
Shackles of Liberation: Voices of Women in the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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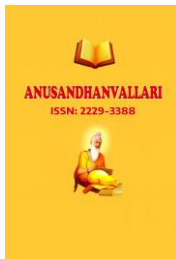
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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian novelist. She is an eminent novelist with a deep insight into the psyche of middle class Indian women. She has presented the modern Indian women's search for self in her novels. With more than a dozen fictional works to her credit she has successfully captured the true emotions of Indian women. She describes the conflicts and predicament of the Indian middle class women in her writings. Her works *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time* deal with the feminine issues. She presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood with a rare gift of sharp psychological insights. The women in her novels are subjected to continuous physical and sexual assaults in the society. Her novels deal with the theme of the quest for a female identity and the complexities of man-women relationship, specially in the context of marriage. The Indian woman has been a silent sufferer for years. While she has played different roles such as wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Manohar's male ego tries to dominate Sarita which results in disintegration ultimately. In *That Long Silence* Jaya recognizes herself as a failed writer because her stories are rejected for lack of genuine feelings which she has laid aside. She becomes the shadow of her husband. *A Matter of Time* is an exploration of Kalyani, Sumi and her daughter Aru. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man made patriarchal traditions uneasiness of the modern Indian women in being a part of them. Her young heroines reveal against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values and try to break all the social and economical barriers.

Keywords: conflicts, predicaments, psychological insights, female identity.

Deshpande, an award-winning Indian woman novelist, started her literary career as a short-story writer with the publication of her first short story in 1970. Her collection of short stories was published in 1978 where as her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, that brought her a lot of praise and admiration, came out in 1980. Her novel, *That Long Silence*, published in the UK in 1988, and India in 1989, won her the Sahitya Academy Award and Nanjangud Thirumalamaba Award. She was also awarded Padma Shri in 2009 for her contribution to the field of Indian English novels. Her other novels are: *If I Die Today*, *Come up and Be Dead*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, *A Matter of Time*, *Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit*. In addition to her novels, she has written four children's books and essays available in a volume, *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. Her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, moves around Sarita, the protagonist, who suffers a lot through out her life in the name of gender-discrimination and marital violence. It explores the inner psyche and consciousness of the Indian woman, a victim of Indian patriarchy. It deals with various issues related to girlhood, womanhood and motherhood which constantly torture and haunt the female mind. It projects the dilemma of a modern woman who relentlessly fights for her rights, identity, individuality, justice and liberty. It is a story of her conflict as a daughter and also as a wife. In her pre-marital life, she suffers a lot in the name of gender-discrimination. She marries Manohar with a hope to set herself free from the tyranny of her life as a



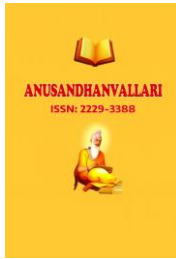
daughter. When she starts her married life she tells herself, “ If there is a heaven on the earth it is this.” (DHNT 40). However, her hope is shattered to pieces and she is compelled to live her life as a trapped creature bearing her husband’s sexual assaults. Ruch Floyd reports thus on marriage:

The success of a marriage depends upon no single factor, it results from the interaction of the total personalities of the partners. It is interwoven with their success in other areas of life in work, in community life. (585)

After having tolerated sexual exploitation for seventeen years and on hearing about her mother’s death, she returns to her parental home, fully determined not to return to her husband. Her stay in her father’s house gives her an opportunity to review the strength of feminine traits in her and also the nature of her relationship with others. She gathers courage and confidence and decides to return to her marital home to live, control and guide her life the way she likes, remaining well within the restrictions of marriage. She represents a typical Indian woman who struggles to set herself free from the shackles of customs, conventions, and traditions, and who strives for the development of her individuality and for the realization of her feminine strength through courage, confidence, determination and education. She bravely fights to survive as an independent being in the world which is filled with darkness, blankness, emptiness and nothingness.

That Long Silence is an attempt to explore Jaya’s relations as a wife, a mother, and most importantly, as a human being with others in a male centric Indian society. The novel highlights Jaya’s marital relationship with Mohan which is deeply rooted in silence. It explores the female psyche and mysteries of the female life affected by conventions and traditions prevalent in Indian society. Jaya, the woman protagonist, who is from a conservative family, possesses the potential and inner strength of character which is suppressed by conventional beliefs and ideas. She has been trained to be silent right from her childhood. Like other female protagonists, she, too, has a strong feeling of dislike for and aversion to social taboos. Mohan’s mother is a silent sufferer throughout her life. She faces and tolerates all insults heaped upon her and injustice done to her by her husband. For her, silence is the only weapon that she uses to move on with her life, totally depending on her husband. Jaya follows the same path by suppressing her own wishes and aspirations, and lives according to the desire of her husband blindly and mechanically. Over the years, she shapes herself so resolutely to his desire that in the end she leaves with no identity of her own, “ Just emptiness and silence.” (TLS 119). She accepts her husband as a sheltering tree and forgets her own ‘self’ and ‘identity’. She accepts a traditional role of an ideal wife by following her husband blindly and mechanically. She makes adjustments and compromises wherever and whenever required. However, in the end, she hopefully and confidently decides to find means to live her life afresh on her own. In this regard Amarnath Prasad presents an optimistic message through the words of Jaya, “ We don’t change overnight but we can always hope... without that life would be impossible.” (203).

A Matter of Time is a multi-generational tale which exposes the human predicament of four women Manorama, Kalyani, Sumitra and Arundhati, representing four generations of the same family. It deals with issues related to womanhood, motherhood, human relationships and a joint-family system in India. It is about physical and mental exploitation of women, sex and sexuality and many other issues related to feminine sensibility in a male-dominated society. It moves around a Hindu married woman with her sorrows, sufferings, suppression and oppression. It narrates a story of a middle-class family of Gopal and Sumi with their three daughters, Arundhati, Charulata and Seema. Gopal’s walking away from his marital life makes all the members of the family including Sumi to face mental pain and suffering. Gopal finds himself struck between his wishes. He says, “Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes – a life time of commitment – is not possible for all of us.” (MT 69). He likes to enjoy his family life and at the same time he likes to be free from familial duties. Rosary Royar reports, “ Responsibility is the enemy that Gopal cannot face and that is his captor and he the captive flees from it”. (154). Sumi does not fight against anyone but blames herself and takes responsibility for her actions. She admits that she was feared by her inner emptiness and fights to fill the void. W.S.Kottiswari reports, “ Resistance is a symbolic mode of action. Resistance is never enacted in a vacuum and is governed by larger



socio-cultural constructs and hence is reading resistance in literature, the entire structure within which the action takes place is to be taken cognizance of.” (112). Sumi, a victim of Gopal’s desertion, lapses into a state of complete and utter silence. Deshpande’s novels are a product of her observations and experiences of the life of middle-class Indian woman caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. She writes sincerely of what she sees around her. She seems to be engaged in portraying the realistic pictures of educated middle-class Indian women with their feminine traits, their strengths and weaknesses. Her novels, deeply rooted in Indian context, usually, have women as protagonists. The projection of feminine virtues such as silence, patience, sacrifice, tolerance is the very essence of her novels. They deal with themes such as loss, loneliness, pain, agony, anguish, frustration, subjugation, exploitation of Indian women, and also with their dreams and aspirations, their desire to be free and complete women in the sense of the term. As a popular woman novelist, she has been basically concerned with the plight and predicament, sorrows and sufferings of the female members of a contemporary Indian patriarchal society. Her major concern is with the pathetic condition of Indian women. She raises her feminine voice of protest against their subjugation, suppression, oppression and exploitation. As a popular woman novelist, she is basically concerned with the theme of intricate human relationships in which the woman is at the centre, the place and position, the plight and predicament of the woman in Indian patriarchal society, the role of customs, conventions, traditions, beliefs, superstitions, mythology, culture and philosophy in her life, her dreams aspirations, her natural urge to prove herself as an independent human being and her struggle

for self-assertion and self-realization in this callous and malignant environment in India. She is concerned about the disparity between the male and female members of society and about the secondary and inferior position given to the woman. Her sensitive and emotional middle-class heroines, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Jaya in *That long Silence* and Sumi in *A Matter of Time* are fully conscious of the fact that they are the victims of gender-discrimination and marital-violence prevalent in Indian patriarchy. Caught between traditional values and the fast approaching new life, they are carrying the burden of home and workplace, child-bearing and nurturing, age-old norms, conventions and traditions, orthodox beliefs and superstitions, duties and responsibilities. They have been struggling for freedom, justice, individuality, identity and survival. They are fighting their own battle, with an urge to find their own way through self-dependence, self-confidence, self-respect and self-assertion. They try to emerge as new women remaining well within the limits of marriage and family.

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