

SARU AND JAYA'S JOURNEY FROM SILENCE TO SPEECH IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S WORKS

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's realistic view as a true feminist on the condition of middle-class women is well expressed in all her novels but here the researcher has selected her two award-winning novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *That Long Silence* (1988). The aim of this research paper is to examine the status of Indian women in this male-oriented world and her resistance, she offers to patriarchy with the reference of these two novels. Her novels offer a mingling of the patriarchal norms and conditions and how women had undertaken these traumas with compassion and understanding. Hence, Shashi Deshpande's all works of fiction are represented as the women's journey from '*Silence to Speech*' and ultimately trying to find their own voices. Often these voices arise out of silences. Human issues, especially human dignity and problems, are at the heart of her writing. She sticks closely to daily life experience and problems of women that prevail even till today in our society; no one has been able to release from these shackles. Her ideas of women's liberation, autonomy are deeply surrounded in the Indian women's situation within the socio-cultural and economic spaces and paradigms of the country.

Keywords:

Feminism, Resistance, Stereotypes, Sufferings, Selfhood, Identity

Introduction:

The most striking feature of contemporary fiction is the emergence of feminist literature. This branch of literature gives expression to the sufferings, aspirations and hopes of

women in this male dominated world. The novels of individual writers like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are realistic in the sense that they are relevant to real life as opposed to romantic or escapist writing. Shashi Deshpande evolves a feminist understanding of the woman's problem out of purely Indian climate. Shashi Deshpande's use of the term 'feminism' is in the broadest sense which refers to her intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her interest in women's problems and not in the sense that she makes an advocacy for women's rights in her fiction. Her feminism is certainly not sarcastic and nihilistic but she considers 'feminism is very much an individual working out her problem.' (Mala, 1989: A156)

Shashi Deshpande's novels portray the middle-class Indian Woman who is undergoing a gradual transformation in terms of her position in society. Her novels resonate with the real-life experiences, are refreshing and reflect the social fabric of an Indian life. Her emphasis on the importance of being self-independent reflects the kind of feminism she projects through her women protagonists, here Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*. This research paper draws certain common patterns in the growth and development of woman characters that make conscious efforts which ultimately lead them to attain their selfhood and identity, marking a new beginning in their lives. This research paper evaluates two of her fictions, the earlier-published novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, published in 1980 and *That Long Silence*, which published in 1988 and won the prestigious **Sahitya Academy Award** in 1990.

The fundamental stance of this research paper is to delve into Shashi Deshpande's fiction highlighting the veracities of the women's lives and the truth that lie behind their silence. Female silences are at the very core of almost all her texts- silence on unhappy marriages, silence on marital rape, silence of muffled daughters, silence of oppressed wives and silence on gender discrimination. Her women are rarely strident feminist but almost all of them in their own ways try to break these silences and seek to have their voices heard. So her concept of feminism is not the strident and militant kind which sees man as the cause of all troubles but her depiction is very authentic, realistic and credible about modern Indian womanhood.

Shashi Deshpande has woven the story of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* around the female protagonist Saru, who was exposed to such unequal treatment of boys and girls at very early age. She felt neglected when her mother showered all her love and attention upon her

younger brother, Dhruva. She was taught that being a girl, she had to accept second place even in her home. The novelist challenges the prevailing double standard code of conduct of the society that has different scales for men and women.

Saru, who is a doctor, married and has two children but she is unable to shake off the fears of the past or the guilt which has been thrust upon her even since the death of her younger brother, Dhruva. There is the guilt for not being the male child her mother so much loved, and also the guilt that she failed to respond immediately to Dhruva's call for help. Things are never the same after that. She feels neglected and estranged, and also rebellious. Her marriage to Manu is one such act of rebellion and the mother's attitude has been unyielding and unforgiving. This homecoming is significant from many aspects-there is a need to belong, to pay homage to her dead mother, to reach out to her living father. Along with this, there is a desire to build relationships in order to forget the fears of the past. Saru, whose marriage is under stress at this particular time because her successful career evokes her husband's jealousy, has come partly to work her own way toward recovery and rehabilitation.

Saru is better paid than her husband Manohar who is a college lecturer. Manu's attitude towards his professionally and socially more successful wife is full of ambiguities. He likes the comforts; her money brings to them but resents her superior status. This resentment is generally expressed only within the privacy of their home, as outside it he puts on the mask of a proud and indulgent husband. Manu's resentment finds expression in the manner in which he savages Saru's body. In this most intimate aspect of the husband-wife relationship, her husband humiliates Saru. She maintains a silence on the perverse punishment, the act of love. She even tries to tell herself that perhaps it was her own fault and her success was to blame for her husband's behavior. She further tries to convince herself that she should defer to her husband:

"If he's an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he's 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-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow 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. ... (137)

Apart from the dominant and vicious husband, Saru has to contend with a resentful mother who has never forgiven her daughter for her role in the death of the cherished male child. Saru's brother Dhruva had drowned when they were playing in a pool and their mother

cannot forget this episode. As the critic Usha Tambe puts it, in Indian society

“A son is much more welcome than a daughter.”

Saru has to come to terms with these vitiated relationships and move beyond silence of unarticulated resentments, pain and hurt to wider worlds where she can develop other relationships that might allow her to be revitalized. Her women do not, however, move away completely from husbands and families into autonomous feminist spaces. Instead, they tap their inner resources to arrive at a position of strength. In the words of Kamini Dinesh:

“The wife, in the end, is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife –one who is no longer afraid of dark.”

This reaction might appear a sign of weakness and capitulation to some readers, but within the Indian context, her texts are realistic expressions of the spaces, women might be able to wrest for themselves, after much effort.

After she comes back to her father, she finds that her father has fallen into routine and there is another student, Madhav, who is living with him. The silences between the father and the daughter are rendered bearable by several things. Her father recedes quietly into the background, accepting her as she is; Madhav acts like a buffer between the father and the daughter but later during Madhav’s temporary absence they find the courage to talk to each other and go over the past in order to work out the sense of guilt which possesses them. This helps Saru to get over the terrors of the dark and exorcise her ghosts. The ‘dark’ of the title is her own past, her memories of childhood, the fifteen-year estrangement, the sense of having been abandoned and the fears of her subconscious mind. The novel ends on a note of reconciliation with Saru deciding to discuss her marriage with her husband. She accustomed with her father and told him:

“She stepped out the door, and then, moved to compassion for the old man, turned round and said over her shoulder, ‘And, oh yes, baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’ (221)

The novel works around three main strands of thought, the first of which is problematizing the institution of family, the second of the syndrome of the male child and the third of Saru’s coming to terms with her own self. As the narrative opens out both time and reflection play an equal role in helping her sort out her fears, apprehensions, aversions and

uncertainties. In this way both her father and Madhav play an important role. The man whom

she has always considered feeble is in fact gentle and tolerant. As she goes over the past, she realizes he had always supported her desire for higher studies and sent her to the medical college. And yet it had seemed to her that his silence accused her as much as her mother's open hostility. Through this mother –daughter relationship, the relationship between two women is intricate. It is a complex, protective, empathizing relationship. All women are not at loggerheads; all of them are not obsessed by the need for male child nor is the relationship with the girl child constrained by gender relationships. Thus, the contextualizing of a woman within male world is central to Shashi Deshpande's concern.

The second fiction, *That Long Silence* is not an imaginary story –but it is a story that happens in every middle class and educated Indian woman's life.

“Yes, the Indian women in this era are born at a time 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. Still.... the silence continues!”

Jaya in *That Long Silence* is yet another woman who overcomes silence that enslaves her tongue. Unlike Saru, Jaya is not a working woman and yet has to face the same spoken and unspoken resentments that the protagonist of the first novel did from the husband. *That Long Silence* tells the story of an Indian house wife who maintained her silence throughout her life in the face of hardships. Jaya, the protagonist, recalls her marriage life with nostalgia. She was married to Mohan and had two children and her relationship with innumerable relatives and friends with compassion and understanding. Though, she felt seclusion in her own home. She failed to be closer to her husband and her husband could not understand her feelings as a result of which she was too from within. She sees the silence in Mohan's

“A struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon.” (36)

Jaya is an educated, middle class woman who has totally subordinated herself to Mohan, her husband. She, too, tries to fall into the same pattern by suppressing her own desires and wishes and act according to her husband's intentions. She follows him so closely that finally she has left with no identity of her own.

“Just emptiness and silence.” (144)

Like the mythical Gandhari in the Indian epic Mahabharata and Sita in the Indian epic Ramayana, Jaya never questioned anything her husband did –

“Mohan had managed to get the job. I never questioned him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes too.” (61)

The bandaged, however, become too tight when Mohan is indicated on charge of corruption and she has to deal with the outcome while rendering her relationship with him and looking after their teenage children. As a result of the charge brought against Mohan, the couple has to move out of their comfortable corporate flat and into her family’s old flat. Moving into the old flat release long suppressed memories of Jaya’s childhood and youth and reminds her of her relationships with people like Kamat that had been supplanted by marriage. Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya’s married life:

“A pair of bullocks yoked together... (8)”and “the husband is said to be like a sheltering tree... (32)”

Those two images explain the meaning of the novel. In the early years of her marriage she utilized the training that she had received at home to be obedient and submissive. She and Mohan shared the burden of their life together. There was no love and hatred between them. Jaya is frustrated by her marital life but instead of being destructive, she endeavors to sublimate her suppressed energy and then she decides to revive her career as a journalist. (78) She writes a newspaper column “Seeta” in which she portrays the journey of middle-class wives and becomes very popular. Using the weapon of her imagination and self-assertion, she finds out the meaning of marriage, love and life. Shashi Deshpande’s make use of other mythical characters; those were very famous in Hindu history that women spent their life for their family and husband, like

“Sita-following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails....” (11)

As a literary figure, Shashi Deshpande tries to deconstruct various myths and folklores constructed by patriarchy as an effective means to suppress women. Men, to consolidate their supremacy, created them and internalized these concepts in the minds of the women. The novelist provides a new perspective of these centuries-old myths. Unlike the images created by myths, she presented her women characters as human beings, not like the mythical characters, Savitri, Draupadi and Sita. All these years, women have been placed sometimes, on a pedestal and praised like goddess but in practice, their condition is no better

than that of slaves. Subsequently, her protagonist of her fiction rejects the image of traditional women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi.

“It is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction...To go in different direction would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain...?” (12)

This disgust of living with a man who does not love the woman, the way she expected him to do, is a burning problem that educated women have to face in contemporary society. Through Jaya’s character, Shashi Deshpande has expressed the ambivalent attitude of contemporary educated independent Indian women who can neither reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life nor cast off their husband simply because

‘Her husband is like a sheltering tree; they cannot afford to live without’ (32)

The image of women underwent a metamorphosis when the contemporary woman decided to cast off her traditional role of living under the shade of her husband. Jaya gives a new image of the Indian woman who now tries to come out to this term and stands on her legs and seeks to break old –age silence by refusing to dance on the tune of her husband. The novel ends with the ‘return’ of her son Rahul, the promise of Mohan ‘to return’ on Friday morning and Jaya changing the idea of their marriage and learning the truth that

“Life has always to be made possible....” (193)

Through the character of Jaya, Shashi Deshpande has also explored the subject of sex although she never is sexually explicit; her fiction has never shied away from the matter of female sexuality. While many of her heroines are subjected to marital rape, there are others who take pleasure in their sexuality. Several of them have extra-marital relationships or are at least physically attracted toward men other than their husbands. Jaya is attracted towards Kamat but at the end, realizes that she has to sort out her marriage and not ‘escape’ into an affair. She tries to come to terms with conflicting identities, that of a wife, mother, woman and writer. Her writing made her unafraid. She now knows the true meaning of Krishna’s sermon to Arjun on the battlefield in the Mahabharata- *Yathechasi tatha kuru (192)* mean do as you desire. She is no longer angry with herself or with her husband and decides that

“I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us.” (192)

The text, thus, ends on a positive note as Jaya moves from Silence to Speech, from Anger to

Understanding from Despair to Hope.

The first acknowledgement of her writing talent came from a feminist press, despite her resistance of being labeled as a woman writer. But as Adele King has noted,

“The work of Shashi Deshpande lends itself particularly well to feminist heroes, but women struggling to find their own voice.”

As **Jaya** and **Saru** is not a feminist, as the text progresses, they find their own voice-the voice of a woman as well as a writer or as a doctor, although they still feel some hesitation in the voicing of both-as a woman and as a writer and as a woman and as a doctor. As she has said in an interview to the BBC World Service, she does feel that

“Over the years...my books have been very empowering for women...”

Although she writes about harsh and controversial topics, Deshpande does not want to be seen as someone who writes about issues and problems-she is keen to point out that she is a writer of fiction. Her characters' struggles are those of ordinary women fighting to be themselves rather than conform to stereotypes-to a fixed idea of how women should be.

“I always feel kind of wronged when people say I write about women's problems, because I always feel I write about human beings, many of whom happen to be woman. But then when I look back at my work and I think about what issue has mattered most, it is the conflict between the idea woman have of themselves and the idea that society imposes on them of what being a woman is. And there is a struggle to conform to this image, the guilt when you can't do that...I think this image, especially in India, comes through religion, through myth, through literature, through cultural stereotypes, through movies, they are all very strong, So I have been discarding all those stereotypes and all the mythical images.”

Thus, many of her women characters learn to break free of the stereotypes which surround them-the stereotype for instance of the mother and wife who remains silent and sacrifices her own needs and her own self. Besides being a daughter, a wife and a mother, according to the novelist, women should try to prove their worth in other arenas. Women should not confine themselves playing the allotted roles and following the dictated norms. They are equally qualified to try things at all levels. Men and women are neither superior nor inferior. But they differ biologically and one should respect these differences in order to bring harmony in the society. Shashi Deshpande personally believes that ‘a positive change in

woman's social status cannot materialize without bringing a change in the woman's mindset first.' Therefore, woman's increasing involvement in her predicament is well expressed in her novels that reveal her the positive, humanistic side of feminism. G.S. Amur rightly observes:

"Women's struggles in the context of the contemporary Indian society, to fine and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as a human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a writer. (Amur:10)

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