

A Feminist Perspective in The Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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History is replete with many instances of gender disparity. Woman is considered weak and ineffective and is compelled to estrange herself from her own society. There have been numerous century by woman of different ages and different countries to make the world realize their significant role in societal activities.

The term feminism was first used in the nineteenth century by a French dramatist, Alexander Dumas, to refer to the emerging movement for women's rights but mostly limited to politics. Women constitute roughly half the world's population, but their role in various fields of activity has been totally disproportionate to their numerical strength. Considered the weaker sex, they have been subjected to social, economic, and political injustices. An awareness of the inequalities present in society resulted in the women's Liberation Movement as late as in the mid – nineteenth century. It was in the later part of the twentieth century that it became more vigorous only to make people examine their age – old beliefs and concepts.

Shashi Deshpande's first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a compelling story of a Well – educated, economically independent woman's struggle against all odds. It is the story of Saru (called Saru) and her relationship with her parents and her husband, and her agonizing search for self. It is the story of a marriage on the verge of breakdown and of a woman who has been made acutely conscious of her gender since childhood. During the course of her struggle, Saru tries to uncover the dormant strength in human beings. In this way, the layers of the past are unfolded to the readers with the simultaneous knowledge of the present. The stream of consciousness makes Saru recall her childhood experience. Her estranged relationship with her mother, her marriage with the handsome versatile – looking young poet, Manohar and the suffering which follows, and her relationship with her daughter Renu and son Abhi.

The novel is remarkable for its exploration of the inner landscape. It is a fascinating study of male psychology by a woman which in turn becomes in exposition of the female psyche too. Shashi Deshpande is a typical Indian feminist writer who delves deep into the problems of women: “ Her novels are concerned with exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it.”¹

Saru wants to free herself from the tyrannies of a male dominated society. She works out her own individual paths towards liberation and in the process discovers new facets of life. While discovering her real self and consequently seeking self – fulfillment, she understands the world better and makes things clear for herself as well as for others.

The novel opens with Saru's return to her maternal home with a twofold purpose after the death of her mother. She wants to look after her widower father and also seek solace from the nightmarish brutality of her sadist husband. Manohar (called Manu). Earlier she had resolved never to return to her parent's house. Her stay in her father's house enables her to recall the events of her life, which get unfolded through her memories of the past, and she compares and contrasts her past with her present. These reflections reveal to her that “Happiness is so evanescent. Nothing is left. Except sensations and feelings” (35).

The novel highlights the story of a marriage on the rocks. Saru is a “two

in -one woman “, who in the day is a successful doctor and at night “A terrified trapped animal” in the hands of her husband, Manohar, an English teacher in a third – rate college. The rest of the novel is the remembrances of things past and a brief confession to father, with whom she had hardly communicated before. Thus the narrative meanders between present and past.

Saru reaches her father’s home after fifteen years. Her father welcomes her “like and unwilling host entertaining an unwelcome guest” (14). The novelist unfolds the narrative through the memories of Saru, Saru recalls the past and realizes the truth about her marriage. She begins to sense that the unloved daughter was the unloving daughter. She knows that the unloved daughter was also the unloving daughter. She knows that the expression on her face is not different from that of her hated mother. In her own words:

“And behind this fear the uneasiness that comes from losing something. No, not losing it, but being unable to find it because I’ve hidden it to keep it safe. Hidden it so well that I can’t find it myself now. And each day the thought”...I²

She recalls the discrimination shown by her mother and how her problems had started right in her childhood. Her brother Dhruva was her mother’s cynosure and Saru was completely neglected. The problems in her life aggravated after her younger brother Dhruva’s death referred to in the novel as A.D. (After Dhruva) , which symbolizes the prelapsarian and postlapsarian life for Saru. Dhruva’s death overshadowed all other memories how she was treated second to Dhruva.

This sort of blatant discrimination between Saru and her brother led to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents. Especially her mother, and to her resultant rebellious nature. Critics are of the view that “In this connection, Saru’s mother’s attitude is typical of most Indian mothers and a common enough phenomenon in the Indian context.”²

The turning point in her life is the accidental death by drowning of her brother. All her life she is haunted by the memories of her mother accusing ‘her of intentionally letting Dhruva die by drowning: “You did it, you did this, you killed him” (173). This accusation haunts her like a ghost throughout her life. She too on her part has a guilty conscience as she considers herself responsible for her brother’s death by drowning by remaining a mute spectator to the incident. She never refuted the charge leveled against her by her mother:” Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfillment.”³ ShashiDeshpande thus reveals the social aspect of keen sibling jealousy born of a mother’s undue fondness for the son.

Thus, unloved and unwanted, she developed hatred towards the traditional practices during her impressionable years. Her hatred toward her mother was so acute that she became rebellious just to hurt her: “ I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer” (142). Home, which is supposed to foster the growth of a child, robbed every happiness from Saru and she was forced to take a drastic step and leave home for Bombay to pursue medicine as a career and later on marry Manohar from her own choice with a view to torturing her mother: “Ill show [her], “Ill make her realize “(60). Being orthodox, Saru’s mother was not in favour of a pratiloma marriage.

Devoid of love and security, Saru wanted to be loved, When she got attention from Manohar, she wondered, “how could I be anyone’s beloved ? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without” (59). The need of the moment was a relation with someone who could give her love and security. She thought: “The fisherman’s daughter couldn’t have been more surprised when the king asked her to marry him than I was by Manu’s love for me” (59). Saru considered herself the luckiest woman on earth, as the initial years of her marriage were sheer bliss. Manohar was her savior and the romantic hero who rescued Saru – a damsel in distress. She married Manohar to secure the lost love in her parental home and her identity as an individual.

Later, when her relations with Manohar became strained, she started regretting her having rushed into marriage unconditionally: “the fisherman’s daughter was wiser. She sent the king to her

father and the father it was who bargained with him. While I ...I gave myself up unconditionally, unreservedly to him. To love him and to be loved". (59). It can be said that. "If her mother had provoked her by her blatant hostility, her father had contributed to her present predicament by remaining a mute spectator in the family drama".⁴

If we look at her present, she is now a successful and famous doctor. Her busy schedule ultimately upsets her family life and her career becomes Manohar's problem and he cannot digest the fact and gets annoyed at her popularity and feels very embarrassed when an interviewer asks him, "How does it feel when you're your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well ?" (182). Owing to her busy schedule Saru fails to concentrate on the domestic front. She is placed in an awkward situation, At the personal level, she feels a gradual disappearance of love and family – attachment which she had once developed. At the personal level, she feels a gradual disappearance of love and family – attachment which she had once developed. At this point of time she feels that as wife she is not able to devote her time to attend to her husband's needs, and as a mother she is not able to take care of her children. In the given situation she fails both as a wife and as a mother.

The feeling that she was responsible for Manohar's sorrowful state and thereby drove him to sadism makes her guilty and adopt silence, unable to either talk to him or confide in anybody else. Her silence causes her agony, but she continues to endure the suffering until she too, like Manohar, become a spilt personality, the two – in – one woman, who in the day time becomes a confident lady doctor and at night becomes a terrified and trapped animals. She feels: "This was not to be deathby strangulation ; it was a monstrous invasion of my body" (10). Once again Saru's home disappoints her. Her married life, which was once beautiful, hasnow become ugly. For the second time Saru leaves home, this time defying her husband.

It is at the crucial point in her life that Saru hears the news of her mother's death and rushes to her parents' house. She has become an emotionless human being. To her everything and everybody including her father appears strange. She is mentally disturbed. She is not able to speak out what she wants or what she expects from her father. She has a guilty conscience that she deserted her parents in order to marry Manohar. She expects sympathy from her father but to no avail. Now she thinks that had her marriage been an arranged one, parents would have come to her rescue now or they would at least have been receptive and sympathetic to her sufferings.

Absolute confusion prevails upon her. She feels that she has done injustice to her mother, her husband, and her children as well: "But there can never be any forgiveness. Never any atonement. My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood" (198). She cannot overcomeher guilt nor for that is matter she is not capable of facing the situation boldly.

Manohar's male ego tries to dominate Saru, which ultimately results in the disintegration of their married life. The egos of Saru and Manohar clash with each other and Saru's feminine psyche encounters the working forces which emanate from her husband's masculinevigour. Saru reveals the horror of her conjugal life to her father, who emerges as an understanding and compassionate protector. Her father gives all the moral support and injects a life – blood into her otherwise dying veins. He tells her, Give him a chance, Saru, Stay and meet him. Talk to him. Let him know from you what's wrong. Tell him all that you told me..... Don'ts turn your back on things again. Turn round and look at them Meet him (197). Saru's encounter with her school friends Smita and Nalu presents yet another aspect of a woman's life. Smita's gives an impression as if hers is a happy and perfect married life when she takes her husbands name several times while talking to Saru. But in reality it is quite different. Once when Smite asks Saru for a small loan to buy a gift for her sister – in – law without her husband's knowledge, Saru is annoyed to find Smita's complete dependence on her husband for money, Through the character of Smita, Deshpande highlights the hypocrisy in married

life and the problem of economic dependence. On the other hand Nalu lives an independent life. She is a spinster. Lecturer by profession, she lives with her brother and his family. She has acquired an air of dignity and confidence. "but with it a conviction of her own rightness that made her seem overbearing and dogmatic" (121). Through the lives of Smita and Nalu, Saru draws a contrast between the joys and sorrows of a wife and mother and that of a spinster. She finds that it is difficult to draw conclusions and say who is happier and more fulfilled. Betty Friedan observes, "The married were reported dissatisfied with their marriages, the unmarried once suffering from anxiety and finally depression. Strangely a number of psychiatrists stated that in their experience unmarried woman patients were happier than married ones." However, as PrabhatK.Singh has made it clear. "This novel is not about a woman or about feminism but about life and living. TO me it is a fictional portrayal of a highly pragmatic philosophy of life –Atmadeepobhava' That means 'Be your own light.'"⁵

Saru rids herself of the complexes and guilt and comprehends the meaning of human life and energizes, "It's my life.... But it's true. We come into the world alone and go out of it alone. The period in between is short.. And all those ties we cherish as eternal and long lasting are more ephemeral than a dew drop"(189).

Saru's coming back to her husband's house is not indicative of submission to patriarchal edifice constructed by her mother; rather she comes back to reconstruct her emotional role without deconstruction her gender identity.

Thus The Dark Holds No Terrors portrays the life of Saru, who becomes a doctor not only as a measure of self – reliance but also to achieve and identity of her own. The epigraph, a maxim from The Dhammapada is revealing and at the same time connotative of the novelist's feminist concerns :

You are your own refuge;
There is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a sensitive and delicate portrayal of Indian womanhood with a focus on the predicament of women and her concern in the life of her protagonists. The inner most recesses of woman have been probed into to give a better perspective of life to her heroines. Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experiences. In her that Long Silence she realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self or identity. About That Long Silence, she says that she wrote the novel almost entirely as a woman's novel; nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one – half of humanity: " A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own."⁶

Shashi Deshpande's themes deal with the struggle of women in contemporary tradition-bound, male-dominated middle- class urban society in India. Her protagonists try hard to overcome their self- imposed inhibitions and handicap to establish their respectable status. The attitudinal postures of Deshpande conform to the theory of Julia Kristeva that " the consideration of femininity as marginally offers a position and not the essence, as they exhibit the courage to transcend the marginality and activate their epicentric participation in life."⁷ A similar view is expressed by Sha Shi Deshpande herself when says, "When I wrote That Long Silence, I had no intention of writing a feminist tract, though the book has now got the of being a 'feminist novel'. I was telling the story of Jaya, a woman who found herself questioning her life, her beliefs, her relationship with others– in all of which her gender played a big role. If, in the course of this woman's mental and emotional journey, a feminist picture emerged, this was not my intention."⁸ Deshpande derived the title of the novel That Long Silence from a speech by Elizabeth Robbins to WWSL in 1907: " If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy - the weight of that long silence of one – half the world. "⁹ She uses a passage from the speech as the

epigraph. The epigraph reveals that the novelist is interested in breaking the long silence that has hidden the ineffectuality of woman in deep sleep. The novel is about a married couple, Jaya and Mohan, who get separated and about Jaya, who observes silence all through her married life only to break it in the end when she takes to writing about herself, her own plight, and her husband Mohan. But the novel ends on a note of optimism as her son, Rahul, returns and Mohan promises to return. Jaya also learns the truth that "Life is always to be made possible" (193). The novel describes of Jaya's disappointments in her married life and her suffering in isolation. Deshpande describes Jaya's married life in the image of "A pair of bullocks yoked together" (7), suggesting that the husband and wife perform their duties mechanically. Jaya is a creative writer.

Jaya is a well – educated and cultured woman. She leads a quiet life. But later hardships of life fiercely jolt her out of her complacency into a gloomy state. Her silence is symptomatic of alienation and apprehension rooted in every woman's soul in different forms. But silence is often misunderstood by men as woman's contentment. Jaya faces the dilemma of a woman– writing who is also a housewife. She is presented in the image of a worm crawling into the hole suggesting her withdrawal keeping inner talent of creative writing to herself and suffering the monotony of life caused by the household activities. As a writer, she has to present her views and ideas to the readers but she remains silent probing into her past, struggling with their present, and trying to establish a rapport with her future. The novel begins with Jaya's silently following Mohan to Their Dadar flat, leaving the Churchgate bungalow, into exile as unhesitatingly as her mythological counterpart, Sita, discharging her sati dharma. Here Jaya is compelled to "excavate her own truths and of other women in her life and unlock that long silence. Jaya, who stoically stood behind her husband for seventeen long years, is shattered to hear the news that husband is caught accepting bribe which she could not believe. She says: "I did not know what I was to do with such a gift. It seems to me impossible. Mohan had to be wrong" (4). Jaya begins her married life thinking that "A husband is a sheltering tree" (32). Though she does not hold any good opinion about Vanita–mami, She sincerely following her advice: "Keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies" (32).

Jaya tries to perform her role as a True wife and when it comes to the question of a choice between her husband and family, and herself as an individual, she unhesitatingly chooses her husband and family. Two more noteworthy thing about Jaya's personality are her writing skills and her friendship with Kamat, her neighbor. Kamat, unlike Mohan, is neither a good – looking nor a well – groomed man. He is middle – aged and bulky, with grey hair, He is neither wealthy nor socially distinguished. But he is an intellectual whose life is "Structured to loneliness" (157). Jaya feels attracted towards him due to his intelligence. She very freely shares and exchanges her ideas with him.

Jaya's friendship and physical intimacy with Kamat clashes with her image of wife and mother. She feels totally at ease in his company which she does not experience when she is with Mohan. "The relation of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another" (158), Kamat tells her once, and the initial platonic nature of their relationship develops into physical attraction. But Jaya overcomes her desire only to safeguard her marital relations with Mohan. She feels heart – broken when Kamat is left alone, unattended and dies suddenly. Though she witnesses it, she moves away without attending to her well– wisher and friend. She remains passive and helpless at the sight. She is scared to make her clandestine retrospect, she realizes: "I am Mohan's wife, I had thought, I'm only Mohan's wife, and I had run away" (186).

Seeing the indifferent attitude of Jaya, Mohan accuses her of being cold towards him, specially when he is facing the biggest crisis of his professional life: "I know that I've never mattered to you, not really" (118). He says angrily, "..... the truth is that you despise me because I've failed.

Aslong as I had my job and position, it was all right; as long as I could give you all the comforts, It was all right. But now, because I am likely to lose it all.....” (121)

His accusations make her hysterical and she bursts into a loud laughter. This hurts Mohan and he leaves home without a word. To add to her despair, Jaya receives a message that her son Rahul, who was on a holiday trip with their family friends, was lost. Jaya, in the isolation of her Dadar flat, probes into her long moments of silence. A way from her life and relationship that she avoided or failed to realize earlier. Jaya is unable to digest the meaningless practice of the male – dominated society where a woman is totally ignored. She is told that she belongs to her husband’s family and not family. She learns that her name and existence, along with those of other women in the family, are completely blotted out of the family history. It proves the point that a woman, whether traditional or unconventional, is not recognized as an individual in a male – dominated society. Now she no longer wants to play the role of a passive wife. She even recollects the final words of lord Krishna’s sermon to Arjuna from the Bhagavad – Gita: “ Yathechhasitatha Kuru Do as you desire” (192). Now she is a changed person.

Thus That Long Silence projects, through the character of Jaya the plight of the middle class woman, the hollowness in her life, even though it was shielded by the deceptively beautiful screen of her social graces and obligations. Even a highly educated and capable woman is invariably affected by her social status, as an individual, Jaya’s social and familial responsibilities disturb her severely because she is forced to accept them compulsively as a woman. She becomes a showpiece after her marriage. She fails to establish a normal relationship with her husband.

The novel also portrays several other characters, like Kusum, Jaya’s mad cousin, Mohan’s mother, and many other victims of patriarchy and also their own silence. The novel grippingly discusses the plight of women who never break their silence. Shashi Deshpande points out how even a cultured society has been kept silent on woman’s sufferings.

The character of Kusum is portrayed as a counter – foil to Jaya who mirrors the darker side of her (Jaya’s) psyche. Jaya tries to define herself negatively through the insanity of her mad cousin, Kusum, who is a deserted wife. Kusum, carrying an “aura of defeat about her from her birth” (23), represents the lifestyle of women who are aware of their low position in their own society. Jaya accommodates and takes care of the insane Kusum despite several serious objections from her elders. After, sometime, when Kusum improves her health, Dilip, her brother, takes her home. But unfortunately she commits suicide a day before her husband is supposed to take her home to establish his family. Thus Kusum epitomizes women who submit to insults, injuries, and humiliations with a stoic patience, without any protest or complaint as they have been trained to have implicit faith in the virtues of patriarchy rather than faith in their own strength. Vanitamami represents another facet of the traditionally suppressed woman, she tells Jaya that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (32). Jaya recalls, perhaps the truth was that Vanitamami had never known what it was to choose. Since the day she got married she, like the rest of Ai’s family, was dominated and ruled by that ghoul, her mother – in – law, my other aaji, Even Vanitamami’s saris were chosen for her by the old woman, Later, there was Ai, who went back to her old home after Appa’s death; there still is Ai. (45)

Mukta, Jaya’s immediate neighbor at her Dadar flat, Widowed at a very young age, lives with her parents and a rebellious daughter, Nilima, Mukta is economically independent, firm, and competent of handling any situation and yet she believes in superstitions. She expects her daughter to be like her. But Nilima is indifferent and rebellious. Mukta, on the other hand, is a pious woman, and Jaya is shocked at her futile self – imposed suffering by undertaking fast on almost all the seven days of the week.

Jeeja, Jaya’s maid servant, is another typical example of suppressing. She is battered by her good – for – nothing drunken husband. She supports him without any protest and even provides him

with liquor from her hard – earned money. She bears no ill feeling though he takes up another woman. Nayana, another maid, also views life with a dispassionate objectivity. She craves for a male child, not because she expects any help from him in old age, but because if it is a daughter, she does not want her to be discriminated against and harassed by society. She is confident that a boy will definitely enjoy at least some status and maintain individuality, Which are denied to a girl. She says: “why give birth to a girl, behnji, who,” If only suffer because of men all her life?” (28).

Deshpande sensitively presents how a woman’s existence is confined within domesticity and how all forms of oppression are perpetuated on her Vimala, Mohan’s sister, tells Jaya the pathetic story of Mohan’s mother.

This poor lady suffered miserably the domination of her senseless husband. She had to wait for him late in night, and to cook rice for him again as he wanted it fresh, hot and from an untouched vessel, and refused to eat what he called “ your children’s disgusting leavings” (35). The wife’s long waiting for her husband in the night became a futile exercise when, one night, the man got angry for not being served fresh chutney to eat, and threw the heavy brass plate at the wall and left the house in anger. This poor lady silently picked up the plate, removed the food scattered on the floor, and sent her son, Mohan, to the next door to borrow some chillies. She patiently and silently prepared fresh chutney, lit the fire, cooked rice Again and sat down and waited for her husband. The children woke up the unexpected that was created in the house, finally drifted off to sleep again, but “she was still sitting there in front of the fire, silent, motionless” (36). The cruelty of the husband and the insensitivity of the son clearly show the discrimination against and subordination of women. Even her educated son, who witnessed the incident, never found fault with his father. Jaya finds the story painful and Mohan’s comments on it strange: “ God, she was tough; woman in those days were tough” (36). He interprets her despair and misery as toughness.

Vimala is another victim of suppression and exploitation in Indian society. A suppressed woman seeks consolation in her obsession human bondage, leading to social degradation, ill health, and death, She is compelled to sacrifice her own needs and interests to those of her family.

That Long Silence, about the suffering of an educated woman, focuses the predicament of a modern Indian woman caused by the insensitivity and rigidity of her husband and making her a victim of circumstances. The novel also dramatizes transformation of Jaya, the “ everywoman” of our time, through self – recognition and self– analysis. She faces adverse situations boldly and realizes that the wheel has turned a full circle and the shadow that lurked between husband and wife for about seventeen years has disappeared.

Thus the novel attempts to portray the sufferings and deprivations of women in general by presenting various characters as stereotyped representatives of traditional womanhood. The India womanhood. The novel seems to advocate that a woman should be assertive and maintain her individuality and take her own decisions about her life and future: “ The novel is an attempt by Jaya to liberate herself from the prescribed and interiorize role of the other, an adjunct to her husbands, and find her own identity as a human being capable of thinking and acting on her own initiative.” Shashi Deshpande seems to be more for a woman’s social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, cultural, find economic liberation which would negate the possibility of nourishing and enjoying various relationships which society and biological nature have imposed upon her. She can be a woman with multifaceted roles of daughter, mother, wife daughter – in – law, sister – in – law, and friend by overcoming her inhibitions. The intricacies of a woman’s life within the family and outside can only be solved by herself when she learns to evaluate her worth and become conscious of herself as an individual.

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