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SOCIAL COMMITMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's effort has had a major influence on the social Awareness. Her work gives us a comprehensive preview of human practices allowing us to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. Shashi Deshpande's novels play an extremely important role in influential society and character development. In the present research article, the author trying to explore the framework of social or moral commitment, social commitment in the writer's novels, to trace the status of women in the Indian society down the ages in order to know to what extent social justice was rendered to the women folk from time to time. From this research the author conclude that Shashi Deshpande commitment to change and her consistent ideological discourse are the textual, literary evidence of a determined revolutionary purpose.

Key Words: Shashi Deshpande novels, social Commitment, social responsibility.

Teaching for social responsibility with good books does far more than encourage civic participation; it redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives- (Steven Wolk 2009).

1.0 Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's writings explore a social world of many complex relationships. Many men and women love together and journey across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationships within their given social world. She presents the modern Indian womanhood in her writings. As a woman writer, her dilemma was either to give voice to women's concern and be branded as women writer.

Most of the women writers employ a mode of social realism. History rarely gives space to women and get it is woman who keeps history alive by carrying on the burden of the past and samsara's. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* could draw the attention of readers on this work with a sense of social commitment. So this work has social relevance also. Her works unveil the true condition of women on those particular periods. *That Long Silence* develops through the disillusionments of the heroines and their identity crisis which lead them to find out their individuality as a human being. Feminism, the meaning of marriage, theme of isolation, the quest for identity, self-realization etc. are the major themes shared in her works and reflect the nature of themes with her titles also.

Discussion

Deshpande analyses her writing thus:

Though no writer in India can get away from the idea of social commitment or social responsibility, committed writing has always seemed to me to have dubious literary values. However, after 25 years of writing, I cannot close my eyes to the fact that my own writing comes out of a deep involvement with the society I live in, especially with women. My novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society, and above all their relationships with others. To me, my novels are always explorations; each time in the process of writing, I find myself confronted by discoveries which make me rethink the ideas I started off with. In all my novels, from *Roots and Shadows* to *The Binding Vine*, I have rejected stereotypes and re-questioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women, even the self-image of women, in this country. In a way, through my writing, I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country¹

Shashi Deshpande's writings are a reflection of society, so society has a huge effect on her work. Since her work is born from society, so her work has had an effect on society. It might actually be on that society had an effect on itself that was simply reflecting in her works. *That Long Silence* a Sahitya Academy Award Winning novel is not only an autobiography of subjugation, but also a revelation of the self. The novel is about the life of Jaya who is drawn from inside. "Who am I" is the question that haunts her and the domestic ambience effaces her female identity. She feels that silence is one of the tricks one has to employ to get along in a relationship. She remains as a silent suffering wife to a dominating husband. This novel is a study of human relationships.

¹ Both this statement and the disclaimers are quoted by Shyamala A. Narayan, "Shashi Deshpande," in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. Lesley Henderson and Noelle Watson, 5th ed. (Chicago and London: St James Press, 1991) 241

Shashi Deshpande's first book was *The Legacy*, an accumulation of short stories, and from since then she has published many stories. The authentic entertainment of India, The exceptional component of her stories, is a particular element of her books too. There is nothing outstanding or colorful about her India—no Maharajahs or snake charmers. She doesn't expound on the crushing poverty of the Indian masses; she portrays another sort of hardship—passionate. The lady derived of love, understanding, and companionship is the focal point of her work. She indicates how customary Indian culture is one-sided against woman, however she perceives that it is regularly women who abuse their sisters, however their qualities are the aftereffect of hundreds of years of inculcation.

Marital relationships have almost inevitably been the focal point of novels written by Shashi Deshpande. But there is a quantitative difference in tone and perception in novels which adopt an explicit or implicit feminist stance. The emphasis is not on the development or mechanics of the relationship but on the forces which work together to make the relationship a farcical exhibition of togetherness. Functioning along fixed parameters, marriages become an arid formality, devoid of contact. Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of many complex relationships. In her novels many men and women are living together, journeying across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. The tradition bound world consists with the modern, creating unforeseen gaps and disruptions within the family fold. Women have been tutored right from the day they had the glimpses of this world, to follow unquestioningly and relentlessly the ideal of the patriarchal set-up of the family. The Hindu woman has been asked to put up all sorts of repressions and suppressions in the name of family honour and for the good name of the children. Women's sexuality, her experience of pain, pleasure or love, desire, sorrow were matters that were routinely ignored. Throughout the novels Deshpande tries to depict this predicament of women. Women's understanding becomes questionable as the old patterns of behavior no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become in tense of

quests for selfdefinition, because it would not be possible to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by clarity about one's image and role.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu undergoes great mental trauma in her marriage due to her husband Jayant's double standards who, though educated and liberal, does not tolerate any deviation on Indu's part from the traditional role of a wife. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* the marriage is on the rocks because Mann feels embarrassed and insecure with the rising status of his doctor wife and is intolerant about playing a second-fiddle role in their marriage. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya has been told that her husband is like a sheltering tree. She has to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if she has to water it with deceit and lies. Hence with her new self-awareness, Jaya ironically views herself and Mohan as "a pair of bullocks yoked together", moving together merely because it was more "comfortable." In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi has a long distance marriage since her husband Kishore is in the navy. She craves for some physical gratification during his long absence but she never oversteps the boundaries chalked out in marriage and remains virtuous. In *A Matter of Time*, the marriage breaks because Sumi's husband walks out on her. In the end he returns to a new Sumi, who has coped with the tragedy with remarkable stoicism. In *Small Remedies*, Madhu too gets totally estranged by her husband Som after she naively discloses to him about her single act of physical intercourse before marriage.

Shashi Deshpande's work has had a major impact on the social Consciousness. Her work gives us a detailed preview of human experiences allowing us to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. Her works play an incredibly important role in shaping society and character development. Shashi Deshpande, born and brought up in India authentically presents the real lives of women of the soil. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, her debut novel published in the year 1980, analysis the complex relationship between a successful doctor Sarita (Saru) and her professionally frustrated and irritated husband Manohar (Manu). A simple storyline, but with a complex theme brings out the strong

emotions of Saru. The patriarchal belief in claiming the male child as a precious one is enforced in the novel. The accidental death of her brother by drowning makes her develop a sense of guilt throughout her life. Her mother puts the blame on her as though she is responsible for her brother's death. Saru's choice of education and life partner Manu shows her revolt against her mother. Her success as a famous lady doctor instills a sense of pride in her husband initially, but causes a sense of humiliation in him later. Saru is subjected to marital rape as an outlet for her husband's hurt ego. The novel focuses on the trauma faced by a modern woman who has a traditional upbringing. She shows herself as an independent and a modern woman in her outward appearances, but in her psyche as she is timid and does not know how to solve her domestic problems. Her stay in her parent's house creates a battle in her mind with the memories of her mother and her relationship with her, the guilt of her brother's death, her affection towards her husband and children and her responsibility as a doctor in the society. She understands that she cannot run away from her responsibilities both at domestic and societal levels and so decides to reunite with her husband and to re-establish her relationship with him.

Shashi Deshpande by presenting Saru in this manner is trying to show the mirror to society, that people give priority or willing to have a male child and still even an educated man feels inferiority complex when his women succeeded more than him in any way. Manohar, her husband, was the master of the family before she got recognition as a doctor. Earlier, she was known as the wife of Manohar but now after the explosion in the factory people recognized Manohar as the doctor's husband. The explosion provides her an opportunity to prove her worth and assert herself, though unconsciously. But this shatters their family life. Manohar thinks Saru's success as his failure.

Shashi Deshpande has addressed various social issues of contemporary India and gender issues invariably find a prominence in her writing. Her characters do confirm her social consciousness. She appears more interested in creating characters who are 'Nay Sayers'. But at the same time they are

conscious about their social set-up. They know that they can fight with society, but there is no escape and they will remain part of it. Her women characters are anti-patriarchal protagonists.

Shashi Deshpande awakens us to the complexities and paradoxes of human life and to the absurd presumptuousness of normal absolutism. She awakens awareness of place, time and conditions about ourselves and about others. Through her works she not only presents her imagination, but also her expectation of change in society. Her desire is to create and induce a social consciousness. Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannad 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 the Sahitya Akademi Award, for the novel 'That Long Silence' her works also include children's books. Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of much complex relationship. In her novels many men and women living together, journey across life in there different age groups, classes and gendered roles.

Earlier Deshpande was contemptuous of the professed committed writing in literature. But, with the passage of time, she understood that all good writing is socially committed writing. She admits:

There was a time when I was scornful of what is called committed writing. I considered such writing flawed because it being message oriented diminishes its artistic worth. But now I know that all good writing is socially committed writing, it comes out of a concern for the human predicament. I believe, as Camus says, that the greatness of an artist is measured by the balance the writer maintains between the values of creation and the values of humanity (*The Literary Criterion*).

Deshpande's commitment to women's cause is evident in her novels.

She is genuinely concerned about people. In yet another interview, she says:

I hate to write propagandist literature. I think good literature and propaganda don't go together. Any literature written with some viewpoint of proving something rarely turns out to be good literature. Literature comes very spontaneously. When I write I am concerned with people (*The Sunday Observer*1990).

Prema Nandkumar has observed about Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* is

"Not a forbidding stream of consciousness probe in the Virginia Woolf tradition. It is very much a conventional tale full of social realism evoked by links of memory. Not misty recollection but clear-eyed story telling". (Ibid., p. 136.)

For the protagonist an objective analysis of what went wrong with her marriage and the reasons for failing as a writer, is a kind of catharsis. The technique is described by the narrator Jaya herself who in the novel says: "All this I've written — it's like one of those multi-coloured patchwork quilts the Kakis made for any new baby in the family. So many bits and pieces — crazy conglomeration of sizes, shapes and colours put together." (188)

In Deshpande's novels, discords or disappointments in marital relationship impel introspection in the protagonists. They do not disregard the importance of marriage as a social institution and seek solutions to their marital problems with marriage. They seek a balanced, practical approach to their problems. They have the courage born of their being honest to themselves after an objective appraisal of their situation. They do not blame the others or their husbands for their troubles, but blame also themselves. Their desire to seek solutions to their problems leads to their temporary withdrawal from their families, followed by an objective appraisal of the whole problem. They are traditional at times in their approach as they strive to seek identity and self-realization upholding social conventions and institution. They

are women who are individuals with awareness of their rights and duties; they have legitimate passions and expect an independent, autonomous existence. Their circumstances lead to their becoming mentally mature and they finally consider marital relationship as worthy of preservation.

Shashi Deshpande portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. They are aware of the social and cultural disabilities to which they are subjected in the male-dominated society. They want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but they find themselves up against well-entrenched social inertia. Conscious of the predicament of a woman in a male-dominated society, especially when she is not economically independent, the author presents her women as desiring to become economically and ideologically independent. She finds them caught up in a conflict between their family and professional roles, between individual aspirations and social demands. Indu of *Roots and Shadows* and Jaya of *That Long Silence*, being women writers, are torn between self-expression and social stigmas-material and psychological traumas. As Maria Mies observes, "Her problem arises firstly, from the contradictions between this image and the demand of a social status and then from the discrepancy between new aspirations and lack of opportunity." Her women like Saru succeed in overcoming social stigmas asserting their potential arena. Deshpande's career women

.... are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between man and woman but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities are realized in their own lives.

In *A Mauer of Time*, Sumi deserted by her husband Gopal, for no fault of her own is not emotionally broken. She does not contemplate divorce, yet the social stigmas associated with divorce in the Indian society haunt her. Shashi Deshpande shows that a woman may get relief from the painful life of a wrong marriage through divorce, but it will not always re-establish her socially, psychologically or financially. In her parents' home,

she feels she is lost and has no place there. However Sumi deliberately plays cool and maintains her matter-of-fact attitude. She is more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity. Her pride prevents her to show her grief to Gopal.

Shashi Deshpande appears to believe that by not protesting and offering resistance, the women have to blame themselves for their own victimization. She, therefore, suggests that they themselves have to break the shackles that have kept them from a state of captivity for several centuries. They have to free themselves from the socially constructed stereotypical images.

The *Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. In all these novels, Shashi Deshpande objectifies new female subjective experiences with a gynocentric vision. She basically reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings, rooted in the culture in which she lives, remain sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences, and they give artistic expression to something that is simple and mundane. Her feminism is peculiarly Indian in the sense that it is born out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature. Her art is intensely personal, not political. Her feminism rooted in the native environment tends to be humanistic and optimistic in its outlook.

In her other novels, she ponders over how male supremacy damages females egos and leads women to a state of intellectual slavery. In her novels, she depicts the lives of Indian middle class women who are born and brought up in a social atmosphere of profound conditioning on the basis of gender. Middle class women in India fare better than their class counter – parts, and are more advantaged economically. Their easier access to educational and professional opportunities enables them to function outside the domestic circle. Shashi Deshpande is acutely aware of the discrepancy between the ardent aspirations of these women and their actual accomplishment in an androcentric context.

In the story 'A wall is Safer', Sushama is a lawyer working for constitutional and social awareness among woman. She resents being called a feminist, considering it a vague term, because she has been doing in something concrete. She does not like the idea of Hema working her law – education in a remote place and playing a good house – wife's role for her husband who is an agricultural research scholar. The story ends with a close ménage, i.e. wall is safer than pointed fence. The 'wall' works as a metaphor to be away from the restricted atmosphere of marriage this feeling of having sex as an adventure has stated, based on fidelity and marital love. "Why a Robi" by; Shashi Deshpande is a story of woman who does not fit with the rest of her family. However, she longs to be close to her daughter, the narrator considers herself as 'a failure – as wife as a companion, as a mother' (vol./ 48) but she decides to build a bridge to pull her family together. Due to all account of discussion some people would doubt the acceptance of the new heroine of Shashi Deshpande in the society but the fact cannot be ignored R. Mala writes: It is this working on individual dialectic of the sexual dilemma in her novel that makes Shashi Deshpande a modernist feminist.

Deshpande sparks some light on the cause of women's education and liberation. Then the whole novel *A Matter of Time* is dedicated to silent, brooding women, unhappy, yet lively, clinging to their past, yet living in the present. The men do not play an active role in the story. But they are root cause of all suffering, Gopal and Shripati. Shashi Deshpande attempts to absolve the male by carrying in some strong, loving and responsible figures. But they come and go, flitting like shadows. The underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife, between mother and daughter. In all relationships, the women occupy the central stage and significantly, the narration shifts through her feminine consciousness.

Conclusion

As a conclusion we can say that, Shashi Deshpande's novels, sturdy sagacity towards social commitment and a sense of anxiety with an element

of humanitarian concern can be seen. In the contemporary Indian literary scenario, Shashi Deshpande as a writer in English reflected the truth of Indian reality. She bears numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. When compared with other Indian novelists, Shashi Deshpande is specifically committed to the reorganization of female subjectivity. Her approach is different from that of all other feminists. In her novels, the protagonist's growth towards an honest acknowledgement of responsibility for her own repressed state is shown in her earlier novels as well as her later novels. Her women protagonists are caught in the conflict between responsibility to oneself and conformity to the traditional role of wife. They do not accept to be considered merely as the objects of gratification. The courage, the dignity, the responsibility and the independent spirit displayed by her proves that she has reached a stage of self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment. Shashi Deshpande seems to look hopefully at the younger generation to restore equality between the sexes and achieve harmony.

Shashi Deshpande's feminism is certainly not cynical or nihilistic. She avoids indiscriminate use of the western feminist jargons and analyses the universal significance of the woman's problem, thereby transcending the feminist perspective. She believes that feminism is "...very much an individual working out her problem." (Mala 1989: A156) She is quite down to earth in her feminist approach to the woman's problem. For though she is aware of the seriousness of the Indian woman's dilemma and the generation old struggles behind it, she also believes that a positive change in women's social status cannot materialize without bringing about a change in the woman's mindset first. So the novelist holds that it is the heroines' retreat in their selves rather than in any external crutches which injects a hope for the woman's redemption from her predicament. The woman's increasing involvement rather than detachment in her predicament as expressed in her novels reveals the positive, humanistic side of Deshpande's feminism. Hence Shashi Deshpande rightly considers her role as an Indian feminist as one of a 'humanist feminist.' (Ibid: A143).

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