



Research Paper

The quest for identity in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is a very significant Indian English woman novelist. She has published more than a dozen novels, short story collections and a collection of essays. She is the recipient of Sahitya Academy award for her novel 'That Long Silence.' Shashi Deshpande's main concern is the portrayal of women's struggle, their quest for identity and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Both the novels 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' (1980) and 'That Long Silence' present the dilemma of modern women, their forced silence and their yearnings and aspirations. Deshpande projects the predicament of middle class educated women and constantly questions their role as wife, mother or daughter. She uses the psychological milieu of her heroines to work on so that she can put these women's search for self-worth in perspective.

Key Words: Quest, identity, women, self-worth.

Shashi Deshpande is a much-acclaimed Indian English Feminist writer who falls in the tradition of Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya, Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal and others writing about women and taking up their cause. She creates characters which come from real life and have a will of their own. One may find in some of Deshpande's novels occasionally autobiographical strains but her characters are not directly lifted from her own life. A characteristic feature of feminist writing is not only to articulate women's voice but also to present a critique of the canons of patriarchy. It is scrutinising the position of women in a male dominated social context. Shashi Deshpande brings out the trauma of women in traditional marriage system where they are stifled and suppressed due to discrimination in the roles of husband and wife and face a complete loss of identity as an individual. In the words of RS Pathak "Deshpande's protagonists are women struggling to find their own voice and are continuously in search to define themselves." (21)

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* portrays the dilemma of a woman who since childhood tries to ascertain and assert her identity. Both her mother and her husband Manohar represent the norms of a patriarchal society. Sarita or Saru resents her mother's preference of her brother and a special treatment meted out to him. She notes that there is always a Puja on her brother's birthday but none on her. After her brother's death her birthday is never celebrated. Saru recalls: "after Dhruv's death, there were no more celebrations. My birthday was passed over in silence both at home and at school. (153)

The novel opens with Saru returning to her father's home after a gap of fifteen years. It is an escape from the sexual sadism of her husband. The fact that her mother has passed away makes things more bearable for her. The story further is constructed out of Saru's recollections and a past remembrance of things and relationships. The stay in her father's house gives her a new understanding of his personality, her relationship with her mother, her husband and even her own children. In the words of R K Gupta: "Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal the women's quest for self, an exploration into the female psyche and an awareness of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it." (19)

Since childhood Saru is very conscious of the gender discrimination which the girls have to face in society. Saru's relationship with her mother in the novel is fraught with mutual hatred. She hates everything that her mother stands for, even womanhood. "A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage, scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother. (55) This makes her determined to create an identity for herself. Being a doctor gives her that satisfaction, and people's acknowledgement of her achievement comforts her bruised self:

When we walked out of a room, there were needs and the smiles, murmured greetings and Namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller, made him inches shorter. (36-37)

But Saru has to pay the price of such self-worth. The confident doctor in the daytime becomes a trapped helpless victim of her husband's sadism at night. And this becomes the cause of her running away for the second time, leaving her husband and children behind. Ironically the to and fro between her husband's and her parental house also highlights the constraints of space that a woman has in a patriarchal set up. She has no home of her own where she can live without fear and be vocal about her needs. Saru is surrounded by women who suffer in silence in one way or the other. She remembers her grandmother who was deserted by her husband but had never complained as she had accepted it as her destiny. "It was written on my forehead" (62) In fact there is a complete loss of identity as she asks Saru "Why am I, a fat old, unwanted woman left alive when he (her husband) so useful, so much wanted was taken away? Why am I alive when he is dead?" (69)

Saru's mother objects to her aspirations of being a doctor. She advises her husband "let her go for a B.Sc.... You can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over." (130-131) But even after being a Doctor Saru does not achieve that equality and self-worth for which she is craving. Her anguish comes through an imaginary letter which she writes to girls in her friend Nalu's college: "a wife must always be a few feet behind her husband.... 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.... If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you." (124) She can see her friend Smita becoming a puppet in her husband's hand as he changes her name to Gitanjali and hates anyone calling her Smita. Also she has to borrow money from Saru because her husband has given her "just enough to buy a small gift for the baby", indicating at his penchant for control. (107)

Finally at her father's house Saru realises that the demon lies within. She has to fight with her inner fear and conflicts regarding – her mother, the death of her brother and her husband. She confesses to her father about the actual circumstances of her brother Dhruv's death and her role in it. She also admits to herself that "I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated, because I have been afraid of proving my mother right." (201) The realisation brings her decision to confront her problems. She realises that she has been escaping from confronting either her parents or her husband and this has always put her in dilemma where she was never sure of her identity. But at the end of the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, a much more mature Saru decides to meet challenges head on starting with her husband Manohar. One can only hope that the newfound identity of Saru will make her fare better in life.

Shashi Deshpande denies being directly influenced by feminists like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Though her ideas as a feminist are certainly shaped by the reading of them and other feminist writers, her aim is more to understand the problems of women and bring them out in her fiction. As Liz Stanley and Sue Wise observe:

The essence of feminism for us, is its ideas about the personal, its insistence on the validity of women's experience, and its argument that an understanding of women's expression can be gained only through understanding and analysing everyday life, where oppression and everything else is grounded. (135)

Deshpande however is aware of the pitfalls of being a woman writer and justifies the liberties a woman might take while writing: "for women particularly, after so many years of silence, there is bound to be some exaggeration, some extravagance.... Women have every right to express themselves in any way they want to." (Pathak 231)

In her much celebrated and awarded novel *That Long Silence*, Jaya, the heroine of the novel, despite being a perfect wife and mother, is lonely and discontented. She is expected to suppress her identity and totally succumb to the duties assigned by her husband, Mohan. She is advised by her uncle Ramukaka: "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you." (138)

From the beginning Jaya has seen and felt the discrimination towards girls in her family. Her own mother prefers her brother Dinu over her and gifts the flat in Mumbai to him even though he is settled abroad. Similarly when her uncle prepares a family tree, she is not mentioned in it. She is told "you don't belong to this family! You are married, you are now part of Mohan's family, you have no place here." (143) she feels "Not just inconsequential, but wholly blotted out." (143) A worse fate awaits Jaya when she gets married to Mohan, where she is given another name Suhasini by her husband and is expected to be "a smiling, placid, motherly woman" (15-16)

Jaya's writing career does not flourish because her husband does not like her expressing her emotions in her writings. For seventeen long years, Jaya suppresses herself and either faces rejection of her stories or gets accepted for her comic pieces in a column entitled 'Sita' approved by her husband. She says:

"Sita had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention, women I had known I could not write about, because they might, it was just possible, resemble Mohan's mother or aunt or my mother or aunt." (149)

In the novel Deshpande reveals a long line of suffering women who remain silent till the end. Jaya, being sensitive both as a writer and a woman, is aghast at the humiliation Mohan's mother has to bear from her husband. In her, Jaya can see a helplessness and despair "so great that it could not voice itself, I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon." (36) Mohan's sister, Vimla, too suffers silently and finally dies with

an ovarian tumour. Jaya observes “she sank into a coma and died a week later, her silence intact.” (139)it is the same silence which Jaya adopts to suppress her identity. Even when she is accused falsely by her husband, She finds herself unable to speak:“I could say nothing. I was in my place, pinned to it by his anger, a monstrously huge spear that went through me, excruciatingly painful, yet leaving me cruelly conscious.”(120–21)

The silence in the novel depicts the plight and suffering of Indian women who by tradition are expected and accept to be silent. The sea of silence engulfs their personalities and identities. Deshpande's women realise this and fight to keep themselves afloat. They are not mere housewives but independent career women who take stock of their situation and either bolt or confront. Saru is a doctor and Jaya is also a columnist and an aspiring writer. They are able to look after themselves financially. It is the institution of marriage which they find lacking. The unfair balance of rights and duties and the fragile ego of their husbands unsettle them and make them flee. And yet Deshpande's heroines often come back and find solution within themselves rather than outside. They seek inner strength, find their identities and get over their dilemmas ,ready to face the future with new-found confidence. Jaya after a long introspection, comes to terms with herself and accepts that:“we don't change overnight,... It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time, but we can always hope. Without that, life would be Impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this; life has always to be made possible.”(193)

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