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The Female Protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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Introduction

Throughout the history of humankind, there has been a belief imposed on women that they were inferior to men both in physical strength and in mental caliber. They were denied freedom to act independently, even to get an education and were considered unfit for any task. In a way woman accepted and found satisfaction in being slave to men. During her childhood days, her father protects her, and after marriage her husband takes care of her; during old age her sons look after her. This was the general belief in Indian and other societies. Slowly, during the British rule and with the emergence of reformers, the condition of women underwent a tremendous change. Women were given education and participated in social, economic and political affairs.

Deshpande solemnly declared in an interview that she is a feminist writer

"I am a woman and I do write about women, and I am going to say it loudly; I don't want to dissociate myself" (Shashi Deshpande) (Sue Dickman, 1998:133). Casual study of her novels

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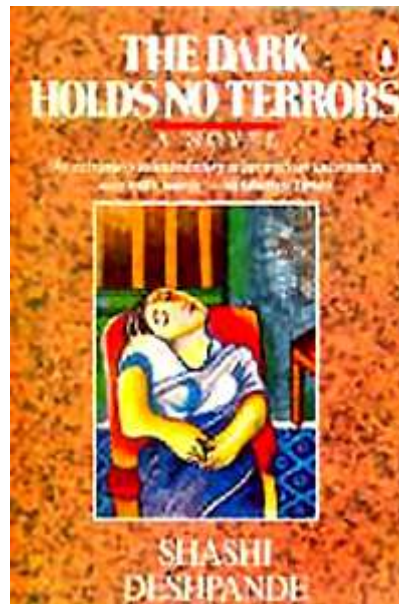
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makes one understand that she has not only much concern for women but also she has tried to understand and suggest remedial measures for their everyday problems in the patriarchal society. The protagonists of her novels are woman who have to struggle for even trivial things in their troublesome life. They have to face the challenges in their day to day life, and that may help quench their thirst for freedom, to say the least.

The Dark Holds No Terrors



The title itself is paradoxical. Darkness is the symbol of Terror. Terror subdues, hurts, affects one's emotions. Here in this novel terror does not affect Saru but her husband stands for darkness. Saru is caught in the web of male chauvinism. Saru becomes almost emotionally unbalanced and turns out to be a cynic. She says then, "A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he is 5'4" tall you should not be above 5'3" tall. If his earning is 500 Rs, you should not earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees. That is the only luck to follow, If you want a happy marriage"..... (137).

"The terrors are inside us all the time. The sorrows inside us all the time. We carry them within us and like traitors they are spring out; when least expect them to scratch and maul" (142).

Here we find a psychological analysis also. This is how our obsessions and fear haunt us like nightmare. The Title is not only simply symbolic but metaphoric.

The Woman Saru

A study of this novel shows how Saru, who strives to break the traditional, wishes to be the modern woman. She confronts reality with brave compromises of her heart to live at her will. This novel depicts how Saru experiences undefeatable trauma when her professional success had cast a shadow on her married life, how courageously she faces the situation and audaciously accepts the challenges imposed on her by her protégé's plight, unaided.

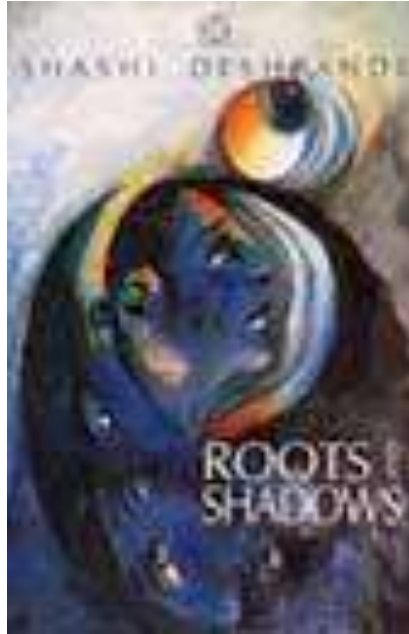
Depiction of Indian Conditions

In this novel the author brings the present day condition of an Indian woman before the readers, through the character of Saru. She experiences trauma differently from birth. As a child she was humiliated and neglected by her parents and family members. Probably the ill-treatment of her family members had forced Saru to seek consolation, love and care from Manu seeking to be modern, but remaining orthodox. After marriage also she had the same experience. She was refused freedom to breathe the scent of Independence. Deshpande discusses the blatant gender discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters, and their deep desire to have a male child. Every parent in India longs to have a male child as their heir, because they believe only he would help them in their later life, but the existing reality is far from that belief. Manu vents his frustration on Saru in the form of sexual sadism, which has been vividly portrayed by the author.

A True Tale of Men Too

This novel is a true tale of men who are intolerant of getting suggestions from their spouses and having their manhood get hurt, when their wives claim acceptance and popularity in the society more than the men. Manohar feels subdued and suppressed with the rising status of his wife Saru in society, and with that all the troubles start. For Manohar is insecure and he develops this inferiority complex for which he alone is not responsible. Here the author has makes it clear that society is equally responsible for their deteriorating relationship.

Roots and Shadows – Problems of Joint Family



In this novel the author gives a clear picture of the prevailing problems of a joint family. At the outset the family seems to be whole and unique but the subtleties inside the family that have been portrayed, by the author exhibit the reality of a joint Indian family. The author has made one point very clear that the head of a family should be more tough and steady to run a family. To keep order and harmony in a family, it needs an indomitable spirit; one must evaluate the pros and cons and make decisions for a family, because one is responsible for solving the problems as well as maintaining peace in the family. In this novel such a character is AKKA, who is endowed with authority and domination.

The Protagonist Indu

The protagonist of this novel is Indu, who wants to be independent of every restriction. Having born in an orthodox family such freedom was denied to her. Her family was a joint family and it was maintained and controlled by an old aunt, a widow who did not bear a child. At the time of her death, she left her money and family to the heroine, Indu. Indu was basically rebellious in nature. She left her home for study in the big city when she was a teenager. She

aspired to be a journalist and became what she dreamt of. She fell in love with a young man who seemed to be modern and married him. In due course, she realized that her freedom was illusionary. She has exchanged the orthodoxy of the village home for the conventions of the 'Smart young set' of the city where material well-being had to be assured by sacrificing principles, if necessary.

Her great aunt dies. Indu returns to her house after the absence of 12 years. As she attempts to take charge of her legacy, she comes to realize the strength and the resilience of the village women whom she had previously dismissed as weak.

Tradition- Bound Woman

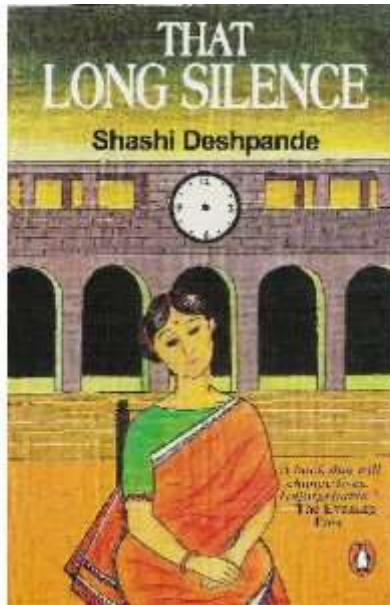
This novel pictures the agony and suffocation experienced by Indu in a male dominated and tradition-bound society. Indu lands herself in great mental trauma when she refuses to play the straight jacketed role of a wife, imposed upon her by the society.

To her great disappointment, the man after her heart, whom she has married, turns out to be no different from the less educated and very conservative Indian men. She is even more saddened when she understands that she herself has all along been involuntarily aping the role of the ideal, tradition-bound Indian wife. On her search for her own identity she even gets into an extra marital affair, and finally she realizes that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage.

A Woman of Determination

Deshpande then exposes the gross gender discrimination and its fallout in a male dominated society. Indu, the protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* is emerging successfully as a woman of determination, not yielding to the dictates of the patriarchal society. She exemplifies as a woman in the traditional period that is tossed between old-traditions and individual views. It records how she defies the worn-out traditions, pushes aside all her fears about her imagined inadequacies and asserts her rights as an individual being.

That Long Silence



That Long Silence won the Sahitya Academy Award for Shashi Deshpande in 1990. This story is a pen portrait of an Indian middle class housewife Jaya, the protagonist of the novel. The theme of the novel is simple. In this novel, right from the beginning Jaya maintains silence; and finally she breaks her 'silence' in order to step forward to lay claim for a prosperous life. How it happens is what the novel is about.

Jaya, the protagonist of the novel *That long Silence*, like every other Indian woman within the patriarchal system, suppresses her own likes and dislikes, as she plays second fiddle to her husband during crucial times, in her own words

“I had learnt it at last no questions no retorts, only silence”. (143)

Finding Female Identity – Jaya’s Journey

In such a stifling and suffocating domestic setting and patriarchal set up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her feminine dilemma is expressed in her chaotic state of mind. “I could and could not do all the things that were womanly and unwomanly.”

Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reaching to the stimuli of the moment and situation. In doing so, she goes on to affirm the feminine psyche of the protagonist, all ready to break away from the

stronghold of the quagmire of the social fabric rooted in patriarchy, which repels as it attracts. The dejections and disappointments of unrequited self-hood, the illusions of and pining for love and the yearnings for companionship make up the stream of Jaya`s consciousness.

“Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel”. (7)

Mute Sufferer

Jaya is not out and out the mute sufferer in the novel. She observes her relationship with her husband and speaks through her consciousness.

“Sensual memories are the coldest they stir up nothing in you.....their emotions and responses seemed to belong to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together. Whatever my feeling had been then, I have never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all.” (21)

“Jaya keeps silence and a silent stream of thoughts and feelings springs from it. In order to get by in a relationship one has to learn a lot of tricks and silence is one of themyou never find a woman criticizing her husband even playfully”(68)

In case it might damage the relationship Jaya yields to her husband`s will without revolting. She is accustomed to tolerating the masculine oppression. But she declares that she is not patterned after the women of traditional Indian society such as Sita, Draupadi, or Savithri. She presents herself the image of a woman to enliven and consolidate the relationship of man and woman in their journey of life.

“No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can`t fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together ... It is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?” (80)

When Mohan was caught in malpractice, he reasoned that he did everything for the sake of his family as he tried to assure his company about his motives. With Jaya, there has been no communication, and between the two there was a big gap. She is disgusted with their mechanical relationship.

“A man and women married for seven years without mutual love or understanding”. (78)

Loneliness in Marriage and Developing New Relationship

This loneliness in her marriage moves Jaya to the side of Kamet, a middle aged intellectual. He is not socially significant as Mohan. He treats Jaya as an equal, and shares everything with her. Jaya finds ease in his company, tells everything which she cannot tell others including Mohan. Her physical intimacy with Kamet is significant; an important thing in their relationship is perfect mutual understanding and friendship between them.

During her childhood days she was taught not to protest against the aged in the family by her Grandma. After marriage she learns to stay under the shell of silence, against the angry accusation Mohan throws at her during quarrels.

When silence fails to resolve everything, it becomes rescue. Jaya says: “I must not laugh, I must not laugh”. (122)

In fact, she laughs at Mohan and enjoys herself in that helpless situation :

“Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan started at me in horror as I rocked helplessly. When finally, I recovered myself I was alone in the room.”(122)

That laughter results in Mohan’s leaving the Dadar flat without a word. During his absence she has no face to show to the world; she becomes rudderless and no one is there as substitute for him. It means he had given meaning to her life.

Women as Victim

Ragul had gone with Rupa and Ashok on a holiday trip; their disappearance makes her lose hope. She goes out of the house and walks aimlessly in the streets of Bombay. She finds two

males fondling the chest of narcotic-smoking well-to-do girls at the bus stop. Shocked at the sight Jaya begins to doubt the credibility of romantic ideas, when the woman can be the victim. Her revolutionary ideas freeze as she fails to encounter the reality. She understands that her own children being distant from her together with her husband's accusations are sufficient to shake her revolutionary ideas. She realizes she is secure only with Mohan.

Success after Long Silence

Deshpande's women succeed after a long silence. Jaya, in "that long silence", knows very well that her husband had cheated her, but she cannot leave him just for that. When Jaya completely comes out of her emotional upheaval, she lists a few problems within her. At one point she feels that she has not achieved anything in her life, but soon this thought disappears.

"What have I achieved by this writing? The thought occurs to me again as I look at the neat pile of papers. Well, I've achieved this I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible". (191)

Self-Analysis

Jaya's father brought her up to be a competent and confident individual to bring victory in life, so he named her Jaya which means "Jay am" - victory. At this stage Jaya does not care about her victory. Mohan's moving away shocks her and she becomes vigilant to find her real place in life, for her life is only in relationship with others. She can have her identity only if she has Mohan with her. She travels in circles searching for her identity in the loneliness of her relationship with Mohan and children. Though it is a full circle it is not the starting point to which she returns. The untiring search for the self has brought her some knowledge of life. Now she does not look for the image of an animal to talk about their relationship.

Instead she looks at herself and Mohan as individuals with independent minds. She realizes that the fault is her own. Further, Jaya says one cannot remain static throughout one's life. There has been a change in Jaya in the right direction; and at night time it makes Jaya behave like a mature woman. With the news of the arrival of Mohan and their son, she finds

herself slipping into her marital life again. The feelings of Jaya newly evolved help to really strengthen her to look back easily at the path through which she had come to the present.

Jaya emerges through the tension of the two worlds in her as a determined modern woman, prepared to face life accepting the responsibility, and not trying to escape from it. Jaya realizes that meaningful co-existence that can only come through understanding, not through domination or subjugation.

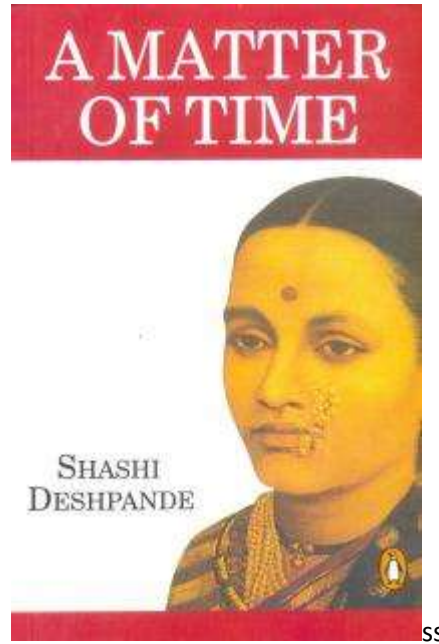
Freedom's Calling

Freedom is to survive 'whole' within the system and Jaya ultimately thinks it is possible. Jaya makes a strong statement on the prevailing subjugation of women in her observation. Fear on the part of women has allowed subjugation to continue. Women need not cling on and assume the roles imposed upon them. She says "in this life itself there are so many cross reads, so many choices".(192)

Women themselves have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership. Jaya herself contributed to her to victimization and so she had to fight her own battle and workout her own salvation. In consequence of this experience, she felt it was necessary to break the silence to stamp her identity. From then onwards Jaya lived in her real identity, without sacrificing individuality.

She would compromise with things and matters not with her life. She abandoned 'seta' for the newspaper column, and that symbolized giving up her traditional model role of a wife. She would write what she wants. She might not find answers from her own life. That was her emancipation.

A Matter of Time



Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* deals with the human predicament of women. Though the protagonist of her novel is a man, Deshpande focuses entirely on women. Though Gopal the husband of Sumi deserts her, Sumi tries to manage the household in her own way. In the end, when her husband returns to the house, "She neither cries to him nor abuses him".

Sumi proves to be a woman of confidence who can take care of her family even in the absence of her husband.

A Matter of Time exposes how Sumi, a deserted wife is dauntless in her adversity in the way she evolves herself from utter desolation and bitterness, which was in line with the visible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities.

It records how with courage, dignity, responsibility and independent spirit, even after being deserted by her husband, Sumi has reached a stage of self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment.

Three Women

A Matter of Time is about three women from three generations from the same family and how they cope with the tragedies from the same family, and how they cope with the tragedies in

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their lives. Sumi is deserted by her husband Gopal, and she faces her humiliation with great courage and stoicism. Though deep inside, she is struck with immense grief, she tries to keep herself composed for the sake of her daughters. Her mother Kalyani was married off to her maternal uncle Shripati.

When their four-year-old son gets lost at a railway station, Shripati sends her back to her parent's house, on Manorama's request. When he returns, he maintains a stony silence for the rest of his life. Kalyani's mother Manorama fails to beget a male heir to her husband and fears he might take another wife for the same purpose. So, in order to avoid the property getting passed on to another family, Manorama gets Kalyani married to her brother Shripati.

To Sum Up

On a close analysis of her novels, Deshpande's genuine concern for women is evident. Her protagonists are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male dominated society, caught between tradition and modernity. Her protagonists go in search of identity within marriage.

The study of her novels also reveals that almost all her protagonists undergo great suffering in marriage, and are humiliated by men in the society. She is a feminist writer with great humanistic outlook and exposes the evils of the patriarchal family set-up in her novels.

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