

Female Subjectivity and Assertion of Self in the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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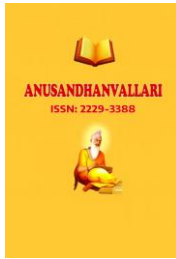
Abstract

The Indian English novel is firmly rooted in the social and cultural ethos in India. In all societies, a woman is assigned culturally by the standards of conduct and decorum both within the family and outside the family. If she turned away from the prescribed norms, the society would consider it as a violation to the ideal image of womanhood and named her as an unruly woman. In a patriarchal society, women have not been seen as equal partners. In India, their place in the socio-political and economic spheres has seen major changes in terms of status, respect, role and responsibilities. Their image in fiction too has undergone a change, especially during the last four decades. The post independence Indian women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women searching for their identity. They are no longer defined simply in terms of their victim status. Instead, these writers have explored the multi-layered roles of their women protagonists and rejected the ideas that are aligned to patriarchal conventions. Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian women writer, highlights the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation in her novels. All her protagonists are caught in the magic web of tradition and modernity. Her women characters are aware of the social and cultural disabilities to which they are subjected to in the male dominated society. They seek change but within the cultural norms with dignity and self respect. Her heroines Jaya, in *That Long Silence* and Sumi in *A Matter of Time* suffer in silence for the sake of social and moral society. They try to assert themselves and seek their own identity. They decide to assert themselves not only as a woman, wife or mother but also as an individual.

Keywords: cultural ethos, womanhood, patriarchal society, self sacrificing, identity

Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Saghil, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Sashi Deshpande successfully highlighted Indian women's capabilities and have established themselves firmly on the literary soil. These women writers have been influenced by western writers and they have been influenced by western feminist writers apart from critical writings coming out of the Indian subcontinent. They raise a voice against women's oppression and focus on the construction of gender in their writings. After India's independence, the social changes are the cause for the emancipation of women from their tradition ethos which has resulted in the participation of women in male-dominated professions. The socio-economic emancipation of women in India has brought changes in their status and outlook. This change has affected the vital relationship between man and woman. In olden times, woman was dissatisfied with the cultural and sexual role which was assigned to her by patriarchal society. But now, woman is gaining strength to rebel against the social and cultural oppressions. But she fails to reject totally her social and cultural responsibilities. She stands at the crossroads and caught between tradition and modernity.

In the changing scenario of post colonial Indian society that observed crosscurrents of traditional ideas and newly imported ones, Shashi Deshpande was burdened with the task of giving the specific roles for women characters which would fit in the socio-cultural values of the changed society. A new generation of women



emerged by embracing the changed values according to which women have a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. The new generation women novelists have portrayed their protagonists in their novels as they have the capacity to make their own choice of the male. In Deshpande novels, we get the theme of poverty stricken, hardworking, sincere and silent women of India who live like animals and embrace intolerable sufferings for survival but they hope for a better future for their issues only to be crestfallen at the end. Her characters belong to different classes in society. They are medical practitioners, writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and maid servants. Besides poverty and bereavement, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering has to undergo. The suffering is attached to the social taboos but sometimes the women are silenced in the name of family honour and compelled to digest torture.

Shashi Deshpande has steadfastly resisted the temptation of creating strong, glorified female heroes and has presented the Indian woman as facing the dilemma of having to choose between modernity and convention. She bares the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operative within the institution of the family and the male centred Indian society. Her protagonists are modern, educated and Independent women. Self-identity and their search for freedom within marriage is a recurring theme. A close study of her novels, her deep insight into the plight of Indian women whose identities are threatened by the gender discrimination and predetermined patriarchal norms Amrita Bhalla says, “She lives in a society where tradition is an integral part of daily life and enjoins codes of cultural behaviour. The actualization of a self identity is counterpointed against the established norms of a patriarchal society”. (14). Deshpande’s novels present the dilemma of her women protagonists and their journey from silence to protest and eventual self discovery. Her perceptions of women’s liberation are deeply entrenched in the life of Indian women’s situations within the socio-cultural and economic solaces of the country. The woman who occupies some social space being identified as wife, mother, daughter and sister is not free and she is in fact held in captivity.

That Long Silence and *A Matter of Time* deal with the conflicts of an Indian woman who is trying to strike a balance between her traditional roles and self-identity. Both Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Sumi in *A Matter of Time* liberate themselves from the shackles of being wives and realize their feminine self through identity-assertion and self-affirmation. Thus, the conflict of these two women is the conflict of common women that she experiences between the desired and the imposed. Jaya is projected as a woman who wants to fashion herself according to the dreams of her husband by imitating the life pattern of women in orthodox families. A wife must behave according to her husband’s wishes to make their marriage successful and happy. The women protagonists have to overcome trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity in order to analyze their response to the situation in life so as to fit themselves in the contemporary society. In a male dominated society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multifarious role in the family. As wife and mother, she should have submissiveness and tolerance as her required attributes. Her individual self has very little recognition in a particular society Deshpande states: “Liberation never means doing without family. No, no, to me liberation does not mean leaving your marriage. We are human beings.” (TLS 89)

That Long Silence thus reveals an intriguing picture of an ordinary middle class educated woman Jaya who lives with her husband Mohan and two children Rahul and Rati. The story entirely revolves around Jaya, her married life and her role as a dutiful wife and an affectionate mother. She has to pass through the trials and tribulations as an Indian housewife and as writer as well. The novel is an autobiographical narrative of Jaya, who faces a conflict between self-expression and self-generated suppression of a woman who has to fit herself to a preconceived image of a stereotype wife and a mother. Nancy Chodrow in her work ‘Family Structure and Feminine Personality’ writes:



.... the experience of mothering for a woman involves a double identification. A woman identifies with her own mother and, through identification with her child, she experiences herself as a cared for child... Given that she was a female child and that identification with her mother and mothering are so bound up with her being a woman, we might expect that a woman's identification with a girl child might be stronger (47).

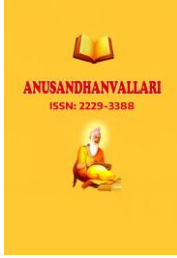
In *A Matter of Time*, Sumi liberates herself by such an action which decolonizes the patriarchy. She starts creative writing to resist her marginality and liberate herself. There is a question in front of her, whether she is Gopal's wife only or the mother of her children or an individual being. Definitely her heart has selected the third one from the multiple choice because it is not the question set in her exams because it is her identity. It is a question related to her life. She selects writing as her mode of liberation. The novelist shows how Sumi becomes the victim of the implicit patriarchal domination. Her husband Gopal leaves her after long years of marriage without explaining anything. She lives in utter desolation without knowing her fault. The novel resists patriarchy through positioning the three women characters in unavoidable situations. Sumi and her three daughters return to the house owned by her mother Kalyani after she was deserted by her husband Gopal. Sumi accepts Gopal's decision placidly not because she lacks the courage to counter him but because she knows the futility of remonstrance. Her refusal to Gopal's action shows that she accepts his decision only due to the critique of tradition. Her method of resistance is balanced and motivated towards reclaiming her identity. She becomes economically independent, immerses herself in gardening, writes and directs plays and discovers herself. As she confronts the past with admirable self-control, it is her triumph to restrain resistance that her husband who deserted her should admirably about her.

In all these relationships, the woman occupies the central stage and significantly the narration shifts through her feminine consciousness. Her novels reflect the lives of suffocated women in search of a refuge from suffering. In order to search a solution to their private problems, the women protagonists in her novels shift from their personal pains to the sufferings of the other women around. Their professions or social commitments sometimes come in conflict with the expectations of the husband and create tensions within the family. Finding it difficult to cope with the tensions arising out of professional roles and domestic expectations, Deshpande's women initially seek relief through abandonment of their professional roles. They quit their professions and try to seek peace by confirm themselves to their familial roles as homemakers. Deshpande has tried to show how her women characters reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system and vehemently deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority.

But on the social level, these women who have been struggling since ages to assert themselves are still being heckled by their male counterparts and forced to remain silent. The voice of this newly emerged class of woman, who have the same education as the men are having and are sometimes given the opportunity of supporting themselves financially, is heard in the writings of Shashi Deshpande. A Voice of protest against the marginalized condition of women as a class is also audible in her works. The bold heroines, having moral courage necessary for self-assertion replace the meek and submissive heroines who were accepted as the standard women characters. Shashi Deshpande usually describes Indian women in her novels. Her sincere attempt to break the silence of women has been widely acclaimed in home and abroad. Her clear understanding of human relationship, her close observation of the way of the world, her unbiased attitude to dogmas and movement is unsurpassable. A balanced and purposeful life is not a utopian fancy for a woman if she liberates herself from the stereotyped conditioning of the society and is not dependent on the male presence to authenticate her thoughts and deeds at every step.

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