

Indian Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and *The dark Holds No Terror*: A Reconstruction of Identity through Difference

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Abstract: The paper is an attempt to examine the feminist perspective in *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terror* of Shashi Deshpande. Feminism as movement might have originated in the West but with the deterioration in the status of women in India and the subsequent efforts made during the freedom struggle to pave the way for equal status, there arises a need for feminist studies in India. So, feminists like Deshpande whose quest for identity and freedom in a patriarchal society has become dominant themes in literature, unfolds the problems of women in the Indian patriarchal society in a very positive way. Deshpande may not be a formal feminist in the strict sense of the word, but it can also be observed that feminism can mean different things to different people. Though the male member in the family is prioritised in her two above mentioned select novels, however the solution to these is not violence to bring a change. As feminism has always meant independence of mind, spirit and body, so in this context the writer focuses on the educated earning wife and her adjustment within the marriage system. Through her texts, it has been observed that the protagonists after attaining all types of rights, now struggles to adjust rather than to get free from the traditional world. They submit themselves to the tradition, perhaps realizing the essence of the traditional ways at this transitional phase of society. Though economically independent, they are emotionally dependent on their husbands.

Keywords: feminism, identity, tradition, adjustment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been an integral part of all discursive practices including feminism. Literature reflects the gender relations in society that feminists aim to reconstruct. Besides providing intellectual framework for feminist thought, literary texts helped inspire and unify women in their political objectives. Thus, feminism in literature can be called a mode of critical discourse which focuses on the male dominance and oppression in all aspects of life. In the words of Nair, feminism "is a world view that refuses to delink art from existing social conditions and practices." (83)

Woman is the direct product of the basic assumptions of male dominated social values and has remained so for centuries. Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist, has rightly argued that women have historically been considered deviant and abnormal. She has become woman but not born one. She said that this attitude limited women's success by maintaining the perception that they were a deviation from the normal and were always outsiders attempting to copy the standards of "normality". She believed that for feminism to move forward, this assumption must be set aside. Beauvoir asserted that women are as capable of choice as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves. In the chapter "Women: Myth & Reality" of *The Second Sex* (1949), she argued that men had made women the 'other' in society by putting a false aura of "mystery" around them. She argued that men used this as an excuse for stereotyping them in society as was always done in societies by the group higher in the hierarchy to the group lower in the hierarchy. Thus, being influenced by western feminist writers, the post independence Indian women writers have engaged themselves in rejecting 'male literary standards'. Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English. She has created a wave in the society of male domination by taking women seriously in her novels. She takes us inside the consciousness of her women characters to present their plight, dilemmas and ambitions. In the context of the

contemporary Indian writing in English, Shashi Deshpande is the confident voice, who explores female psyche. According to her, most of her protagonists are women who are educated and exposed to western ideas. Being exposed to such modern ideas, women of the present day society are always eager for any social change. They are intensely aware of the injustice heaped on them by the society. However, unlike the western counterparts, Shashi Deshpande does not believe that women are inferior beings. This awakening of the women's consciousness as portrayed by Shashi Deshpande in her novels needs to be assessed from a new perspective. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are stronger than her contemporary writers like Anita Desai and Shobha De. These contemporary writers focus on the women's exploitation, discrimination and commodification. On the other hand, Shashi Deshpande's protagonists refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role models laid down by society for women. But they attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal and with great maturity. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru returns to parental home to escape from her husband Manohar's heartlessness. This temporary withdrawal helps her to view her situation objectively. She evolves into an individual with her own legitimate expectations of life. In her other work *That Long Silence* too, she focuses on the tensions of Indian women caught in the crisis of a transitional society where the shift is taking place from conventional to unconventional. Her women protagonist Jaya is preoccupied with the dilemma in society: the clash between the old and the new. She was born in the era when there is much awareness about her rights, liberty to express her ideas, freedom to enjoy finance and the chance to stand for a cause. Though she tries hard to rise above tradition but involuntarily adapted to it. Perhaps Deshpande agrees with Sarla Palker that there should not be a total revolt but a gradual change in the society for which everyone has to put some effort to bridge the gap between the old and the new generation. Thus, Deshpande is not against the institution of marriage as her women protagonists strive to make their marriages a meaningful existence. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for identity within marriage. She concerns herself with women's issues in the Indian context. In an interview she tells Lakshmi Holmstorm:

It is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences.

She says that she knows how the Indian women feel and she knows the mood of India. The protagonists' quest for identity is largely due to their frustrating experiences in the Indian patriarchal society.

The feminist thought in the west have had some influence on the women's movements in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterpart. As Uma Narayan, a feminist scholar in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* rightly disputes feminism as a solely western notion by challenging assumptions that Indian feminism is based on Western models. The female protagonists in their writings written in Indian context has enough courage to question the oppressive role of culture, but yet they refrain from taking the paths suggested by the western feminists. They rather seek to find their own paths. We know the social customs and attitudes prevalent today are largely a direct product of the Christian canon. Though in present day India, a woman still finds herself caught between her traditional upbringing and the values imbibed through her 'English' education and gainful employment, the social changes in the past fifty years have undoubtedly changed her formal position in society. Although the woman protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are at odds with their environment, they also come to comprehend the fact that the same environment has also given them strength and courage to offer resistance and fight through their dilemmas. Though limited they earn a real victory. Surprisingly in her novels, the male characters excluding the husbands are broad minded and feminist in their approach, for example- lovers, fathers and other relations. They display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. Deshpande's male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully.

The present paper is an attempt to analyse the select novels of Shashi Deshpande – *That Long Silence* and *The dark holds no terror* - as literary contributions to the feminist rethinking in Indian context. It examines women's situations and their search for identity by exploring the possibilities of resistance which are different from that of the western women with the application of a third world feminist perspective, as depicted in the novels of Deshpande.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* is a convent educated girl with a sense of being unique and extraordinary. Being a convent educated English-speaking girl, she feels suffocated and trapped in the traditional Sita-role defined in patriarchal society. She refuses to surrender her name Jaya for Suhasini, given to her by her husband Mohan at the time of her marriage. But she did not protest because quite at an early age she was taught that her husband is a tree of protection, a security. Jaya, therefore, shuts her door from outside darkness and disaster and confines herself to the stereotypical role of a traditional wife.

An engineer by profession and presently a technocrat, Mohan's concern is basically with money, status and material comforts. He was prospering but once he is caught along with his boss taking a commission, an enquiry is on and Mohan has to leave his office till the enquiry is completed. He has to leave his church gate bungalow too and make do with the Dadar flat of his wife. In course of time, Jaya gains in confidence even as he loses it. In the changed circumstances Jaya refuses to be servile any longer and opens the door of the Dadar flat herself. It is Jaya's father who taught her to have confidence in herself. Jaya's father is her source of some of her strongest moral emotions. No doubt her early training at home made her obedient towards her husband, but as she grows, she realises more and more that if there is anything wrong, it must be resisted. Refusing to handover the Dadar flat key to Mohan reflects a change in their relations and in the changing circumstances she refuses to be subservient and opens the door herself.

In the changed circumstances, when family life becomes unendurable for Jaya, she thinks that death is the only way out. But Jaya remarkably pulls herself back and does not approve of suicide that easily. She is a typical case of 'fight until death'. In Jaya, Shashi Deshpande provides a role model for the oppressed woman who challenges the stereotypes of morality that relegate women to the margins. Jaya emerges out of her confined space allotted by an androcentric world. She says :

Two bullocks yoked together – that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here, Mohan and I. Now I reject the image. It's wrong. (Deshpande, 191-92)

Jaya who has compared her life to "a pair of bullocks yoked together" now rejects this. She vows that she would not write any silly gossip now as Mohan once did not like that story. This made Jaya leave writing stories. According to S. Prasanna Sree, "Her giving up writing for the newspaper column 'Seeta' symbolises giving up her traditional role model of wife, now she will write what she wants to write and will not look up at Mohan's face for an answer she wants. This makes her voyage of discovery complete." (Deshpande, 191). Now Jaya had reconstructed her identity to get rid of the silence and advice by others. Thus, Jaya reviews her life and regains her confidence when she was hiding at her Dadar flat due to her husband's act of malpractice of funds. They have sent their children to the family friends. She thinks remaining in isolation: "I'm scared of cockroaches, lizards, nervous about electrical gadgets, hopeless at technical matters, lazy about accounting..almost the stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support" (Deshpande, 76). Now all she does is writing a book in which she articulates their own lives – lives of Mohan, Jaya, Rati and Rahul. She portrays that all her illusions of a sheltering and protective husband is a daydream. She rejects that part of her own self who has not accepted her real self. She accepts and encounters the life as it is. She accomplishes a space for herself within her family through self-assessment and self-criticism. The whole novel is a preparation for the articulation which will break her long silence. Jaya asserts: "will have to erase the silence between us, but the actual drama is postponed to the future." (Deshpande, 192). She comes to realise that life can always be made possible. This future possibilities for Jaya makes her a mature woman and with her realisation, shadow that befall between wife and husband tends to disappear.

What's remarkable about Jaya is that when she says "To me, our lives are intertwined yet there are two distinct strands. They are like two distinct lights that shine more brightly together but to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone." (Deshpande, 92), she means that she does not drift away from her culture and surrender meekly to circumstances. Instead she makes a compromise between the conflicting ideals of conformity and non conformity. In this case her father's attempt to make her different is praiseworthy. Her papa had made her different: "You are not like others Jaya,' Appa had said to me, pulling me out of the same circle in which the other girls had stood...You are going to be different from others,' Appa had assured me" (Deshpande, 136). Through Jaya, Deshpande gives a call to women that they should come out of the dependency situation, thus paving way for a strong willed individual ready to face life and not escape from it.

In her another novel, *The Dark holds no Terrors*, Deshpande lends portrayal of Saru, the protagonist an educated, economically independent, middle class wife who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents house fifteen years after marriage due to her strained relation with her husband. There she gets a chance to think over her relationship with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother Dhruva.

Saru is ignored in favour of her brother Dhruva. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much elaboration and performance of religious rites, whereas her birthdays are not even acknowledged. Saru recalls her conversion with her mother:

Mother: Don't go out in the sun, you will get darker.

Saru: Who cares?

Mother: We have to get you married. Will you live with us, your whole life?

Saru: Why not?

Mother: You can't

Saru : And Dhruva?

Mother: He's different. He's a boy.(Deshpande,45)

This proves that any Indian girl is a victim of gender discrimination in the Indian social setup even in the twentieth century. Saru's mother blames Saru for Dhruva's death. Her hatred towards her mother is so intense that she becomes rebellious just to hurt her. "I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer". The hatred drives her to leave home for Bombay to seek medicine as a career. Her success as a reputed doctor becomes the cause of her strained marital relations with her husband. Saru's rise in social and financial status in contrast to her husband's status of an underpaid lecturer sets in great discomfort in their conjugal relation. Shashi Deshpande has portrayed Saru's character as someone who remains at home as a housewife despite being a qualified doctor . Saru presents a perfect testimony for a successful marriage. She says :

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA, you should be a BA; if he is 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety, 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.

Thus ,it can be concluded that Shashi Deshpande does not let herself get beat by the western feminism or its radical concept of liberation. A mature Saru and Jaya reject extremes and take a practical dealing of the circumstances. They are neither the typical western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. In their search for identity ,they do not advocate separation from family but a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage. Although Deshpande highlights the degradation in a male dominated society ,she is not against the institution of marriage because we have observed her woman protagonists strive to make their marriages work in their endeavour to lead a meaningful existence. She broadens and reconstructs the scope of woman existence by providing new ideals for better man-woman relationship. Jaya and Saru prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity for an identity. Here ,Deshpande reflects tradition as the values of harmony that symbolises the Indian way of life that should be preserved and modernity is the assertion of one's space and identity. Her protagonist are victims of the Indian patriarchy and after initial submission they resist the oppressive situation through temporary withdrawal and creativity. Both of her novels trace the growth of the protagonist from a state of weakness, feeling of failure to that of relaxation. Though she portrays the ill-fated female of modern India, her portrayal is quite unique This reflects the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her identity. She states that she does not "believe in a simple opposition of bad men, I don't believe the world is like that at all." Thus, she puts forward a pragmatic solution.

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