

A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN SELECT WORKS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT:

For ages, traditions, customs, cultures, norms have led Indian men to assume that they are vital and superior. Women are forced to think that they are inferior, weak and are not expected to play any other roles other than those of being a wife, mother, daughter or a caretaker of the family. Indians have always been inclined towards magnifying the roles of men in society and minimizing or ignoring the roles of women in all spheres of life. This study on the selected works of Shashi Deshpande is an attempt to explore the transition of women and their attitude and unwitting response towards patriarchy. The powerful characters of Deshpande represent the changing feminist thoughts and concerns of 20th century India. Their power lies in breaking the shackles of servility and compliance towards patriarchal rigidity.

Key Words: Self, Marginalized, Identity, Advocating Freedom, Awakening And Consciousness

Introduction:

Indian women have contributed significantly to the world of literature. Their novels signify the spirit of the age than the poetry or drama of this age. Novel, as a genre, deals with social realities and permits the creator the autonomy to project it. The world of literature has necessarily been patriarchal since times immemorial. Intellectual and artistic spheres were the domains women were not considered fit to be in. It was inconceivable to think of roles for women other than bearing children, raising them. With such a background, women never came to the forefront to express themselves through formal speech, reading, writing etc. Thanks to reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the possibilities of women's education germinated in India. English education gave women an opportunity to express their experiences within the domestic space. A. Sinha opines 'Women in India are, by and large, victims of social, economic and political exploitation'. The 20th century writings by Indian women are the most powerful writings due to the influence of modernism and feminism, the two great movements of the world. The indigenous ideas in the writings of female writers of the 1980s heralded a literary renaissance. Writers like Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandayya, Gita Hariharan etc moved forward with strong, firm strides flourishing and ascertaining their individual space.

Among the many celebrated Indian English women novelists, Shashi Deshpande has made a very deep-rooted impact on the audience. Her novels have created a great wave in the world of Indian fiction. Her narrative technique, blend of tradition and modern Indian values, gives her native readers an exuberant experience. Shashi Deshpande is an award-winning novelist, the daughter of famous Sanskrit writer Sri Ranga. Being born in Karnataka, educated in Bombay and Bangalore, she published her first collection of short stories in 1978. 'The Dark Holds No Terror' – her first novel was published in 1980, followed by a plethora of writings widely accepted by a large section of the audience.

Shashi Deshpande deftly delineates Indian middle class families, especially women who suffer the indescribable tensions and contradictions of the minds of our society. Gayathri Spivak in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' identifies nonwestern women as particularly as a group that lacks voice and holding a subordinate role. The post-colonial India exposed Indians to a new – Western lifestyle, advocating freedom of women, as opposed to the age-old Indian traditions. This conflict created a dilemma in the educated section of women who emerged as exponents of feminist ideologies. They are also the sufferers of their inner conflicts and the overbearing male ego of Indian men. All the novels of Deshpande emerge as realistic works since her characters do not belong to an imaginary world. They are characters of the changing Indian society, women ascertaining their new-found rights and freedom. Deshpande's protagonists are women, standing poised at the threshold of an awakening and consciousness. There is a suffocation in perceiving their identity in a society governed by traditions and values. The position of women in post-colonial times is predominantly political. Her writings are based on the politics of man-woman, a struggle for justice of the oppressed. This paper explores the issues of self-identity in *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000) and *Shadow Play* (2013).

In the novel *A Matter of Time* (1996), Shashi raises many existential questions through the women characters. It is a novel beyond feminist concerns, very sensitively throwing light on the lives, their personality, decisions, choices women make in life. Deshpande explores the most interesting relationship i.e. of a husband – wife, steeped in values and norms set by the prevalent society. These values operate within the institution of marriage and impact the dynamics of man-woman relationship. She portrays the Indian middle class educated woman sandwiched between traditions and modernity. *A Matter of Time* (1996) is a multigenerational story of women of silent suffering. Kalyani undergoes suppressed pain and isolation for more than forty years from her husband, Sripathi, for losing their only son. Sumi like her mother is also a victim of patriarchal dominance. Her husband leaves her after many years of their marriage, for reasons not known to Sumi. She tries to untangle the reasons for Gopal's desertion in absolute disillusion. It took years for her to understand that she cannot be solely responsible for her marriage. Sumi is advised by an elderly woman – "...Go back to your husband, he's a good man. If you have done something wrong, he'll forgive you. And if he has, women shouldn't have any pride". Indian civilization and culture determines certain characteristics for a woman to fit into the set norms. The following shloka defines an ideal woman if Indian culture:

*Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi
Rupecha Lakshmi, kshamayaa dharitri
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayaneshu rambha
Shat karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni (Acharya: 351)*

These words signify that a woman should work for her husband like a minister, have looks of Goddess Lakshmi, be benevolent like mother earth, a mother while feeding and a celestial beauty while in bed. A dutiful woman who performs all the above roles shall be honoured.

Sumi reflects on this advice and the fact that kumkum on the forehead means everything in this society as it is a mark of security for the future of her daughters. She dismisses these thoughts and decides to move on, leaving the past behind. She doesn't make an attempt to coerce him to come back and this exhibits her dignity and identity.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, *"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman...; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ---, described as feminine"*.

Deshpande through her female characters, challenges and breaks the traditional stereotyped images of women. Though they are products of patriarchal value systems, they emanate. Deshpande's characters of Kalyani and Sumi emerge as women who claim their individuality. Kalyani emerges as a woman of strength, inspired by her own daughter and lets's go of her past. Sumi liberates herself by moving away from her past and starts the creative act of writing. She questions herself – is she Gopal's wife, is she a mother to her children or is she an individual being. In the questions she has about her life, she is happy with the revelation that her choice is the third one. This is her answer to her question on self-identity and liberation. She searches for a world of her own – a private space, deconstructing the premise of patriarchy. Aru, the daughter of Sumi, holds strong views about patriarchy. She declares 'I'm never going to get married', after seeing the tragedy of her mother and grandmother's marriage. She also ensures that her father, Gopal does not go scot-free. While Sumi tries to ascertain her self-identity. Sumi gets herself prepared for the future:

"....retracing my steps, picking up things, thinking – is this it? But she has turned resolutely away from even their immediate past; she is preparing herself for the future...." (122)

Aru fights for the justice for women.

Shadow Play is a sequel of the novel *A Matter of Time*. Aru, the eldest daughter of Sumi, continues to be the central force binding the lives of the women fraternity in the novel. Her resistance against injustice that has happened for her previous generations sustains ceaselessly. She creates a life for herself and her sisters, focuses on readjustments of strategies to undertake an identity of their own as embodiments of strength and courage. Shashi Deshpande seamlessly photographically the four generations of the same family, each representing a specific set of experiences. Manorama is the product of patriarchal system, Kalyani represents the survival power of women, in Sumi we see the struggles to live and assert oneself withstanding the shock and hollowness of life left behind by Gopal. In Aru, we see the preparedness to combat challenges by being armed and never being totally vulnerable.

The female bonding of these generations complements each other by helping them support each other towards success in life. In these we see the power of the company of woman contributing to the discovery of their identity not just within the construct of family by society persay. The changing world is symbolized through the transition in the characters of Shashi's women. Aru's sense of freedom is envisaged in the end of the story where she adopts a child. She changes her mindset according to the situation and feels hopeful for her future. This indicates, for the 'new age women' motherhood is not a requirement. Aru

wonders how women wait for the child for nine months. She thinks over the situation and tells herself, “Only way to get rid of the barrier is to jump over it, and to leave things behind”. (SP 209)

In *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande has shown her protagonists as the ‘new age women’. A rudimentary reading of the novel reveals that the story is about Madhu, the narrator of this story. The novel is linked with the lives of two women Savitribai and Leela. It’s a writing presented to the readers from the woman’s point of view. The characters are seen not conforming to the ideologies or values of the society they belong to but thirsty for building their identity. Savitribai, a woman from orthodox Hindu family, elopes with her muslim lover for a career in music. She goes against the age-old traditions to pursue her career, eloping with her tabla master Ghulam Saab, has a daughter Munni from their union. Though she becomes a renowned musician, she is doomed to suffer throughout her life to maintain her dignity and a measure of respectability. Savitribai devotes herself to music and take up the many challenges that come her way, deals with them. With her strong perseverance she asserts her identity.

Deshpande mirrors not just a single aspect of women in her novel. Women’s psyche works in many ways. Some are bold like Savitribai and Leela and on the other hand few are weak and submissive. She is clear about the fact that women are responsible for their treatment in the society. An independent woman like Leela, another remarkable woman, “ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well” (Deshpande 94), strong believer of communist ideology is whom Madhu chooses to write biography upon in the novel. She loses her husband Basant and then decides to take up a job. She decides to remarry a doctor by name Joe despite the cultural differences and the differences in their personalities. Leela is Deshpande’s ‘New age woman’ who makes her own choices but to gain this liberty, she had to fight against the rigid norms of the society. She is an educated woman with refined nature who works for the welfare of others and herself. In case of Munni, Savitribai’s daughter, she is too influenced by her society and doesn’t want to accept Savitribai as mother nor the table master as her father. She sees limited scope of life unlike the women protagonists of Deshpande. For Madhu, writing is the means of getting rid of her marital tension and a way to escape from the bitter relationship with her husband. As she explores the lives of Leela and Savitribai, she understands herself better and questions the conceptual construct of a women in Indian myths. Deshpande’s efforts to subvert the roles of Indian men is also a success in the novel *Small Remedies*. This subversion is much accepted by the readers since Indian women’s lives are overloaded within the defined setup of patriarchy.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are a document women’s resistance to patriarchal ideologies and focus on the strategies of fortifying her identity. She redefines the roles of women and identity in the light of the emergence of western feminist theories. Economic dependence of women keeps them servile and controls their sexuality. The need for women to become economically independent was the motto of the new wave feminist ideology. This concept of feminist ideology in Deshpande’s novels have given a positive image of her women. She indicates that without the active participation of women in all spheres, the civilization remains incomplete. She creates a ‘space’ for women and records her protest through the characters she creates, challenging the stereotyped images of women. Her novels have intricate pattern of relationships within the institution of family. In an interview taken by Geeta Vishwanath she said:

Geeta: Every novel of yours focus on marriage and its crises. Could you explain this centrality you accord to marriage?

Deshpande: ...See it this way. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, it's the relationship of the daughter with the mother which is equally critical, though it is the past. We are shaped by our childhood and our parents. So, that relationship is also very much there. Now, in adult life, our relationship mainly concerns the partner, spouse, lover and husband whoever it may be, a wife and children. Now these are different relationship, which concern us. Marriage is a more complicated relationship because it is not a blood tie. Also there is the physicality of sex. And there are enormous demands made on each other and it is that which interests me. Because when it comes to a crunch, you put stress on it, it comes apart. It is so human-made. I don't see it as anything but an institution made for certain purposes and so much has been built upon this foundation, monogamy, the sanctity of marriage – all these are things which are hard for human beings to adhere to. This is why marriage interests me. In times of crisis, when there is a small flaw, the whole machine seems to come apart. The parent-child relationship is equally important for me. This is again a very deep and complex relationship. But yet, marriage is important for me and so is the family. I am interested in the family. Not just marriage. These are the two relationships one is generally concerned with.

Shashi Deshpande's writings are outpourings from a world within the woman. She emphasizes on the role of 'self' and regards self-esteem of women as important, projecting the significance of humanity in the structure of society. This needs to be strengthened through education of women and this seems to be the vision of Shashi Deshpande.

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