Women’s Plight in That Long Silence – A Feminist Study of Shashi Deshpande’s Fiction

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Abstract
Feminine subjectivity has been explored by many Indian women writers. Among the recent Indian women novelists writing in English, Shashi Deshpande’s credentials are most flawless. Shashi Deshpande, a leading Indian woman novelist who has potential as a serious writer, genuinely concerns with women’s issues in her works. In almost all her works she presents the picture of woman trapped between tradition and modernity, mental trauma of a woman, her quest for an identity etc. A close study of her novels reveal how well she voices their concerns. This paper is an attempt to project the miserable plight of the contemporary middle class, urban Indian woman presented in ‘That Long Silence’ by Shashi Deshpande. This work of Shashi Deshpande has drawn critical attention and got Sahitya Academy Award because of its detailed and realistic representation of Indian middle class woman.

Keywords: That Long Silence, Shashi Deshpande.

Author’s Idea

Literature refers to a work of creative imagination that include poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction which introduces us to the new world of experience. Literature is a kind of printed material that possesses some kind of artistic merit. Literature expresses issues, experience, ideas of intense interest to many people. Since a writer creates ideas and gives them permanence and universal interest, literature addresses topics like freedom, truth, beauty, love, despair, hope, hopelessness, that are of deep interest to many people. Various contemplative people throughout time have concerned themselves with all and such other ideas and have explored them through literature.

A ‘literary’ text is the one that along with expressing ideas intensifies, freshens and deepens our understanding of something. It helps readers deepen their understanding of particular issue of universal and ongoing interest to the masses. It offers valuable insight into the issue in a way, that is, itself remarkable for the way it functions in conjunction with the ideas to create an experience that is greater than the ideas themselves.

Literature is classified according to historical periods, genres and political issues. Historical periods in English literature include Old English, Middle English, the Renaissance, the Elizabethan, the Restoration, the age of Romanticism, Modernism and postmodernism. Genre includes the artistic works that fall with a certain central theme like romance, mystery, crime, fantasy, erotica, and adventure. The study of literature includes some important intellectual movements – feminism, post- feminism, post- colonialism, psychoanalysis, post- structuralism, post-modernism, romanticism and Marxism.

Contemplative people, throughout time, concern with ideas and issues in their surrounding and explore them through literature, these contemplative people are either men or women. It is believed that the men and women have different life experiences, the writings of male and female authors will differ, as well. Women’s writing as a distinct area of literary studies is based on the notion that the experience of women, has been shaped by their gender. “Their text emerges from and intervenes in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men”[1]

Women writers have remained disadvantaged by a male dominated literary world. Feminist theory, an extension of feminist movement, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality and examines women’s social roles, experience, interests and feminist politics in a variety of fields such as communication, economics, literature,
education and philosophy. It focuses on analyzing gender equality and the promotion of women interests.

Feminist criticism aims to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing, to interpret symbolism of women’s writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view, to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective. The feminist thought and feminist movements in the west had some influence on the women’s movements in the developing countries like India. Indian literature took many years and several distinguished personalities to reach its present status. In the mid-nineteenth century, more women started writing in the English language and incorporated their personal and female experiences in their writings.

In the previous years, writings of female were undervalued because of some patriarchal assumptions. Male authors and their experiences would get priority and acceptance in the Indian society as they used to deal with heavy themes whereas, woman used to write about female experiences in the domestic realm. Due to which women literature was declined in the eighteenth century. In nineteenth century female writings focused on the country’s freedom struggle and feminist ideologies began to influence the English literature of India.

Indian women writers explore the feminine subjectivity. The list of Indian women novelists comprises popular names such as Bharti Mukherjee, Nergis Dalal, Krishna Sobti, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Gauri Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabwala, Shobha-de, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and many more. Most of these novelists are known for their bold views that are reflected in their novels. Authors like Nayantara Sehgal, Rama Mehta, Anita Nair, Susan Vishwanathan have used feminism and marked the treacherous journey of women in Indian society as the main theme of their writings. Kamla Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai have picked up miseries, plight and woes of women in the today’s male dominated world as main subject matter of their works.

Among Indian women novelists, Shashi Deshpande has emerged as the mainstream woman writer who has drawn critical attention because of her sensitive and realistic representation of Indian middle class woman in the domestic arena. She is always labeled as feminist writer. She is critically acclaimed writer of nine novels include *The Dark Holds no Terror* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Wine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996) *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving on* (2004) and *In the Country of Deciet* (2008). Almost all her novels deal with the situation of women at the cross road of a transitional society, changing from traditional to Modern. She pictures the dilemma of the educated class Indian woman trapped between her own aspirations and the forces of patriarchy. G.S Amur rightly observes: “women’s struggle in the contest of the contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande’s major concern as a writer.”

Though all works of Shashi Deshpande’s focus on the reality and truth of the lives of Indian woman, this paper is chiefly concerned with Deshpande’s feminist concern shown in her work *That Long Silence*. *That Long Silence* work basically expresses the plight, frustration, and disappointments of women who experience it in this male dominated society. It portrays the agony and trauma experienced by women in tradition bound society. In *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande’s feminism in Indian sense is born out of predicament of woman placed between contradictory identities: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature.

In *That Long Silence* through the character delineation of Jaya, Shashi Deshpande portrays the utmost plight of woman she faces in Indian Male Dominated Society – her loss of identity in Indian Patriarchal and traditional bound society. Jaya, the female protagonist of the novel, though a convent educated girl with a literary taste, is supposed to lead a traditional passive life like: “Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri, dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails” *(TLS 11)*

These legendarry women followed their husbands willingly, while Jaya follows Mohan everywhere because of compulsion. This shows the contradiction of modernity where an educated woman does not have say in her own life. She does not have liberty to call a spade a spade. Whether she wants or not she has to follow her husband and this patriarchal society. This is the characteristic of woman in Indian society that once she is tied in the nuptial knot she does everything to prevent it from any disaster. “Two bullocked yoked together…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?” *(TLS 12)*. These words uttered by Jaya shows the frank and brutal realization of the evil necessity of marriage in life of not only Jaya but of the life of all women in Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife and her suppressed feelings. For a long period of time Jaya manages to remain silent and suppress her feelings as she gives priority to her role of a good wife than a good writer. When she was torn between her two selves – of a good and
loyal wife and a good writer – she not only suppresses her writing career but also her association with her one-time neighbour, Kamat. When Jaya is on the road of her success and about to be recognized as a creative writer of merit, her husband Mohan expresses his uneasiness about her story writing. She thinks, “looking at his strained face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong, and I had stopped writing after that”(TLS 144). Here Shashi Deshpande figures out subservience of woman in Indian society. It accentuates male domination constantly relegating woman to a secondary position in Indian society of patriarchy.

But her self of writer prods her to keep writing. She starts writing under a different name but unfortunately her stories are rejected one after another. Her friend Kamat makes her realize that the reason behind the successive rejections of her stories is the lack of strong emotions. But she is condemned to express her emotions and feelings lest it should damage her relation with Mohan. She suppresses her anger and emotions as her husband Mohan considered this trait in a woman as unwomanly. She tells Kamat: “because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of any angry woman?”(TLS 147) Here Shashi Deshpande shows the helplessness of a woman. In the clutches of male dominated society she accepts to confront the reality but not to run away from it. Though Kamat admonishes her for this saying that it will drag her down into a soft squishy bog of self pity but she remains unwavered by his warning and determined for loyalty towards her husband. Later she produces humorous pieces on the sufferings of a middle class housewife in a column entitled ‘Seeta’. She says; “Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who 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.”(TLS 149). Thus she deceives the reality or truth and suppresses her inner conscience to avoid endangering her marriage. Actually here reveals the fear of every Indian woman of jeopardizing her own marriage. In Indian society even a well-educated, progressive female feels the intense tugs of tradition and family expectations.

Her association with Kamat brings another agony to Jaya. While Kamat has been assisting Jaya in writing career and helping her in avoiding any confrontation with her husband, she get closer to kamat. She feels so much at ease in his company that her womanly inhibitions wither and she opens up her problems with her. Jaya finds a source of solace in Kamat in her pain. Their closeness leads to physical attraction. On one occasion, in her distress, she comes closer to Kamat and surrenders herself to him and when he tries to console her she finds herself in the arms of Kamat. At that moment, in her desolation and privacy of Kamat’s apartment she had ample opportunity for physical involvement but she dare not do so for fear of endangering her marriage. Even she feigns attachment after that day. This incident provides the evidence for the fettered selves of so-called educated middle-class wives. Just to prove herself a loyal wife and a caring mother, she suppresses her real self. This is what every Indian woman is expected to do. A woman is always remained secondary in this patriarchal Indian society.

Besides this there are many more evidences in the novel that depicts the restrictions on the fulfillment on the individuality of a woman. As in, Jaya remains passive and does not revolt the change of her name from Jaya to Suhasini at her marriage just to keep her husband happy. Her dress and her appearance prove her subjugation to Mohan. One more point in support of her suppression of her free will is that she has been taught “the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family – family as security, as a source of emotional strength.” Almost all the plights that a woman faces in Indian society arise from male domination and rituals and customs are there to perpetuate the myth of male superiority. It is evident in the counsels of Vanita Mami when she says to Jaya before marriage that husband is like a sheltering tree and advises her to keep that tree alive and flourishing even if she has to water it with deceit and lies.

The novel depicts blatant gender inequality and discrimination prevalent in the society. This gender discrimination is strongly evident in the words spoken by Ramu Kaka when he shows Jaya the family tree. There in that family tree Jaya finds the mention of the names of boys only and her name was missing. Infact, she finds no mention of her mother, her aunts and even ajji who kept the family together which makes her interrogate Rama Kaka about that patriarchal family tree at which he says: “how can you be there? You do not belong to this family. You have no place here.” Indeed, there are there are a number of female characters who falls victims of the gross gender equality. Mohan’s mother and sister, Vimla too are such victims. Mohan’s mother met a tragic death. His sister, Vimla also develops an ovarian tumor. She does not tell anybody about her problem and bleeds herself to death in silence. Then kusum, Jaya’s cousin is also a deserted wife. Jaya’s help-maid, Jeeja, has her own story of oppression. Her husband is also a drunkard and beats her frequentl. Jaya’s grandmother Ajjji, who after the death of her husband keeps herself confined to room.

Shashi Deshpande in her work ‘That Long Silence’ depicts the inner conflict of a female and her quest for the self identity and other sufferings in this male dominated and tradition bound society.
where male is considered primary and female secondary even in this modern age. This work of Shashi Deshpande is labeled as feminist novel as the protagonist has raised her voice and rebels against the suppression of the old patriarchal set up. Toril moi says, "It seeks to expose, not perpetuate patriarchal practices".

References