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MYTHS, CUSTOMS AND RITUALS: A STUDY OF SELECTED NOVELS OF SHASHI
DESHPANDE THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

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ABSTRACT

For thousands of years woman has been living and breathing silently under the umbrella of patriarchy and under its 'gaze'. With the establishment of patriarchy, in its unwritten form, disproportion between man and woman developed through language, customs, rituals, myths and religious practices. Myths, rituals and customs contribute in the evolution and establishment of human society. It is believed that they have developed naturally, but they are actually socio-cultural constructions and help in carrying out patriarchal ideologies. Thus they are instrumental in the subjugation of women in our society.

This paper makes an attempt to study Shashi Deshpande's novels, viz. The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence, Roots and Shadows and The Binding Vine, in the light of status of women in family and society. Women, the preserver of traditional spirit, are forced to pursue certain socio-cultural norms that actually prohibit them from coming out of their traditional circles. Folklores, rituals, ceremonies contribute in moulding the psyche and mindset of the community and the people living in it.

Deshpande very artistically exposes the different ideological elements that shapes a woman from birth to girlhood and then through her womanhood. Under the feminist influence, women acquired ability to understand their situation and decided to find remedy for their suffering. They realize that society has made culture and tradition obligatory for women, and not for men. Her female protagonists, who are modern in their outlook and aware, succeed in resisting the subtle tactics of our society.

Keywords: Patriarchal ideologies, Myth, Subjugation, Folklores, Disproportion, Customs.

Family, society, customs, culture, traditions, religious rituals, writers, painters contribute a lot to the suppression of the rights of women in our society, consciously or unconsciously. The socio-cultural values are so designed that it gives little scope for freedom to the women folks. Women are made conscious of these values and they imbibe them dutifully and thus begin their subjugation. In

the patriarchal society the socio-cultural norms make it easier for the conquest of women. The subjugation of women begins right from her birth and she grows with a sense of insecurity and guilt. She is made aware of her secondary position through different activities and rituals of life. The rituals and the customs are devised in such a way

that it uncovers the gross gender discrimination in our community.

Today, 'culture' belongs to the public domain and is determined by male hegemony. The society, which is male dominated, learns to look at women as subordinates or inferiors. The presentation of Eve as 'fallen' in the Bible and Aristotle's definition of woman 'as mutilated male', made it apparent that in society there exist two kinds of human beings- the male and the female; both of them functioning differently and possessing different potentials. The unexamined stereotypical representation of women, failed to offer women equality, higher education, justice and excess to privileges. Interestingly, in the patriarchal society, all these were made to look natural, normal and justified.

Deshpande's women oriented novels taken up for the study, viz. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Binding Vine*, testify the fact that a woman is fasten by various myths, rites, rituals and practices in our society. These myths, rituals and customs contribute in the evolution and establishment of human society. Though these myths and rituals and practices are believed to have been developed naturally, they are actually socio-cultural constructions that assist in carrying out patriarchal values.

Shashi Deshpande's novels discuss various traditions, customs, rituals and social organizations that join hands to dominate women at various levels in our society. Her novels urge us to explore and examine areas of women experience in our society, which were not previously discussed elaborately and with such minute details. Modern women are pulled between their liberal conviction and their traditional instincts. They refuse to act like puppets in the hands of men with patriarchal mindset. However, the voices of women have been muffled in the name of tradition and culture, and they have been compelled to live like shadows of their inner selves.

In women, knowledge has been ignored and their talks are taken as mere gossips. The cultural politics of our society is such that it does not want to see 'intelligence', 'knowledge' and 'emancipation' in the women. Society takes pleasure

in looking at woman as a burden or a non entity. Even Friedrich Nietzsche pronounced that "Woman was God's second mistake" (The Antichrist). Literature echoes Shakespeare's immortal word, "Frailty thy name is women" (Hamlet).

Through these selected novels, Deshpande renders the fact that social values are obligatory for women and not for man. Society trains humanity to believe that in women the ultimate reality is the body. As Sarita utters in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, "We deal with the ultimate reality...the human body." (155).

Other experiences of the body in women that Deshpande exposes are the thrill, anxiety and disgust of menstruation. Almost are the female protagonist are made to feel guilt about their body, this is more so when they attain puberty. Though attainment of puberty, in our tradition, is associated with fertility and therefore an occasion to be celebrated; Deshpande chooses to focus on the traumatic nature of this experience. The writer foregrounds the demoralizing effect of puberty on young tender minds, rather than romanticizing the whole issue. The trauma of puberty is heightened when the girl is made to believe that her body is impure. Puberty makes her feel unclean, unwanted and filthy. The novels in concern echo the same question repeatedly- Is womanhood a shame?

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Sarita cries, "It was a torture. Not just the three days when I couldn't enter the kitchen or the puja room...I was served from a distance, for my touch was, it seemed, pollution." (62). In *The Binding Vine*, we get to see similar expression from Mira when she exclaims, "My companion for three days, window in the corner room" (98). Indu is blatantly told by one of her female relatives in *Roots and Shadows*, "...[F]or four days now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything." (79). Jaya calls her attainment of puberty, *That Long Silence* as 'drama of my womanhood' (64), she further recalls the experience as 'unaccountably choky', 'emotional', 'momentous', 'agonising' and 'terrible'. We witness that the social customs associated with the initiation of puberty makes things worse for these girls as they are already traumatized by the physical change in their body. The women begin to feel themselves

unclean, unwanted, devalued and diminish. They find it difficult to accept their growing femininity and the physical changes that are accompanied with it.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu starts hating her growing process and expresses her anguish, "And I, who had had all the child's unselfconsciousness about my body, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it.....I was unclean." (79). Sarita's mother repeatedly reminds her of her growing up and strictly instructs her about her conducts, as accepted by the patriarchal society, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, "You should be careful now about your behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it's only your father who's around." (62). Warning of such kind is bound to unnerve the girl child and they start perceiving their growing up process as something terrifying and creepy. The codes and restrictions prescribed by the society are followed seriously by them and they internalize these throughout their growing years.

In the Indian society the process of growing up of a girl child is a matter of great concern, but the society does not say anything for the boy child. Simone de Beauvoir notices in *The Second Sex*:

"She cannot become 'grown up' without accepting her femininity; and she knows already that her sex condemns her to a mutilated and fixed existence, which she faces at this time under the form of impure sickness and a vague sense of guilt." (351)

The society that has taught women to maintain sanctity within the family and community, has also taught women to be ashamed of her body and her desires. Patriarchy has made women feel that body is to be surrendered and desires suppressed; if at all these desires are independent of male satisfaction. Indu states in *Roots and Shadows*, "And now I know.....it shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. When I'm like that, he turns away from me. I've learnt my lessons now." (83) Boldness, daring and courage are some adjectives that society hates to associate with women. Moreover she should not be questioning, inquiring, curious and inquisitive. Such nature and qualities are never welcoming in the traditional society and therefore

Jaya's grandmother warns her, when she finds Jaya curious and ready witted in *That Long Silence*, "For everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that." (27) In *Roots and Shadows* Indu tells Naren, "As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl they had told me I must be meek and submissive" because "you are a female. It is the only way for a female to live and survive" (174). The apparent question that arises here is who 'they' are. Is it the mother, father, grandmother or the society at large? Thus we see that Deshpande renders a very true and realist picture of our society where in a girl is groomed both physically and mentally for her later period of life. Such grooming undoubtedly weakens the mind of women, making them vulnerable to the ill practices of the society. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* observes:

"Taught from their infancy, that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison....But was their understanding once emancipated from slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man....has subjected them, we should probably read of their weakness with surprise." (ch-3)

By presenting women like Sarita, Urmila, Indu and Jaya, Shashi Deshpande makes an effort to break the myth that man is always superior and the women the symbol of virtue. Today women do not want sympathy and due to difference in the upbringing of both the genders they are filled with severe desire to prove that they are no less than boys. Sarita is a doctor and is responsible for the extra luxury of her family; Urmila becomes a strong pillar of support to Shakutai and gives her support and insight; Indu is a symbol of change as she ushers a new hope in the minds of her relatives who cling to the old traditional values; Jaya learns to transform her 'silence' from a means of surrender to strength.

In our society, a woman is taught to groom herself for marriage since her girlhood, recount the beauty of motherhood and its fulfillment. Through scriptures and tales women are told that the sole

purpose of marriage is procreation and for a woman motherhood is something to be proud of. Ironically, we find that in our society women cannot exercise freedom when it comes to bear a child or terminate it. But this common and accepted belief that motherhood is beautiful and makes a woman complete has been destroyed by women like Indu, who is unwilling to have a child as she shares an uncanny relationship with Jayant “babies and suckling” (58) in *Roots and Shadows*. In *The Binding Vine* Urmila senses:

“Sometimes, I think,” I [Urmila] told Vanaa “they brainwash us into the motherhood thing...” (76)

Deshpande not only dismantles the myth of motherhood and ideal motherhood, but also strips the act of child birth of its usual romance and sensation and presents it as a gruesome act. In reality pregnancy and childbirth causes enormous discomfort and pain to the women, and the men do not truly understand their feelings. The pangs of childbirth and the related embarrassment are displayed in its most naked form by Deshpande. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* describes her labour at the time of Renu’s (her daughter) birth as, “...she has felt, through a haze of pain and shock, Renu’s head forcing itself out, she had been outraged at the indignity of it. Her posture, her grunts, her cries, the pain which made an animal out of her....was this the prelude to motherhood?” (162) Here the author destabilizes the accepted belief that for a woman the experience of childbirth is the most pious and memorable moment for a woman. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu tells Naren how once Kaki had once thrust upon her the sense of womanhood most ‘brutally’ and ‘gracefully’, “You’re a woman now....You can have babies yourself.” (87)

Just as, in our socio-cultural context, ‘motherhood’ is considered to be a blessing, similarly ‘widowhood’ is recognized as a curse. A widow is deprived of a respectable life and has to live in an awful situation after her husband’s death. Through the portrayal of old and widowed women Deshpande develops a contrasting lifestyle between the old generation and the new. The values and principle that these women of the older generation carry, gives them little freedom and choice in their

life. The older generation thinks it to be their destiny to live in such condition and hence neither complain nor protest. The author grasps that this kind of attitude is responsible for the growth of inferiority complex in them as they have been taught by various customs and traditions since childhood. And any deviation would result in gruesome consequence. Their stories reflect reality as it exists around us, without exaggeration, and depict the women as oppressed at several levels.

Another critical issue that Shashi Deshpande touches upon is the subject of childless mother or ‘barrenness’ as assumed by the society. Barren or even women failing to give birth to a son is scornfully looked down upon. In *Roots and Shadows*, to the Old woman Indu’s success have no value, to her Indu was just a childless woman. Indu wonders:

“Nothing about me...my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money...none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless mother. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand-children...” (116)

Jeeja in *That Long Silence* tolerates her drunkard husband, who often beats her. When he takes up another woman, she remains silent, as she thinks he has every right to marry as she could not bear him a child. In *That Long Silence* Jaya’s Vanita mami, keeps fast and performs numerous pujas to be blessed with a child. All her efforts prove in vain and she lives in guilt. In *The Binding Vine*, Sulu is ready to bring in Kalpana to her house on Prabhakar’s insistence. Sulu is childless and therefore bows down to her husband’s demand, who is a lustful creature.

In our Indian society, a girl child is a burden and it becomes a distressing situation if a mother is unable to give birth to a son. Desire for a son is deep rooted in our Indian culture and Shashi Deshpande has vividly depicted in her novels. This desire to have a son is because in our religion it is explicitly mentioned that a son should lit the pyre of his parents, then only they can attain ‘moksh’, i.e., salvation. It is because of the prevalence of this kind of belief that in our society we openly find

preference for a male child over a female child. Sarita, whose brother has died in an accident by drowning, on hearing her mother death the first thought that comes to her mind, "Who lit the pyre?" (17). A modern woman like Sarita, who has challenged the norms of society and defied her family on many occasions, could not escape from the influence of old traditional values and rituals of our society in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The moment she came to know of her mother's death, she is immediately haunted by the thoughts of the last rite of her mother than anything else.

Deshpande has changed the very perspective of marriage in our society and has presented it as a social contract or an institution that is believed to promise love, care, security, contentment, happiness, etc. But all these promises shatters and marriages are shown to be based on love and lust, which can be substituted with 'sex'. Sex and sexual needs that the society perceives from only male point of view humiliates and denounces a woman. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* denies the existence of 'love' in marriage. She cries:

"Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well were illusions...And the code word of our age is neither love nor romance, but sex" (133)

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu calls marriage and love a 'trap' to her cousin Naren. She becomes agitated when Naren asks her to explain her idea of 'love'. Indu says, "It's a big fraud, a hoax, that's what it is. They tell you it's the greatest thing, the only thing in life. And you believe them and fall into the trap..." (157) When Naren tries to correct her by calling love 'a beautiful, comfortable trap', Indu defies that love is 'false' and hence it cannot be beautiful.

Shashi Deshpande in these novels shows how resistance leads to destruction of myths, beliefs and attitudes constructed by the patriarchal society. She has proved it wrong the most radical and common belief that a woman cannot live or survive alone. Her heroines though suffer from 'dependency syndrome' in the beginning, when circumstances get beyond control, they do not hesitate to set out and search for answers in the bigger perspective.

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with twentieth century women, who can feel the tension between tradition and modernity. Western education and postcolonial thoughts have liberated the minds of these women, who no longer take pleasure in being an 'object' of the society. They become 'cultural hybrids', as they fight to breathe within a tradition bound culture and western education.

Just like her protagonists, Shashi Deshpande is a cultural hybrid and does not try to conceal her class or gender identity. She hates being tagged as a 'feminist' writer and wants to be recognized as a writer, without the qualifier 'woman' or 'feminist'. She tries to give a realistic picture of women's oppression and hence vulnerable to be labeled as 'feminist'. The stories of Sarita, Indu, Jaya and Urmila are but realistic representation of many faces of Indian women in today's modern society. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft exposes the various systematic inequality of woman in family, work, culture, economics, law and education. She blames the patriarchal society for the subjugation of woman in all spheres of life and for the general weakness of woman.

In each of these novels, the reader can sense how beliefs, myths and attitudes are deep rooted and ones psyche is tuned accordingly within the socio-cultural norms, which consequently stifles the dreams and aspirations of the women. Women are made to accept that if they are to survive in this patriarchal order, they must disown their personality and make themselves powerless.

Michel Foucault says, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. (The History of Sexuality: Vol- 1, p-95)

Subsequently it is clear that 'resistance' will obviously reside parallel to the exercise of 'power'. Deshpande's women are not rebels, but they do challenge the socio-cultural patriarchal values.

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