in forbearance; a mother while feeding; Rambha, the celestial prostitute in bed; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife.’ If a woman possesses these qualities she is considered as an honourable. But this is only a myth. In fact women perform all these things but they are regarded only as the “Weaker Sex”, a child breeding machine etc. and she never enjoys equal status as man. Therefore the equality of man and woman is only a myth. Deshpande contrasts the past with the present and depicts myths in the light of the experiences of the contemporary woman as closely as possible and reinterprets them in the modern context. Deshpande, on the other hand, attempts to break the long silence of Indian woman in her writing by transforming a predominantly and symbolic order into a feminine narration. Shashi Deshpande writes in the “Afterward” to her collection of short stories, *The Stone Women*:

Myths are still important to us. We do not demolish them, we need them to live by, they have shaped our ideas for a great many years they embody our dreams. To destroy them would be to leave a large dent in the fabric of our culture. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. (94).

Shashi Deshpande’s female protagonists are generally caught in a web of painful circumstances and their struggle, the outcome of which is usually the basis of novel her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as a human being. The chief protagonists in her novels are female characters who are in constant search for meaning and value of life.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* which brought her the Sahitya Akademi Award deals with the silence of the modern and educated Indian women who are urban. She narrates the life of Jaya who is disillusioned with her marriage and her life. Jaya externally appears to be a satisfied house-wife. Having married a responsible man, Mohan, and blessed with two children, Rahul and Rati, she seems to have everything in life. The novelist lays emphasis on self-realization in all her novels and advocates to give due place to women in the society, without the support of their husband. All women whether they are educated, professional or housewives, they are always suppressed by the social traditions. Shashi Deshpande said in an interview to Joel Kuortti :

That Long Silence is a hysterical novel in the sense that inside of me I was kind of screaming, but when it came out — as you said, one steps back from that screaming self — and one says, look Jaya is very analytical. There is no point at which she gives way to her emotions or self-pity or anything. Throughout she is analysing herself, her life, her relationships, and I think that is how it has been for me. I think it was really the culmination of the anger and all the repression; everything came out in *That Long Silence*" (Sharma, 55).

In this novel different myths have been referred to. Some of them are the worship of Tulsi plant for the longevity of husband's life, myths of Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari, Maitreyee, Savitri and so on. The novel opens with Jaya and Mohan moving back into their old Dadar flat in Bombay from their cosy and palatial house. Mohan is held guilty of corruption in office at the instigation of Agarwal in contracts, tenders and commissions. Agarwal advises Mohan to move from Churchgate house to somewhere else to avoid unnecessary publicity and shame. This journey reminds us of Sita following Rama to forest and to Savitri's journey to hell to bring back her husband. Mohan gives the excuse that he has done it to keep his wife and children comfortably, "I did it for you, for you and the children" (*That Long Silence*, 10). In the novel Jaya compares herself with historical women and try to follow them but when she realizes that her follower becomes a hinder in her progress she refuses to follow them:

Sita following her husband into exile,
Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her
husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her
husband's travails... What have I to do
with these mythical women? I can't
fool myself. (11)

Deshpande revises the myth of *Pativarta* as in most of her novels the protagonist has an extra marital relationship. Urmi, Madhu, and Jaya — all of them indulge in extra marital affairs. Jaya enjoys her friendship with Kamat by sharing her problems and writing content which she is not able to discuss with Mohan. Kamat inspires her as a father, brother and lover. Though he was middle aged man and not as successful as Mohan but she enjoys his company. So Jaya is not *Pativarta* but she has all material comfort for which other woman pray for God, though she does not indulge in any *vratas* and *pujas* like Mukta and Vinitamami. Deshpande's characters are shown doing *vratas* and *pujas* in accordance with the traditional norms but simultaneously show the ironic reversals of these practices by showing the futility of such practices. Mukta's husband is dead, still she fasts. Her mortifications seemed meaningless, "since she had already forfeited the purpose of it, the purpose of all Hindu women's fasts — the avoidance of widowhood" (67). There is Vimla, Mohan's sister, performing the Mangala Gouri Puja, performed by the married Hindu women for the first years of their marriage for a successful married life. Unfortunately she has no children even after performing the fifth puja. Even Jaya's Vanitamami falls into this category of performing numerous Pujas and fasts in the hope of getting a child :

but she had gone on with her fasts, her
ritual circumambulations of the *Tulsi*
Plant, of the *Peepal* tree, even when their
aim had gone beyond her reach, when
her uterus had shrivelled and her
ovaries atrophied. (67)

After doing lots of *pujas* and *vratas*; Mukta is widow, Vimla had no successful life and died without children and Vinitamami has no child. But all these Pujas prove to be fake and useless and they did not get anything in their life in the name of rituals and myths. Where Jaya was not so much devotee to this culture and tradition but she had a peaceful life in comparison to them. In *That Long Silence* Deshpande depicts the feeling of Indian women that how much importance they give to their

husband and 'Kumkum' the sign of wifehood without that we cannot imagine a married woman. When Tara maidservant of Jaya abuse her drunkard and wife beater husband Rajaram her mother-in-law scolds her, "Stop that! Don't forget, he keeps the Kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?" (53). Though our history is full of stories in which man is supreme power or presents as a hero, in *That Long Silence* Deshpande chooses a story in which a woman is more knowledgeable than man. Shashi Deshpande changes the myth of good mother. In her novel mother-daughter relationship is not always good as we think. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* remembered her mother's harsh words, when she was not able to save her brother from drowning. Manorma in *A Matter of Time*, stops her daughter Kalyani's school on the basis of doubts and forcibly arranged her marriage. Jaya does not enjoy good relationship with her mother nor her mother feels towards her and Jaya is more comfortable with her father. Jaya had some dispute with her kids. Rati, Jaya's daughter often said to Jaya, "you're impossible!" and according to Rahul, "you don't understand anything" (131). *That Long Silence* is a typical Indian novel in English which reveals to us the prevailing situation in Indian social structure.

In the Country of Deceit deals with the dilemma of the middle class Devayani who decides to live alone in the small town of Rajnur after her parents' death. But when she meets Ashok Chinappa, Rajnur's new District Superintendent of police, they fall in love despite the fact that Ashok is much older, married, and have a daughter. So, it is a relationship without future. Devayani Mudhol is a twenty-seven year old woman. She is a bold and modern woman who does not believe in marriage and decides to live alone. As the novel begins, Devayani and her elder sister Savitri are rebuilding their old house to give a touch of modern values in Rajnur. Devayani is a law student giving English tuition to students. She also spends her time in gardening and translating a Kannada book which was based on the history of Rajnur. Devayani's external appearance is traditional and stereotyped but her views are unconventional. She wants to live on her own. She desires to have the freedom of supreme happiness in her life, "I want that, I thought, I want a needlepoint of extreme happiness, I want a moment in my life which will make me feel I am touching the sky" (*In the Country of Deceit*, 24-25). Devayani has seen her parents' marriage life which was a compromise and full of misfortune. She knows that her father's death was a suicide, not an accident but she did not reveal this truth. The love-triangle in Deshpande's novel has three points — Ashok Chinappa,

his legally married wife and Devayani. Rani organized a party where Devayani meets Ashok Chinnapa. Ashok is attracted by Devayani's simplicity. Ashok is a powerful and ambitious man. Devayani gets disturbed when Ashok proposes to her. She is frightened and realises that, "I am frightened, not of the man, but of myself, of my desire to run, not away from him, but into his arms" (94). This sudden change may be cause of her loneliness and desire which she does not know herself. Devayani is impressed by Ashok's honesty and simplicity. He promised her only truth and honesty. Shashi Deshpande presents the mindset of Devayani through the example of Abhisarika Nayika. Abhisarika is the eighth Nayika of Bharatmuni's *Natya Shastra*. Devayani compares herself with Abhisarika who was waiting for Ashok's secret visit in a rainy day at her home. Love undoubtedly happens to be perennial theme in Deshpande's novels but in the present novel she focuses more on the adult love between two mature couple. The novelist in an online interview says: "All my books are about relationships, particularly this one which is about love between an adult man and an adult woman" (dnaindia.com). Shashi Deshpande writes about unmarried women who suppress their desire. Her women characters belong to middle class society and are brought up in a traditional environment. They are struggling to liberate themselves and trying to seek their self-identity and independence under the influence of modernity. Marriage is supposed to be ultimate goal for girls. Women have to change themselves to suit the interests of their husband and in this process suppress their self-identity. As Maria Mies, points out:

The career woman has not only to face the opposition of her surroundings and to struggle against many objective obstacles, but she is often divided in herself because she also often subscribes to the Indian idea of womanhood. Her problems arise, firstly from the contradictions between this image and the demand of a new social situation and then from the discrepancy between new aspirations and lack of opportunity (Mies, 130).

The novel presents man-woman relationship outside marriage. The traditional man-woman relationship starts with marriage and ends with death or divorce. Relationship outside marriage has no social approval and is looked down upon by the society. Therefore, such

relationships are carried on secretly. To Devayani, the only obstacle in her relation is that Ashok is a married man. For Ashok, Devayani is his life. But he cannot promise her a secured life, "I can promise you two things. I can promise you love and I can promise you honesty" (*In the Country of Deceit*, 131). It is not for the promise; she waits for, but for an assured life. That assurance she never gained from Ashok. Deshpande depicts the silent suffering of Devayani who is an educated modern girl surrounded by traditional values. Shashi Deshpande rewrites the mythological character Devayani of Mahabhata. In the story Devayani was the daughter of Shukracharya and wife of king Yayati. But she never gains love from her husband. It is Sharmishtha, the other woman who enjoyed king Yayati's love. Devayani is modern, bold and strong. She has an open mind to accept new ideas and believes in principle of individuality, equality and freedom. She does not require marriage institution to secure her life. For her love is important, not marriage. She wants only Ashok, his body and his love. One day Ashok brought her a gift but she denied taking it because it makes her feel like a prostitute. So she is an independent modern woman who does need any economic help from Ashok or any kind of favour. Rani is a bold and modern lady who married twice. From first marriage she had a girl Roshini and from second she had two children Rohan and Neha, and they all love each other. After a long break Rani, wants to come back in movies and her husband supports her. Women have been confined to four walls of house. It is not only a physical confinement, but mental, social and traditional confinement too. The contemporary women have come out from the caged condition. They think marriage restricts women's freedom and compels them to live for others. Devayani represents the class of women who tend to get rid of family relation and responsibility in search of their liberation. Devayani also walks further on the path of individual liberty.

From the analysis of her two representative novels, it is clear that Shashi Deshpande has a deep insight into female psyche and an in-depth idea of feminine predicament of Indian women arising from patriarchal values of a dogmatic tradition bound society. She has put her focus on the women of the present time, particularly those who live in urban society and as they are educated, they entertain modern ideas. But their aspirations come in clash with societal values and this makes them suffer both physically and emotionally. Deshpande's feminist consciousness has certain new dimensions in accordance with modern scenario which distinguishes her from other feminist writers.

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