

The Cry of Women in Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Voice from the Margins

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:10 October 2013



Shashi Deshpande

Courtesy: <http://www.penguinbooksindia.com/en/content/shashi-deshpande>

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande, the daughter of an eminent Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar Sriranga, is a widely acclaimed novelist who has ten novels and five volumes of short stories to her credit. Her father is called “the Bernard Shaw of the Kannada Theatre.” Like her father, she has also won various awards such as “Thirumathi Rangammal Prize” and prestigious “Sahitya Akademi Award” (National Academy of Letters) in 1990 for her novels. She also won the “Padma Shri” award in 2009 for her valuable contribution as a writer. She also wrote the screenplay for the Hindi film “Drishti.” She is a postgraduate in English from Mysore University. After her marriage in 1962, she went to England with her husband. After her return, she started writing short stories which have records of her personal life. Earlier her short stories were published in bestselling Indian Magazines such as “*Femina*,” “*Eve’s Weekly*,” “*The*

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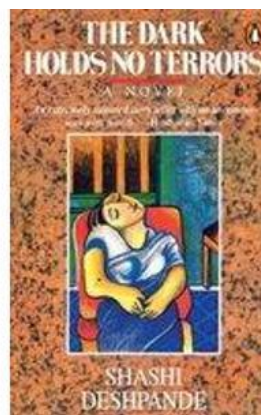
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Illustrated Weekly of India,” “*Deccan Herald*” and “*J.S. Mirror*.” Later on, after getting popularity her short stories were collected in five volumes. These are: “*The Legacy and Other Stories*” (1978), “*It Was Dark and Other Stories*” (1986), “*It Was the Nightingale and Other Stories*” (1986), “*The Miracle and Other Stories*” (1986) and “*The Intrusion and Other Stories*” (1993).

Shashi’s Growth as a Writer

Shashi admits that three things were responsible for her development as an English writer. She says: “There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female” (*Of Concerns* 107). This statement clearly echoes the voice of a feminist soul in her. However, unlike the early feminist authors who chose to portray the subjugation of women in ordinary life, Shashi Deshpande moved a step further and made educated women as the subject of her writing and voiced the agony of such women who have to depend on their male counterparts for the choices and decisions of their life. In the words of Y.S. Sunita Reddy, “She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism” (Reddy 146). Neither her male characters are culprits nor do her female character sufferers. Infact, the female characters in her novels know their rights and they raise their voice against the male domination and women oppression. Through her novels she raises various issues related to women and her position in human society.

Preference of Male Child



Deshpande's novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, brings out the struggle of a woman in a family where a male child is preferred to a female child and the novel reveals how the insensitive attitude of the family towards a female can drive her into a schizophrenic state of mind. The central character of the story is Saru (Sarita) who experiences the indifference of her mother and her own guilt feeling. The guilt of abandoning her parents, the guilt of her mother's death, her career as a physician, her marriage and her feelings about her husband and children. Moreover, she lived with the guilt of her brother Dhruva's untimely death. He is drowned at the age of seven. Her mother preferred her brother and she is always neglected. Years on, her mother's harsh words still bothered her, "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (*The Dark Hold No Terrors* 19). This is the common situation in most of the Indian households.

Issue of Male Ego

Saru finds comfort in her love marriage with Manu. To get rid of her insecurities, fears and loneliness she started earning. As a typical status conscious husband, Manu felt uneasy and unhappy as his wife is more respected and more successful. He even raped her and she again left alone as she separated from him. However, the feeling of being alone does not despair her for long. She exhibits a real courage as she tells herself, "All right, so I'm alone. But so's everyone else. Human beings ... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 220). Saru frees herself from the shackles of tradition in quest of her self-identity which she ultimately realized in course of her life. S.P. Swain rightly asserts, "Saru's journey is a journey from self – alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self" (Swain 39).

Detective Novels with Relevant Social Issues

If I Die Today (1982) and *Come Up Be Dead* (1983) are detective novels by Shashi Deshpande but with relevant social issues related to women such as education, economic independence and motherhood. *If I Die Today*, is first published as short story but later on it is developed as a novel. Manju is not only the central character of this novel but protagonist as well. She is honest, straightforward, broad minded and kind hearted lady who is a lecturer in a college by profession. She handles her personal and professional life simultaneously without any

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compromise at any stage. In spite of this, her married life is caught in the web of silence and barriers. Even after the birth of second child her married life is full of silence and misunderstandings. The agony and plight of her mind is clearly visible in her thoughts and she questions the institution of marriage. She thinks, “A marriage you start off expecting so many things. And bit-by-bit like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But there two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jar who can see each other but can’t communicate? Is this marriage?” (*If I Die Today* 24)

Theme of Revenge

Come Up and be Dead is a detective novel by Shashi Deshpande. It is a detective story with revenge as its theme. This psychological thriller reveals the award winning literary excellence of Shashi Deshpande. The story is about the suicide of a girl Mridula who studies in an exclusive school. Miss Kshama Rao is appointed as new Head Mistress by the Chairman of the governing body of the school. The appointment is the result of good impression she left in his mind during a train journey. However, she finds herself incapable to handle this situation, especially when her brother Pratap turns out to be the prime suspect. The situation gets worse, when two more deaths make the school a place of suspicion and fear. After an attempted murder, Devayani, the cousin and the housekeeper of the head mistress suspects the conspiracy. It is revealed later on that Pratap was innocent and when he learnt the truth he was killed.

Deep Human Philosophy

Devayani deliberately accepts the challenge “to come up and be dead.” With the help of police she escaped the attempted murder and a sex racket was found behind all this conspiracy. Prominent men of the city were found involved in this including Varma, the chairman of girls school management board and the doctor who treated Pratap and Mridula. However, this novel also depicts the deep human philosophy besides its dramatic elements and suspense. Varma’s vengefulness is the real cause of all this conspiracy. He treats whole female sex as his enemy. Varma’s ally, Girish tells Devayani about him, “Strange isn’t it, that a man who has so much money should make himself vulnerable by going in for a thing like this? When I went to him I knew at once that he enjoyed this trade in girls. It was not just the money for him. Some sort of a

kink, I suppose” (*Come Up and Be Dead* 252). Shashi Deshpande thus gives the message that evil must be punished, whatever may be the odds.

Dilemma of Preference between Family and Profession

Roots and Shadows is again a feminist novel by Shashi Deshpande. Like Manju in *If I Die Today*, the protagonist of this novel, Indu finds herself caught in dilemma of preference between family and profession, between patriarchy and traditions on the one hand and independence and self - expression on the other hand. Besides fulfilling all the traditional family roles of a daughter, wife and mother she finds herself lost in the way of becoming a complete human being. Like, the other female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande, Indu also represents a large number of Indian women, who bear social and sexual oppression in day to day life. Indu is a journalist who tries to free herself from such kind of oppression. She tries to search her own self – identity and wants to attain individuality. She left her home in young age yearning for the freedom. But after her marriage with Jayant she realizes that she again lost her freedom and individuality. She ignores the advice of her old uncle Kaka and her aunt Atya. She admits, “But twice in my life I had thought I was free. Once when I left home as a young girl. And the second time, when, once again I left the family and returned to Jayant. Both times I found out how wrong I was. New bonds replace the old: that is all” (*Roots and Shadows* 36).

Happiness Lies in Small Things

Indu realizes that everyone and she herself expects too much from her life. In her relation with her husband Jayant she tries to project herself as he expects from her. But she ends up causing discomfort to him in this process. Jayant, here, is the representative of the society that put the huge burden of expectations on the shoulders of women, especially after her marriage. She realizes his alienated feelings when she faces her professional crises. She offers to resign from her magazine company as she realizes that she is doing nothing meaningful and the job is causing discomfort to her. But Jayant does not realize the delicacy of the situation and forces her to continue with her job. Dissatisfying from her marriage, she finds comfort in extra – marital affair with Naren, her childhood friend. He is just the contrast of Jayant. After a short term infatuation she realizes that her one and only destination is Jayant. In this relation she comes to aware about her own strengths and weaknesses. She also remembers her old uncle Kaka’s advice

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that happiness lies in small things. She also understands the position of Akka, the family matriarch in much better way. After so many twists and turns she finally tries to write what she dreams of as a journalist. Now, harmony in her family and peace of mind in her professional life finally brings happiness in her life. As Indu herself admits, “Now I felt clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary, uneven edges off myself” (*Roots and Shadows* 6).

Monotonous and Routine Life

Simone de Beauvoir once said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (*The Second Sex* 267). These most quoted words by the French feminist writer are totally apt for Jaya, the central character of *That Long Silence*, the Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel of Shashi Deshpande. At every stage of life she is forced to remember that she is a woman and her paternal family teaches her the duties of a woman towards her husband. Unlike, Manju and Indu of earlier novels, Jaya completely devoted herself to her family roles as a wife and mother. Although she is living happy married life with her well earning husband Mohan and children Rati and Rahul, she finds her life monotonous and uncreative.

Loss of Self - Identity

Meanwhile Mohan is charged with corruption and he blames Jaya for it. He tells her, “I did it for you, for you and the children” (*That Long Silence* 10). Their family moves to a new house to avoid neighbors and the shameful situation. Unhappy and disillusioned Jaya moved to Dadar flat silently without questioning but in her heart she is utterly disappointed. Deshpande rightly asserts: “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?” (*That Long Silence* 12). Her situation is thus like a cattle who moves from one place to another against its wishes. “She is named ‘Jaya’ by her father which means ‘victory’. Her father has brought up her as an ‘individual’. Later Mohan has given her name ‘Suhasini’ which means a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman” (*That Long Silence* 16). Thus she loses her self-identity.

Quest for Self-Identity

During her quest of self – identity she becomes aware of her talent and creative abilities. She starts writing short stories and her prolonged silence finds voice in these stories. One of her stories won the prize. In this story Jaya writes that a man could not reach out to his wife except through her body. Mohan felt that people will think this story is based on their life. To save her marriage, Jaya again becomes silent and changed her style of writing. As a result, publishers rejected her stories. Their neighbor Kamat, who admires her stories points out, “why didn’t you use that anger in your story? There is none of it here. There isn’t even a personal view, a personal vision. I’ll tell you what’s really wrong with your story. It’s too restrained. Spew put your anger in your writing, woman spew it out. Why are you holding it in?” (*That Long Silence* 194). Thus she loses her anger and deliberately becomes silent as per wishes of Mohan, the qualities which Mohan likes in her and his mother. At one instance, she finds herself unable to control her laughter when Mohan is blaming her for not being a dutiful wife. He gets angry and left the house. During his absence, she realized that she herself is partly responsible for the loss of her real self. Her silence is nothing but the suppressed anger. She decides to speak for the sake of her husband and her children. Her determination is very clear when she says, “I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to ease that long silence between us” (*That Long Silence* 192). This novel thus, portrays the life and compromises made by a middle class woman Jaya, who sacrifices her career to maintain peace in her family life. She is the true representative of Indian women. She is the spokesperson who raised their voice and put forward various questions which come to their mind every day.

Other Feminist Issues

Likewise, Urmi in *The Binding Vine* raises her voice against the rape of her elder daughter Kalpana by her sister Sulu’s husband. Sumi, in *A Matter of Time*, is left by her husband Gopal. He left without saying anything to anyone. And everyone blamed Sumi for the fault which she has not committed. Then there is another brave heroine Madhu in *Small Remedies* who has lost her only son Adit and who tries to get over the shock by writing biography of a famous singer Savitribai. She tries to find out how Savitribai managed to live without her child. And finally she gets her piece of mind back when she learns to live the life with courage like Savitribai. Another of Deshpande’s female protagonist is Manjari, in *Moving On*, who tries to unfold and discover the past through the diary of her dead father. She resists the patriarchal

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ideologies and wants to live life on her own terms. She represents the modern, educated and rebellious girl who is independent and aware of her rights. Deshpande's tenth novel, *In the Country of Deceit*, presents another modern woman Devayani who involves in a deceit or illicit relationship with Ashok, the District Superintendent of Police who is the father of a ten year old daughter. She sacrificed her reputation in pursuit of love and position. Thus, all the women characters in Deshpande's novels "try to assert themselves as independent individuals through confrontations with the traditional constraints in Indian society" (Haldar 11).

Issue of Patriarchy

Most of the novels of Shashi Deshpande question patriarchy in the conventional sense and her female characters are consistently seen in a quest for their identity. Her female characters are aware of their condition but they constitute the group known as "the gendered subaltern." Women are no doubt at the margins and men at the centre. But as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has pointed out, even some of the females join hand with males to exploit the other members of their sex and in a way try to draw privileges by moving a step towards the centre and leaving the margins behind. This is true of Deshpande's novels too, where women also exploit each other. There are hierarchies among women and women like Vanita Mami, Jeeja, Nayana and Tara indirectly reinforce patriarchy as they behave like a silent spectator and do not oppose the wrongs done on the other members of their sex. Sulu in *Binding Vine* and Akka, Padmini and Sunanda in *Roots and Shadows* also feed and strengthen patriarchy.

Conclusion

Thus, Shashi Deshpande has given a true picture of the society and not a biased one. Although she often denies being a feminist in her writings, yet she admits that in personal life, she is one: "I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my life, I mean. But not consciously as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism" (Reddy 68).

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