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Women's Search for Identity in Marriage
Special Reference to Shashi Deshpande's Fiction

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Abstract

Feminists regard marriage as a subtle expression of patriarchal control and the most powerful weapon for female subjugation. With the shift from feudal patriarchy to capitalist bourgeois patriarchy, the nature of social relations has altered and strong individualism, self-interest and self-determination have evolved as the essential human factors in the social relations. Woman too though comparatively in a restricted way, has begun to grow as an individual and the primary center of collision for her becomes the institution of marriage which has, so far, constituted the limits of her space. The self-subsuming, suffering and self-sacrificing woman, with her gender typical traits has begun

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to thwart the compulsions of endorsing patriarchal gender ideology. The woman who has moved to the center and become an important entity in the social setup is keen to explore new avenues for self-improvement and intellectual gratification and establish her individuality in marriage.

This article addresses marriage issues as seen in the work of women writers. The creative women writers re-define the husband-wife equation in their novels. They reveal woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality in marriage and become fully aware of her potential as a human being.

Key words: marriage, patriarchy, individuality.

The Quest for Identity

The quest for identity which involves self-definition and self-development is a central theme of contemporary women's fiction. This process is both environmental and psychological, and it entails coming to terms with multiple social and cultural forces, external as well as internal, that infringe upon the path toward female individuation and an understanding of the individual self. Rites of passage are depicted as the woman's awakening to the reality of her social and cultural role as a woman and her subsequent attempts to re-examine her life and shape it in accordance with her new feminist consciousness. It is significant that it is not solely a search for identity per se that engages women writers in general, but rather an exploration and articulation of the process leading to a purposeful awakening of the female protagonist.

The Focus of This Paper – Shashi Deshpande and Marriage Issues

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This research paper delineates women's search for identity in marriage because marriage is an issue that concerns women more than men and education has added to the complexity of this issue. Educated woman does not want sexual gratification but emotional fulfillment in marriage. She wants to explore new avenues for self-improvement and intellectual gratification. She wants to establish her individuality in marriage. For her, marriage means caring and sharing, not exploitation and oppression of female.

This work will address marriage issues as seen in the work of Shashi Deshpande. This study explores how the aspiring Indian woman, at the turn of the new century, performs cultural balancing acts to defend personal autonomy while maintaining her place within the family.

The Old Testament states that bond of Adam and Eve started life on Earth. The humanity developed and transformed itself from nomadic life to settled life, and this gave rise to the necessity of satisfaction of psycho-social needs and systematic relations to stabilize society. So our ancestors developed the institution of marriage to perpetuate the human race and to satisfy sexual need for personal gain.

Dictionary of Sociology defines marriage as socially sanctioned sex relationship involving two or more people of the opposite sex, whose relationship is expected to endure beyond time, required for gestation and the birth of children. In Hindu dharma, marriage is viewed as a sacrament and not a contract. Hindu marriage is a life-long commitment of wife and husband and is the strongest social bond that takes place between a man and a woman. *Grihastha ashram*, the second of the four stages of life,

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begins when a man and a woman marry and start a household. In ancient India, marriage was considered necessary for the complete fulfillment of the purpose of men and women without which it was believed they could not achieve 'moksha'. It was considered compulsory for women due to tradition and culture and above all because of the complete economic dependence of women on men. A necessity, because of tradition and culture, to which she must adhere to for personal and social security.

Feminism

Feminism regards marriage as a subtle expression of patriarchal control and the most powerful weapon for female subjugation. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost always it annihilates women" (De Beauvoir 496). Germaine Greer comments in *The Female Eunuch* (1971): "Self-sacrifice is the leitmotif of most of the marital game played by women" (80). In the politics of gender and sex, radical feminists perceive marriage as distinctly a conspiracy to both marginalize and confine women in a domestic area and to make her transition from womanhood to personhood inconceivable. Family is constituted as the essential moral center of the society of which woman is the silent, unpaid domestic guardian. Woman's social identity is obliterated and the home acquires elusive power and appeal, security and comfort.

A Work Contract

Assumed risk and terror in breaking through the walls of home help maintain the harmony of this patriarchal unit. To the socialist feminist, the marriage contract is a work contract in which a woman produces mainly for the family's internal use. Marriage, thus,

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becomes “the institution by which unpaid work is extorted from a particular category of the population, women- wives” (Delphy 138). John Stuart Mill, one of the strong male supporters of women’s cause, is also right in saying that marriage is the worst form of slavery for women. He says that “no slave is a slave to the same length and in so full a sense of words as a wife is” (Mill 207).

Compulsory Sexual Rights

Compulsory sexual rights which marriage permits to man over a woman’s body damage feminine sensibility irreparably and cause psychological fragmentation. Feminists focus on male sexual violence and sexual domination through forced and compulsory sex which the husband uses as a weapon to possess, dominate and demean the wife. Defeated and displaced and a loser in power-politics in marital inversions, sex is not man’s source of gratification and fulfillment, but a rape like act and a sadistic expression of power and hatred for the wife.

Phallocratic power-holds become imperative for marital status quo but when marital structures are determined by re-negotiated sex roles, the conventional equations are jeopardized. Both man and woman are emotionally uprooted and psychically fragmented and the conventional marriage plot is extricated from its prevailing morality to be appropriated for a more complex and crucial representation of new gender linked determinants.

From Feudal Patriarchy to Capitalist Bourgeois Patriarchy

With the shift from feudal patriarchy to capitalist bourgeois patriarchy, the nature of social relations has altered and strong individualism, self-interest and self-determination

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have evolved as the essential human factors in the social relations. Social consciousness and social living are not the absolute determinants of modern life.

Patterns of existence are structured by individual concerns and, therefore, an individual begins to come into constant conflicts with social structures. Woman too, though comparatively in a restricted way, has begun to grow as an individual and the primary center of collision for her becomes the institution of marriage which has, so far, constituted the limits of her space. The self-subsuming, suffering and self-sacrificing woman, with her gender typical traits, begins to resent the compulsions of endorsing patriarchal genderization, looks suffocated in her narrow “woman’s room”, seems to feel the need for equality and freedom and ways of existence other than in marriage.

Woman in Search of Identity

The individual moves to the center and becomes an important entity in the social setup. Individual values and priorities clash with social beliefs which generate many problems. Woman in search of identity in marriage tries to find a solution to these problems in marriage.

Women’s sense of individuality has matured by the introduction of education; she does not want to lead a passive married life of a sacrificial and shadowy creature. She expects a measure of satisfaction in life and marriage.

Promilla Kapur, a sociologist, analyzes the change:

With a change in women’s personal status and social status has come a change in her way of thinking and feelings and the past half century has witnessed great changes in attitude towards sex, love and marriage.

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An Indian woman has to perform many roles at a time. Promilla Kapur thinks that the husband and the society are mainly responsible for the tension:

They like wives to take up jobs but dislike them to change at all as far as their attitude towards their roles and status at home is concerned and dislike their traditional responsibilities being neglected which results from their out-of-home vocation. Their attitude toward their wives being employed is found to be ambivalent.

Role of Education and Economic Conditions

Education and economic conditions have changed the attitudes and have created a need to work. The working wife has to face the problems of marital adjustment. She experiences a conflict of values. She tries to combine the two roles thrust upon her and avoids disturbing the harmony of the family. A woman has to work hard to achieve success in this multi-dimensional role. A woman faces fever and fret in an uncongenial atmosphere. Her life means trials and tribulations, tireless efforts to assert an identity in a society which is callous.

The total socio-economic structure gives the women the couch of apparent security that makes the women shy away from defying social norms or from questioning old values. At the same time, women have not yet been able to form a clear concept of new values that could replace old and outdated values without toppling the balance of basic human relationships. Women are in-bondage even during this period of transition in roles, in ideologies about the woman-question.

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Besides, there is the tremendous conflict that arises out of the positive and normative roles- what woman is within the present social framework. On the other hand, lays the other question what woman is expected to be in a more Utopian social framework where more egalitarian roles have been dished out to members of either sex.

Idealization and Reality

Since time immemorial, the institution of marriage has been valued and idealized. And the secret of happiness considered in this rumble of life was the organized family life. But on closer scrutiny, we realize that in most cases women have been at the receiving end in the scheme of things and this resentment is working within them for quite some time.

Writers' Concern

Writers have raised their voice time and again against this unchanged deplorable condition of women. Some of the prominent writers who have taken the cause of women are George Eliot, Bronte Sisters, E.M. Forster, Thomas Hardy, G.B. Shaw, Kate Choping, etc., and in the Indo-Anglian literature are R.K. Narayan, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, etc. A lot of work has been done in the past two decades to show visible cracks in the crumbling monument of male chauvinistic society.

After the metamorphosis of the good woman, the New Woman is on her way in quest of her identity. This New Woman no doubt has boldness and strong affinity for tradition but a stronger attachment to self-respect and individuality. Obviously the institution of marriage in its present form has also come under scrutiny.

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The first generation women novelists depicted, woman who were traditional in outlook and resigned themselves to life. They wrote mainly to voice their concern for and sympathize with the suffering of Indian woman, rather than to censure the society. The second generation women novelists depicted the fact that the woman of today no longer wants to be a Cinderella, she is all set for change. Novels written during the last two decades of the twentieth century provide glimpse into the female psyche and deal with a full range of feminine experience.

Many Indian writers now present a picture of women which is totally different from the image of the past. Change in the economic conditions has brought a remarkable change in our attitude towards gender, and as a result, woman has substantially consolidated her position as she has shed off her servile attitude towards her husband. This has led to the creative writers to re-define the husband-wife equation, as depicted in the novels of Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Manju Kapur and Shashi Deshpande.

Shashi Deshpande and Her Novels

The writings of Shashi Deshpande, ten novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a screenplay prove that she is one of the most prolific women writers in English in contemporary India. Recipient of a string of literary awards including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for her novel *That Long Silence*, her works have been translated into a number of languages: German, Russian, Finnish, Dutch and Danish. She is one of those stay-at-home writers, who have not necessarily hankered after foreign publishers. Nevertheless, she prefers to remain an invisible writer not wishing to draw

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much attention, perhaps the reason being that as a writer she is rooted in reality. She never wrote from the point of view of 'marketability', no exotic themes to attract the West, no adapting her style to target readership. She writes of simple day-to-day Indian middle class life. Each of her novels offers sufficient food for thought especially in context of human relationships and emotions.

Sashi Deshpande on Anguish and Conflict of the Modern Educated Indian Women – Reflecting the Different Phases of Women's Movement in India

Shashi Deshpande's major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern educated Indian women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, self-expression, individuality and independence for the women on the other. Her fiction explores the search of the women to fulfill herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother. She has examined a variety of common domestic crisis, which trigger off the search.

Deshpande's concern and sympathy are primarily for the woman. While revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect, self-identity, enlightenment and autonomy for herself, the author subtly bears her multiple levels of oppression including sexual oppression experienced by women in our society. Her work has progressed through different phases of the women's movement in India.

The search for new metaphors necessarily involved a deconstruction of the age old concepts of '*sati*', '*pativrata*' and '*devi*'- concepts vested in the idea of purity, passivity and surrender. For a woman to become a person, she has to cross over from being a possession or a property from no will of her own and no role in carving her life to a

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woman who can take her own decisions and compel others to listen to her. It also implies a crossover from victim hood to subject hood.

Deep Insight into the Female Psyche

Shashi Deshpande, an eminent novelist has emerged a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche, focusing on the marital relation. She seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal tradition and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. Shashi Deshpande uses this point of view to present social reality as it is experienced by women. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values.

Roots and Shadows

Roots and Shadows her first novel highlights the agony and trauma experienced by women in male-dominated and tradition bound society. She brings out the absurdity of rituals and customs, which, help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority. This clearly points out, how a woman grows from self-surrender to assert her individuality with newly emerged identity.

The Dark Holds No Terrors

The Dark Holds No Terrors, her other novel, rejects the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a wife's existence is to please her husband. It reveals a woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality and become fully aware of her potential as a

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human being. It projects the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her identity and individuality. Saru, the protagonist in the novel, is a symbol of a progressive woman who tries to exercise her personhood.

That Long Silence

That Long Silence traces the passage of a woman through a maze of doubts and fears towards her affirmation. Looking at the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not blame entirely the men for subjugation of women. She sees how both men and women find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles assigned to them by the society.

The Binding Vine

The other novel *The Binding Vine* depicts how the educated earning woman helps poor women inculcating the spirit of solidarity among women. The novel is also about the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape; the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence in the name of family honor. Through her novel, she expresses the frustrations and disappointments of women who experience social and cultural oppression in the society.

A Matter of Time

A Matter of Time expounds the human predicament of four women representing four generations of the same family. Besides that the novel also deals with motherhood,

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husband-wife relationship, mother-daughter relationship, problems of Indian joint-families, marriage, mental and physical trauma of women, sex and sexuality, etc. The novel is a fine expression of the pain rampant in the lives of the leading women, their suffering at domestic and social levels and the imposed endurance in marriage.

Moving On

Her novel *Moving On* presents the protagonist Manjari, who breaks all relationships and moves ahead alone and independent refusing to take the crutches of re-marriage that Raja offers. Manjari's moving on in another search projects the contemporary women's unending search for selfhood.

Small Remedies

In *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande adopts the structure of a biography within a biography. Madhu Saptarishi, the protagonist, has been commissioned by a publisher to write a biography on a famous classical singer, Savitribai Indorekar, the aging doyenne of Hindustani music, who avoids marriage and home to pursue her genius. She has led the most unconventional of lives, and undergoes great mental trauma due to the opposition by a society that practices double standards- one for men and the other for women. Besides, Madhu narrates her own life story and those of her aunt Leela and Savitribai's daughter, Munni. In the process, Shashi Deshpande reveals the dilemma of the Indian woman trapped between her own aspirations as an individual and the forces of patriarchy which confine her.

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Shashi Deshpande's Fictional Forte - Exploration of the Psyche of Her Women Characters

All Deshpande's protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hyper sensitive women who embark on a quest for identity and true meaning of life. In fact, her fictional forte happens to be the exploration of the psyche of her women characters of all age groups. She not only speaks of liberation (though still within the framework of marriage), but also attempts to trace the actual processes by which women are 'womanized'. She does so by locating and foregrounding the overt and covert means of women's bondage and conscription by ideologies, stereotypes and limited choices. She also focuses on the strategies of re-adjustments her female protagonists undertake in order to forge an identity of their own. Her women characters struggle to learn to become "one's own refuge".

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