



CONFLICTS IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: A STUDY OF *THAT LONG SILENCE* AND *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande has been one of the sturdy supporters of women literature in the post modern literary ground. Shashi Deshpande has emerged on the Indian fictional scene in 1970s. For the purpose of this study, two of her novels have been considered, *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Her stories generally centre on family relationships – the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter. The conflicts faced by a woman as a wife, a mother and a daughter are given importance. In the present study an attempt is, therefore, made to study Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists, as portrayed 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. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are women struggling to find their own voices. Her Writing reflects an ongoing process of problematizing life's conflicts and compromises, resolutions and irresolution's, ironies and affirmations, triumphs and tragedies and so on.

Key Words: Conflict, feminist, gender discrimination, Women, Oppressive, educated, woman, society, female identity

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INTRODUCTION

In the post-colonial Indian Literature, themes regarding the gender issues have been the headquarters and hub point of attraction of many Indian writers. The mount of feminist movement raised questions regarding the status of entire women community. Indian constitution, after independence, offered identical rights to Indian women. This changed the approach of Indian women regarding their rapport with her family members. It also distorted their attitude about the marriage. Women begin to locate themselves in the conflict of tradition and modernity and this made

them alienated from self and society. Man-woman relationship, marital discord, gender discrimination, delineation of self, search for identity, male hegemony and female subordination, power and sexual politics etc. are the prevalent themes in the fiction of contemporary writers.

Shashi Deshpande (b: 1938), a prolific writer, has written ten novels, four books for children and many short stories, published in *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*. Deshpande's fiction has generated great interest and has received tremendous response from critics. A survey of critical works available on her fiction shows that her

themes, concerns, style and technique have been subjected to a variety of critical interpretations. This is because the focus in these books is also limited mainly to her earlier novels. For example, Sarabjeet K. Sandhu in her book, *The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* deals with *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. All the three novels are her earlier works. Similarly, P.G. Joshi also focuses mainly on the prior novels of Deshpande in his book titled *Shashi Deshpande's Fiction: A Study in Women Employment and Postcolonial Discourse*. Moreover, these studies appear to be recurring as their primary spot of concern is feministic attitude in Deshpande's novels and the novels taken up for analysis are more or less the same. In this way, they provide a partial critical perspective on Deshpande's art. The critical spectrum available on Deshpande is, thus, lopsided and her concerns and development as a writer have not been fully exposed. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels and stories. Her stories generally centre on family relationships – the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter.

Shashi Deshpande explores the psyche of educated middleclass Indian women who find themselves smothered and fettered in patriarchal society. They suffer from mental trauma because of frustration, hopes and disappointments. They feel trapped between her own aspirations and an individual and forces of patriarchy which confine them. Women in Shashi Deshpande's novel not only stop with identity crisis and self-discovery but analyze their sufferings, concerns, and problems, understand the culture and make positive decisions through introspection. Deshpande's heroines suffer from alienation, identity crisis and they feel the need of complete freedom to their own life. But in the end showing maturity, they find happiness in peaceful co-existence, understanding and acceptance and expect the same from male community. Siddhartha Sharma comments on the novels of Shashi Deshpande thus:

She has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of Indian

patriarchy and her initial submission resists the oppressive situation, thereby reflecting the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her individuality (Sharma111).

In *That Long Silence* Women's social fears and fear of failure and victimisation are depicted. The inner conflict of Indian women who seek freedom and fulfilment outside the framework of marriage is well portrayed in her novels. In *That Long Silence* (1988) Jaya wants to bring out her creativity in writing. She is not brave enough to continue her literary pursuit just because she is "scared of failing". Shashi Deshpande presents modern Indian women who are victims of the contradictions and clashes between patriarchal ideologies and feminist ideologies. In fact they want to become liberated women. As they are socially conditioned to be passive and submissive, they have to overcome severe inner struggles to adopt progressive measures advised by feminist movements for the betterment of their lives. This inner conflict of Indian women is well explored in her novels.

Deshpande in *That Long Silence* depicts Jaya's quest for a sense of completeness. She analyzes her life and her relationship with her husband and children and finds that she has miserably failed to be herself. She begins to realize the futility of her existence in this realistic world. Now, when she looks back on her life from childhood onwards, she realizes that she is no longer her in-itself. She was afraid of nothingness. As a matter of fact, she realizes that she can have her identity only if she has Mohan with her. The following lines indicate the situation of Jaya in spite of being an emerging writer in the society.

A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life.....
There's only order and routine- today I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after clean the fridge..... (*That Long Silence*, p.147-148)

We see her women protagonists caught in the conflict between responsibilities to oneself and conformity to the traditional role of a wife. The

family becomes a cage where her 'wild self' is trapped and she raises her strong voice of protest against the male-dominated Indian society and against man-made rules and conventions. Right from her childhood days, She has been told stories about Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, depicting the sharing of their husband's travails and their silent sufferings. Jaya says:

No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together...it is more comfortable for them to move in same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? (*That Long Silence* p. 11-12)

Jaya refuses these role models because they have lost all relevance in modern period Sita, Savitri and Draupadi; the legendary women followed their husbands willingly, but Jaya followed her husband 'Mohan' because of compulsion as the novelist articulates:

"there is a frank brutal realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life." (*That Long Silence* p.27)

She is named 'Jaya' by her father which means 'victory'. Her father has brought up her as an 'individual'. Later Mohan has given her name 'Suhasini' which means *a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman* (*That Long Silence* p.16). Like Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist Jasmine loses her identity by being called by several names, Jaya also loses herself and identity. Her aunt Vanitamani's advice is, '*a husband is like a sheltering tree*' (*That Long Silence* p.32). Jaya who is curious and shrewd and questions each and everything maintains absolute silence after marriage. She recollects her ajji's words:

'I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya whoever he is', she had said to me once. What for, ajji? Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that? Though there is no question, there is no comfort in her married life. That silence seemed heavy with uneasiness. (*That Long Silence* p.27)

Shashi Deshpande provides perfect examples of victimized women in a patriarchal system. Jeeja, Jaya's maidservant supports her good for nothing husband by all means. She does not protest him for getting her co-wife, in turn, she justifies it by saying, "God didn't give us any children. That was his misfortune as well as mine. How could blame him for marrying again? When I couldn't give him any children? After the death of her husband and his mistress, she willingly brings up their son, Rajaram and looks after his wife Tara. Jaya does not allow even Tara to abuse or curse her husband. She says,

"Stop that don't forget he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that? (53)".

The metaphor of silence under which the novel is organized helps to impose a quietude and discipline: the inner dynamics of a self, cut off from human communication. *That Long Silence* is not an intrusion into the world of silence but a silent communication with the oppressed self- straining for articulation, for a voice. Silence manifests in Jaya's discontent which is more personal and deeply sexual. Her romantic longings of adolescence are transformed into rigid rules by tradition. Jaya and Mohan hardly spoke to each other of love and sex. Love- making for them was a silent and inarticulate affair (Sharma 96).

Jaya has shaped her life according to the desire of Mohan and loses her own self and identity. She admits:

It hadn't been Mohan's fault at all. And it had been just a coincidence, though it had helped, that just then Mohan had propelled me into that other kind of writing. 'I encouraged you', he had said to me. He was right. But, I went on with my chest-beating out of penitence, Mohan had not forced me to do that kind of writing. I'd gone into it myself with my eyes wide open (*That Long Silence* p.148)

In other words, Jaya is self- alienated. Her creative urge and artistic zeal frees her from her cramped and dubbed domestic and societal roles. It releases her from emotional turmoil. At length she resolves to break that long silence by

putting down on paper all that she had suppressed in her seventeen years' silence—that long silence which had reduced her self to fragments. *I am not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I am Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible.* (*That Long Silence* 191)

This kind of self realization helps her to find the reason for the unhappy married life. She understands the consequences of suppressed anger. Her silence is nothing but suppressed anger. Silence or lack of communication is the cause of 'marital incompatibility'. She decides to break her long silence to restore peace and happiness. She decides "to plug that hole in the heart... I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to ease that long silence between us" (*That Long Silence* p. 192). She decides to be assertive and to be of her own self.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande represents, an educated, economically independent woman but yet for society, her parents and her husband she is an object to dominate, to rule. From her childhood she has been craving for love and when Manohar enters she has been craving for love and when Manohar enters in her life, she finds herself to be complete. After marriage, her dingy "one-room apartment with corridors smelling of urine, the rooms with their dark sealed in odors is a heaven on earth" (*The Dark Holds NoTerrors* p.40) for her. But soon her illusions were broken into pieces. In Indian society wife is not allowed to enjoy prime condition. It is a husband who is worth of it. Saru is working and for husband it becomes unbearable her success as a well-known doctor becomes the cause of declination in her perfect relationship. Now Manu does not love her as he used to earlier and on the other hand dissatisfaction grows gradually within Saru too. She resents:

"I knew now that without money life becomes petty and dreary. The thought of going on this way become unbearable."(*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.92)

Manu's being a lecturer at the third grade college creates great discomfort between both

of them. Manu's male ego and self-esteem is hurt by lower employment and humiliation. caring and sensitive Manu starts into turning a brutal one at night. At day time he is a loving husband but at night turns in to a rapist, tries to assert his manhood. Being a victim Saru is unable to express any helplessness. She is unable to fight, unable to cry. It becomes more difficult to handle the issue for Saru as in the morning Manu becomes ignorant towards his beastly behaviour. In one talk she says:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3". If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. Don't ever try to reverse the doctor, nurse, executive, secretary, principal, teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous; and I assure you, it is not worth it. He'll suffer, You'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage must be an equal partnership. That's nonsense, rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal, it will always be unequal, but take care that it is unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.137)

These lines have greater significance in relation to the determination of the identity of a woman in the society. The patriarchal society is so much rooted in the blood of each individual being that if at times it is attempted to reform some illogical ideologies from the mind and psyche, some barriers come into the forefront and then

interrupt the whole process of women's independence. Through this episode Deshpande want to convey the message that in a traditional society, even an educated and professional woman cannot thrust her views on the whole men-women folk. A female person is fated to suffer the inequality based on the gender discrimination. The superiority of the male is

considered to be an essential condition for the success of marriage. The concept can be very hardly replaced and uprooted as in Saru's case it is projected. She seeks happiness and joy in extra marital relationship with Padmakar Rao and Boozie but she abruptly withdraws from them and ends the relationship, as she finds no comfort in them. She says:

"Now, I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated, but she thinks it. What had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well, illusions, and not relevant to my life any way (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.133)".

She comes to her parental house to see her sense of belonging to the world but the same eludes her. Sarita is waiting outside her old home, like the old friend of lord Krishna Sudama in rags waiting outside the palace gets of lord Krishna and his queen Rukmini. But Sarita, unlike Sudama has a suitcase full of cloths, full of humility. She gets a cold reception at her father's house; at times Saru regrets her visit. "*Why had it seem so important to come here, and, at once?*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.17). Thus, back in her old home, and with the gradually realized comforting presences of Madhav and her father around her, whose first significant nurturing act for Sarita is to ensure a hastily made cradle for her to sleep in the old Puja room. She expects a loss of sympathy from her father after having become a hapless victim of her senseless choice of a love marriage, she moans, "*It's my fault again. If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this?*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.218)

Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is also unable to enjoy daughter mother relationship as her mother treats her and her brother differently. Her mother inserts gender discrimination in her treatment towards son and daughter. Even at the death of Dhruva, it is the mother who condemns her own daughter she really dislikes her mother. She says, "*If you are a woman, I don't want to be one.*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.55)

In the event of Dhruva's death the mother accuses Saru of killing Dhruva. She speaks out

Saru's intentions and not the deed. We witness an extreme instance of the sibling jealousy provokes undoubtedly by the mother's favouritism. Dhruva's death utterly disappoints Saru's mother. She loses all interests in life. Saru's dream is mainly the representation of her feeling of guilt. Saru's brother Dhruva, unfortunately dies by drowning into the water and her mother makes her feel guilty of his death. That fills revolt in her against her mother. She is a courageous woman and does not care for the harsh words of her mother. Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker. Who cares? We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married. I don't want to get married. Will you live with us all your life? Why not? You can't. And Dhruva? He's different. He's a boy. The antagonism is faced mainly from two persons- Saru's mother and Manohar, Saru's husband. Both of them represent the values and norms established by the patriarchal society. She wants to be a strong woman in all the three spheres, 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. She declares:

My life is my own..... somehow she felt as if she had found it now, the connecting link. It means you are just as a strutting grimacing puppet, standing futilely on the stage for a brief while between areas of darkness. It I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving mother right (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.220)

Saru comes to Bombay for higher studies and her impressionable mind is attracted to the Manohar (called Manu), a popular fellow a student of the college. His talents as a budding writer, a poet, an orator and an active member of the college Dramatic Society, charm Saru to develop love affair with him, and to marry him. On this affair Sarabjit K. Sandhu comments.

"As she (Saru) always feels insecure in her parents' home, her marriage to Manu is a means of that love and security which she had always lacked in life. He is the ideal romantic hero who has come to rescue her from the insecure, loveless existence" p.11

Her father, a simple man fails to understand the words like-sadism, Love, cruelty, etc. Saru takes every possible step's to explain her problems and says that she wants to talk to him, not as a daughter, but as a woman to man. Her father expects that they should talk like matured persons, because, he says that this kind of relation- (a woman man) of intimacy or sharing of feelings, or communicating with each other had never taken place between him and his wife, He says "*Silence has become a habit for us*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 199). As he starts enquiring Saru about the events, very slowly his unnatural composure and indifference disappear. Saru pours her heart out with all details about Manu's brutality and expresses her helplessness she says: "*I couldn't fight back; I couldn't shout or cry...I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 201). She wholeheartedly expects moral support from her father, and very frantically requests him "*But you have got to help me, you have got to. You did it once. And because you did I went to Bombay, met him an married him*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 204). Sarita's father, without any response leaves her and goes away, she feels quite isolated and becomes sad. She wants to tells her father, that "*Baba, I'm unhappy, Help me Baba, I'm in trouble. Tell me what to do*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.44)

At her father's place, slowly she loses, the awareness of her femininity, she stops thinking about herself as a women. The aspect in doctor in her is more often seen than that of the wife, and the mother in her. Her neighbourhood woman now visits her for their physical health. Mostly there simple woman keep more of their ailments everything as a secret. Sarita thinks that - "*Their very womanhood a source of deep shame to their- she calls them stupid, silly, martyrs—I idiotic heroines. Going on with their task and destroying. Themselves in the bargain, for nothing, but a meaningless modesty*" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 107)

The crisis of identity, which is the root of all problems in human life, is due to the darkness of one's mind. Finally Saru's decision to go with her husband shows her confidence and courage in this direction. Thus the novel's title itself holds an assessment of the near impossibility of decolonizing a once-colonized mind:

"The dark holds no terrors...The terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us, and like traitors they spring out, when we least expect them, to scratch and maul"
(*The Dark Holds No Terrors* p.85)

Conclusion

Deshpande has proclaimed that the novel is a treatise on the state of Indian women. Being a woman herself, the novelist has presented a realistic study of the attitude and conduct of woman in Indian middle class families. The writer deals with silent sufferings, servility, subjugation, submissiveness and male chauvinism. Women are expected to submit and subdue to others but they should break these barriers and wrong expectations into pieces. Now the time has come for them to break their bondage and breathe freely. They should make their own decisions and fight their own battles. They should break their silence. Education alone can free the subjugated women—race from dependency. Using the stream of consciousness method and a narrative technique which goes back and forth, she unravels the inner world of woman. *TheDark Holds No Terrors*, her other novel, rejects the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a wife's existence is to please her husband. It reveals a woman's capacity to asset her own rights and individuality and becomes fully aware of her potential as a human being. *That Long Silence* traces the passage of a woman through a maze of doubts and fears towards her affirmation. Shashi Deshpande's psycho-analysis reveals to her that her women protagonists pursue a double course, a synthetic fusion of the in-itself with the for-itself. All that they finally come to realize, is their dreadful freedom whether they go back to the wedlock or remain solitary. This is the absolute freedom. There are, of course, obstacles to their freedom but these obstacles are in relation to their choice—whether choose to be in relations or out of it.

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