

Rising above Her Search for Equality: A Critical Review of the Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

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Abstract

Women, women, women i got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. As if we had locked ourselves and thrown away the key.

- Shashi Deshpande

For a very long time, woman has existed as "the other" in a world ruled by men. They have played their roles perfectly well as companions of men or those related to them. They have been good daughters; obeying their fathers, prevailing the dignity of the family and following the tradition by marrying a man of their parents' choice. They have been good wives and mothers; taking care of the house, the man of the house and the children. For a very long time, they have confined themselves into boxes of tradition and norms built by the patriarchal society and have thrown them into the dark corners of their inner selves.

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss as well as the woman's role at home is a central focus it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Shashi Deshpande has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact.

This paper aims to illuminate the contemporary Indian women's struggle for individuality which gone past the search for equality with men. Through a study of the protagonists' characters from novels by Shashi Deshpande, a theory has been developed to explain how the contemporary woman is not seeking equality with men , but for an individual identity that is free from any relations or duties and titles.

KEYWORDS: women, culture, patriarchal, individualism, traditions, society.

“trying to find oneself- what a cliché that has become. As if Such a thing is possible. As if there is such a thing as one self, intact and whole, waiting to be discovered.”

-“That Long Silence”

Shashi deshpande,p69

Since the creation of Adam and Eve, there have been differences. Differences so clear and obvious that one cannot deny or ignore. Men have always been different

from women in every sense; be it the physical appearance or the emotional aspect. Both can shed tears but the reasons may differ, both may love, but the ways of conveying may differ. Man is and will always be different from woman. Do not misunderstand my argument here and accuse me of being a woman-hater. I here, talk about the importance of an individual identity which is above equality with man for women. The history of the feminist way of thinking goes far back ,there where I cannot spot a date or day, it could be said with the beginning of creation. Women have first struggled hard to be treated well and be accepted by men in society, they have also spent centuries trying to reach the level where man has reached. They have struggled hard for equality. It may be an appropriate thing to do and ask this question here at this very point of my argument: what is a woman to achieve if she reaches to the level of man? what is the level men have reached anyway? are they any better?

Men and women are not equals. If they were, they would share the same biological, emotional and psychological features, but it is not so. However if not equal, one cannot say that men are by any means superior or women inferior. Each have their differences and by these differences they complete themselves and each other. This does not suggest that women need men to shape their identities but they need to create an individual identity that would free them from any relations that bind them with chains of duties and keep them under the title of mother, sister, daughter or wife.. Women's literature is the best example of women's lives and their struggle at every age of time in history. Elaine Showalter, an American literary critic in *Toward a Feminist Poetics* traces the history of women's' literature saying that it could be divided into three major phases:

1. The Feminine phase (1840–1880), “women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature”. In this Phase women wanted to be considered by man, to be accepted by him.
2. The Feminist phase (1880–1920) was characterized by women’s writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women’s rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.
3. The Female phase (1920—) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, “women reject both imitation and protest, two forms of dependency, and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature”.

Rejecting both imitation and protest, Showalter recommended approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current Female phase, rather than from perspectives that traditionally come from a male perspective like psychoanalytic and biological theories.

Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists:

Shashi deshpande , a leading woman novelist of the twenty first century on the Indian literary horizon won the prestigious Sahitya Academi award for her novel *That Long Silence*. Deshpande is acknowledged for her remarkable potential as a serious writer. Most of her protagonists are women who are well educated and highly exposed

to liberal western ideas, but are unable to free themselves entirely from the clutches of radical male ideas which are a part of her culture, that culture which is created by the patriarchal society.

The modern woman stands on the brink of the threshold of social change in a position where she is aware of the injustice piled over her back. However, unlike the woman centuries ago who believed that she must be passive and submissive, she does not believe that woman is inferior. This development of the woman's consciousness as defined by Shashi Deshpande in her novels deserves a serious study for accepting the woman's point of view. In her "That Long Silence" and "The Binding Vine" both the protagonists, Jaya and Urmi are educated and modern women who are married and are recognized in society by their relations to others. They are women struggling hard to be recognized as individuals and human beings.

Jaya or Suhasini?

"That Long Silence" depicts the conflict in the character of the protagonist between the writer and the house wife. For many years, Jaya the protagonist keeps her feelings suppressed, trying to give more importance to the wife and mother than her writing career. She is a failed writer, a mother of two teenage children and a wife of a successful husband. Her life is torn apart when her husband is investigated for allegations of business malpractice against him. When he goes into hiding, he is to some extent consoled that his wife will accompany him.

Jaya is a good wife who has never questioned her husband's success in his job however when her husband's job may lead him to jail, he throws all the blame on her saying that " I did this for you" which makes Jaya at last break her long maintained silence. Then she starts searching for her long lost self. She starts questioning her past as she moves into the Dadar flat with her husband Mohan, to supposedly hide for a while from all eyes.

In the Novel, Jaya's maiden name is changed to Suhasini by her husband Mohan. When her father named her Jaya which means "victory" he had proudly claimed, " Jaya means victory". After marriage Suhasini has become her new identity. In her struggle between Jaya and Suhasini, she had forgotten who she actually was. She had played both roles quite well, but it was time she ask who she was under the cover of both names and the relations they bind her with. Here some lines said by Jaya as meditations on her identity : "..... now that i had abandoned "Seeta", there was nothing left, or, if there was , I had to search for it.....". In many parts of the novel, Jaya states that the married couple are like a pair of bullocks paired together "(8). In another part of the novel, Jaya symbolically talks about the ritual of the search for the coin that is performed at the time of weddings. "the one who finds the coin rules". Which also indicates that the man of the house gets more importance because he is the one who earns more money, but what happens in the case where the woman earns more than her husband? Is she given the same importance? does she become the one who rules?

Urmi: self confidence

Meanwhile, in Deshpande's "The Binding Vine", the protagonist Urmi, is trying to recover from the memory of her daughter's death. While this, she comes across old letters and poems written by Mira, Urmi's long dead mother in law in which Mira talks of how she suffered from rape in marriage. Those letters were not written to be read because it had been a shame to talk about such a thing in her times. Urmi relived the sufferings of Mira through her writings. These experiences were included to the sufferings of the young rape victim Kalpana and her mother Shakutai whom she meets at the hospital. . Urmi is an intelligent, educated middle-class wife, who is employed as a lecturer in a college. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women of our society. She is one who affirms her independence and freedom in each and every judgment of her life. Urmi united in marriage with the man whom she preferred, but is desperate in her married life because of her ego and to some extent Kishore her husband is accountable for it. The problem with Urmi is that she is full of confidence, as she is financially independent and well settled in her life and above all she has a room of her own as Virginia Woolf has emphasized in her book *A Room of One's Own* that for a woman to write she must be financially independent and has privacy. Due to this economic stability she has developed a kind of super ego in herself which makes her reluctant to submit before her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa (her sister-in-law) and her mother before their husbands.

Conclusion

Today, undeniably, it is reasonable to argue that the social world is the construction of both males and females, and that any full understanding of human society and any practical program for social change will have to incorporate the goals, thoughts and activities of the "second sex". Then why is woman still defined in the twenty-first century "the second sex", "the Other"? Though Simone de Beauvoir wrote "The Second Sex" a century ago, i.e. in 1949? As in the case of Kalpana who was brutally raped but suppressed her anger against her rapist, Shakutai's suppression of anger when she tried to suppress the case of kalpana, Jaya's suppression of anger in her objective lifeless writings because of her husband, Mohan's mother's suppression of anger as she sat surrendered in front of the fire, Urmi's suppression of anger at her daughter's death and at Mira's letters, Mira's suppression of anger which she poured in her hidden unread letters. "A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated "(147) It is not a womanly trait to express anger as Mohan told Jaya. In her suppression of her emotions, her feelings, her anger, woman suppressed her need to be individual. As "the second sex" she is always treated as an inferior and as the one who always comes next. Everywhere, even in societies where women have achieved considerable social recognition and power, as is the case of the European countries, they are still facing male domination, being excluded or not considered trustworthy from certain economic or political activities or responsibilities.?

As the feminists claim, one of the principal obstacles to equality is the division of

labor between men and women, departing from the home to take a job represents at least a step toward enclosing the gap between male and female spheres, and creating a new and different kind of life for women. Change may take place in the societies and in the minds of people, especially men, if it occurs first in the mind of women. As more and more women have taken jobs, responsibilities within the home have been redistributed between husbands and wives, women increasingly expecting and being expected to fill a diversity of roles. And if attitudes change, then behavior patterns change as well. Husbands have started accepting that both husband and wife can share the coin and still share their duties outside and inside home. It is in their hands to change this mindset with the change of their attitudes and with a stern insistent struggle that would not stop unless the goal is reached.

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