

Feminism in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract: Feminism is a movement or call for liberation of women from certain forms of gender based discrimination which deprives women of opportunities of self promotion and equality. Shashi Deshpande a Sahitya Akademi awardee explores suppression, domination and restrictions on women at every step of life but when self realization dawns upon them, it gives voice, a hope to the protagonist. Her novels like *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds no Terror*, *Roots and Shadows*, *A Matter of Time*, *Binding Vine* and others express feministic views. Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, Jaya of *That Long Silence* and Saru of *The Dark Holds no Terror* exhibits the position of women in India. They are educated but stress on education is only to get a good match for them. It is expected from them to be a good daughter, wife, daughter-in-law but nobody cares for the real person in them. The inner struggle and suffering of new middle class women is exposed. Their alienation and question of identity is evoked. Towards the climax all the three protagonist i.e. Indu, Jaya and Saru revolts against the conventions of society to assert their identity and individuality.

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Feminism is a movement or call for liberation of women from certain forms of gender based discrimination which deprives women of opportunities of self promotion and equality. The epoch-making work of Feminism is Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of rights of Women* and Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Indian novelists were influenced by western movement of feminism and tried to project feminine emotions, sentiments and consciousness in their works. Shashi Deshpande a Sahitya Akademi awardee explores suppression, domination and restrictions on women at every step of life and their searching for individual identity. When self realization dawns upon them, they break all the bondages and silence which also showcases a glimpse of hope. Her important works includes *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds no Terror*, *Roots and Shadows*, *A Matter of Time*, *Binding Vine* and others. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds no Terror*, *Roots and Shadows* exposes the patriarchal social system in India which refers to the autocratic rule of male head in the family and subordination of female. Sociologist Sylvia Walby has designed six overlapping structure to define patriarchy "that takes different forms in different cultures and different times: First the state: women are unlikely to have formal power and representation. Second, the household: women are more likely to do the house work and raise the children. Third, Violence: women are more prone to being abused. Fourth, Paidwork : women are likely to be paid less. Fifth, Sexuality: women's sexuality is more likely to be treated

negatively. Sixth, Culture: women are more misrepresented in media and popular culture” (Wikipedia). All these six structures are visible either in one form or other in the novels of Shashi Deshpande.

All the three novels *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds no Terror*, *Roots and Shadows* deals with the patriarchy involving problem of identity and conflict between being oneself and fitting into a traditional image of a good daughter, wife and a mother. This is what makes female subaltern and marginal as they have to act according to the central authority and automatically becomes a margin. They are not allowed to speak and are suppressed, subjugated by the cultural and patriarchal norms. Deshpande deals with discriminations both at individual and collective level of society on the basis of class, gender, sexuality with insight and empathy. Females in her novels are trapped between tradition and modernity undergoing stress and mental trauma in quest of their identity. As Simone de Beauvoir said:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...” (Second Sex, 295)

That Long Silence exposes the problem of a woman's inability to speak due to various cultural, sexual, social and traditional pressures. Jaya is an educated woman who is suffering from identity crisis, she is a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law but in playing these roles she has lost her own identity, her real image that 'who she is? The question 'who she is?' consistently haunts her as she fails to find herself and a sense of alienation is always present. In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set up, she finds her female identity effaced. She says to her friend Kamlesh that women are even not allowed to express their anger. Has he ever heard of any angry young women? Jaya in a way suppressed all her feelings, frustrations, desires, anger and adopted silence. Jaya means victory but her name is changed to Suhasini which means placid motherly woman. Her real identity has been robbed from her by providing an alternate identity. This alteration in name shows that a woman doesn't have a right even to keep her identity safe. Deshpande seems to question the tradition of changing the bride's name leading to detachment from identity. She uses Seeta as pseudonym to write columns about the plight of the middle class housewife. Both 'Suhasini' and 'Seeta', according to Jaya are “the many selves waiting to be discovered...each self attached like Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without other..”(TLS, 69) However she tries to break this codification. Jaya teaches herself to wait in silence. Silence becomes her weapon for freedom.

She feels bewildered when she thinks about her - 'Self',- “to know what you want ...I have been denied that ...Even now I don't know what I want”.(TLS, 25) She feels suffocated and sometimes thinks to escape from the grim realities of life but escapism is not a solution therefore she prefers a long silence. She becomes passive, silent; stops voicing her

opinions and feelings therefore become indifferent towards Mohan. Both her names are like two sides of a coin, one which her father gave representing victory and the other by her husband which symbolizes submission. It takes her long seventeen years to break her silence and the typical adjusting, compromising nature.

In *That Long Silence* Deshpande portrayed female characters that are alienated in their own private worlds, away from husbands who take them for granted and Jaya is no exception. At the initial stages she was silent, submissive and followed her husband like Sita and Gandhari but when her husband blames her and the children for the corruption he had done, it was unacceptable to Jaya. He justifies that it was for her and the children that he did this, he wanted Jaya to have good life and to provide the children with all those things which he never had. For the first time in her married life she feels a strong sense of hatred and anger on Mohan for the accusation. This leads Jaya to re-assess, self-interrogate her seventeen long years of married life and she uses silence as a weapon to revolt against the patriarchal system. Silence is the symbol of alienation and apprehension rooted in soul of women in different forms which is often misunderstood as a symbol of contentment by men. Jaya wants to flee from the confines of domestic life in order to find a new identity for herself. Communication between Jaya and Mohan at personal level was a failure, everything was totally absurd: "Nothing. nothing between us...nothing between me and Mohan. We live together but there had been only emptiness between us." (TLS, 185) She described her conjugal life as "two bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?" (TLS, 11-12) Jaya opines about females condition that "...for women the waiting game starts in early childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in laws home. Wait until you have kids. Yes ever since I got married, I have done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home...." (TLS, 30).

Jaya's introspection towards the end helps her in self revelation which gives her the strength to change things. She says she will erase the silence between them and also that "We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything to know now it is this: life has always to be made possible" (TLS, 193). Indu, the protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* was brought up in an odd family where marriage is the ultimate destiny of woman. Indu refuses to lead a life of subjugation like the other women of the family and wants to live a life on her own terms and condition. For older women (Akka, Narmada, Sumitra kaki) life was just to get married and to bear children. The position of women was just a child bearing machine. The service of men was the ultimate motto of Indu's cousins and Kaki which seems disagreeable to Indu. She criticizes such marginalization of women and

refuses to accept marriage as her only identity in this world. Here Deshpande shows that the pitiable plight of a woman is caused by another woman and that how a free spirited girl was chained in the bondages of marginalization. Indu's flair for writing provides her with a job and she breaks from a restricted life. While working in a feminist magazine where she meets Jayant and was attracted to him. She marries him considering him an intelligent and open-minded person, but Jayant's conventional attitude soon comes into conflict with Indu's independent ideas. Indu is representative of an educated middle class woman who resented traditional norms and is caught in the web woven by age-old customs and traditions. She voices her view about marriage:

“It's a trap... that's what marriage is, A trap? Or a cage? May be the comic strip version of marriage... a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... isn't so wrong after all. And it's not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself?” (RS, 44)

Though Jayant was mature and affectionate but his traditional views dominated Indu's life. His belief that a woman should be submissive and talkative makes independent and bold Indu's life miserable. In order to keep her marriage intact she pretended to be passive by suppressing her passions. It was also not possible for her to return back her paternal home because their marriage has been a rebellious act for the family. She says:

“When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him? And I can't blame him. It's the way I want it to be. And one day I had thought... isn't there anything I want at all? Have I become fluid, with no shape no form of my own... am I on my way of becoming an ideal woman? A woman who sheds her I who loses identity in her husband's?...” (RS, 49)

Indu was unhappy to find that she is not different from those women who circumambulate the Tulsi plant and believe that a woman's good fortune lies in dying before her husband. Simone de Beauvoir considered motherhood a way of turning women into slaves. They were forced to focus on motherhood and femininity instead of politics, technology or anything else outside of home and family. Given that one can hardly tell women that washing up saucepans are their divine mission, they are told that bringing up children is a divine mission. *Roots and Shadows* exposes marginalization of women as a weaker or second sex. It seems that an intelligent woman is a threat to society and autocratic male therefore is avoided by them. Jayant always wants Indu to submit in front of him and also suppressed her femininity. This marriage which smothered and suppressed her emotions forced her to seek fulfillment in another man –Naren. According to Indu there is not much difference between wedding and funeral. Wedding implies death of a woman as she has to kill her individuality and independence and accept dependence. By sharing her problems with Naren she realizes that her relationship with Jayant lacks understanding. Marriage has become a trap for her, a burden. She realizes that her need for independence and autonomy has made her revolt against tradition and her family but by marrying Jayant a

traditional, orthodox male she once again entered into cloistered life of dependence. Another thing which has posed a problem for Indu was Akka's will in which she was named as the sole heir of Akka's money. Indu was overwhelmed by the sudden change in the attitude of family members towards her. The power to control the house and the lives of others gives her the confidence to take charge of her own life. She begins to feel self assured and is finally able to shun the life of subordination. Once again aiming for autonomy with determination she moves towards self actualization. Deshpande's works focuses on subaltern and marginal position of women in the society but towards the end gives a ray of hope as well. In the end Indu spends the money according to her will. She decides to spend part of money on Mini's wedding and rest in making a trust to help orphans. Her determination makes others respect her will and thus encouraged she decides to undo the wrongs of her life.

Shashi Deshpande's another novel *The Dark Hold No Terrors* is story of Saru who is an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife. She was made conscious of her gender as a child. Her loveless and strained relationship with her parents and her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The play begins with Saru's return to her paternal home because of the stressful relations with her husband. She vowed never to return back to her parents home but in order to find some solace she did that. Since childhood she realized the gender discrimination between herself and Dhruva-her brother. Here Deshpande shows tendency of Indian parents i.e. their preference for a son instead of daughter. Simone de Beauvoir said woman "owns nothing, woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms a part of the patrimony of a man: first of her father, then of her husband. Under the strictly patriarchal regime, the father can, from their birth on, condemn to death both male and female children, but in the case of the former society usually limits his power: every normal new born male is allowed to live, whereas the custom of exposing girl infant is widespread. Among the Arabs there was much infanticide: girls were thrown into ditches as soon as born. It is an act of free generosity on the part of father to accept the female child; woman gains entrance into such societies only through a kind grace bestowed upon her, not legitimately like a male..." (Second Sex, 114) The color consciousness has also been stressed upon; as Saru's mother constantly reminds her not to go out in sun as it will worsen her already dark complexion. Her return gave her a chance to ponder over her relations with her husband, parents and dead brother dhruva. The accidental death of her brother by drowning changed her life. Her mother considered her responsible for it and she too subconsciously was guilty. As a child, Saru's feeling of being unwanted was so acute that she started hating herself for being a girl/woman. She was neglected at home and pines for love of her parents. In order to pursue her medical career she goes to Mumbai where she meets Manu, falls in love with her and marries him against her parents wish. According to S.P Swain "her marriage with Manu is an assertion

on and affirmation of her feminine sensibility.”(25) From here troubles accelerates in Saru's life, her increasing social status as a doctor causes strain and disturbances in her conjugal life. Manu's male ego was hurt by her success, he feels inferior and becomes brutal in his behavior and turns a treacherous rapist at night and asserts his masculinity through sexual assaults upon Saru. According to Betty Freidan "For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment — autonomy, self realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted."(FM, 282) Saru inspite of being dissatisfied with her marriage, in her quest for the wholeness of identity does not advocate separation from Manu but a tactful assertion of her identity within marriage. In the end she leaves her father's house and returns back to Manu with a determination to assert her identity. Saru does reach depths of self-actualization and feels that escape is a ridiculous idea. There is no escape for an individual in life; all have to face their own challenges. There is no refuge, other than one's own self. She can attain peace of mind by her own efforts and was ready to face her husband. *The Dark Hold No Terrors* exposes the problems faced by a career woman. This novel can be considered as a protest novel especially in the Indian context in the sense that it rejects and reacts against the traditional concept that the single purpose of girl's life is pleasing a male. Saru, a professional woman breaks the myth that husband is a protector and provider and wife is recipient and protected. Over the centuries, patriarchal stories were well established and assimilated so deeply that it is difficult to break from them. To encounter this Deshpande debunks mythology itself and gave them new configurations. All the three novels of Shashi Deshpande's namely *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds no Terror* & *Roots and Shadows* present strong women protagonists. These women refuse to sacrifice their individuality and identity and to uphold traditional role models which have been laid down by society. It is said that sometimes one has to move a step backward in order to in order to move forward this has been displayed in Deshpande's novel that protagonist halts or withdraws temporarily in order to resolve their problems and move to new directions with a ray of hope.

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