

A Study of Pathetic Condition of Indian Women Reflected in the Selected Novels of Shashi Deshpande

Dr. Sonwane Vinod Sidram

Shivjagruti Senior College, Nalegaon
Tq. Chakur Dist. Latur

Introduction:

Indian English novel has a bright history. It started with the renowned novelists like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand and later on developed by the next generation novelists like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, V.S. Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor etc. At present the novelists like Amish Tripathi and Chetan Bhagat are the well-known Indian English novelists. In Indian English novels, the women writers have also made their extraordinary contribution. Anita Desai, Kamla Das, Jumpha Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande are some of the eminent women novelists in Indian English literature. These women writers have mainly focused on the contemporary social evils and the predicament of Indian women. The present research paper minutely studies the presentation of the pathetic condition of Indian women as presented by one of the great Indian women novelists Shashi Deshpande in her novels. She creates figures that take her readers through the social strata of urban society, but her interest comes to centre more and more on women of the middle and upper middle classes; well-educated women who struggle for their own space, for their place in the family and in their social and their cultural setting. "A reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals a deep understanding of the female psyche particularly that of the educated, urban, middle-class woman" (Zanvar, 2014).

Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* (1988) of which she says that it is her most autobiographical one and its main topic is how woman is made silent by the family and society. It is, as she has said, a loud cry of despair. The main figure manages to break the silence and to speak out. The novel had come out in English, in Britain, but was translated into Hindi, Marathi and Kannada. Which shows, not only the

impact of the linguistic diversity of the subcontinent, but also the status Deshpande has achieved. Women, in Deshpande's texts, are not simply victims of circumstance, of family and of society but they have come to stand out as self-assured, self-empowered and articulate personalities. They leave behind limits and limitations; hurt themselves against and cross barriers and conventional norms.

That Long Silence:

In *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the irony of a woman writer, who is also a young wife. The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled, comfortable house to their old house in Dadar, Bombay, where they had stayed immediately after getting married when their financial condition was not good. They shift into their old apartment to escape the scene as Mohan has been caught in some business malpractice and an inquiry is in progress. Here is a small old flat Jaya gets out of touch with her schedule and becomes an introvert.

Jaya is not satisfied with her married life, she recalls her past days, her upbringing, the environment in which she was brought up, and the principles that were thrust upon her when she was growing up. She has been taught that "A husband is like a Sheltering tree". She does not have any identity of her own. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. Jaya, which means 'victory' is the name given by her father when she was born but after the marriage she was named as 'Subasini'. Both the names are symbolic. The former name symbolizes revolt and the latter submission. The dreams of her childhood, to change the situation of women, are crushed by the environment, the surroundings, and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of limitations on women.

"Outwardly she is a satisfied housewife married to an apparently caring man, with a comfortable home, with no dearth of material

comfort. But on scrutiny, it is revealed that to achieve this stage of fulfillment as a wife, Jaya has systematically suppressed every aspect of her personality that refuses to fit in with her image as a wife and mother besides a failed writer (Prasanna Sree, 2003)”.

She is absolutely dependent and is unable to improve her situation. She revolts in silence.

Different attitudes between Jaya and her husband resulted in more of a compromise than love, based on social fear rather than a mutual need for each other. When Jaya thinks of her life, she realizes that in her marital relations there is no conversation left. This sadness is reflected not only in her marital life but also in her social life.

The Title of this novel is symbolic as well as metaphoric. The silence in the novel is the silence which has been destiny of the Indian women of different age groups down the centuries. They can be refuted, ill-treated, trampled, expelled, and raped and still they are forced to be silent.

The novelist's intention is to crack the long Silence that has kept women as it were, in a state of hibernation. The novel is a remarkably skillful portrait of a submissive woman Jaya. It is this reality that Deshpande tries to present through the female protagonist, who in the end, chooses to break her long silence. Thus, in the novel *That Long Silence* Deshpande very elegantly decorated the inner struggle and misery of middle-class women through the character of Jaya. “Unable to free herself from the traditional code of conduct, her inner voice remains inarticulate even in her writings and her pent-up feelings make her neurotic” (Sharma, 2005). In a male-dominated society, a woman is dependent solely on her husband, father or son for everything. But in the end, Jaya intends to implement her choice; her self-esteem motivates her to smash the silence while her capabilities make her speak through writing. Jaya challenges the patriarchal system while remaining a part of it. “The novel focuses Jaya as a representative of the modern young woman-educated and aware-nevertheless unable to break free from the strangle-hold of tradition” (Zanvar, 2014).

Deshpande's *That Long Silence* minutely observes a deep insight into the female psyche, focusing on the marital relation. It discloses the

tradition by which a woman is taught to play her subservient role in the family. This novel is mainly considered as the feminist novel as was first published by the British feminist publication Virago. The novel itself gives sufficient prospect to this view that it is a feminist novel. Deshpande denies and writes: Feminism is not a matter of theory. It is difficult to apply Kate Millett or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc.

This autobiographical account of Jaya, an exceptional writer, whose talent lies buried under the disapproval of her husband, Mohan seeks to remove the long silence by giving a truthful and frank account of conditions which lead to her failure as a writer and the constraints of society which result in the suppression of her as an individual. In *That Long Silence*, the story is narrated not in a simple manner but with a flashback method of narration. Women's repression and pathetic condition in male-dominated society, realistic description of women as wife, mother and daughter, and search for identity are some of the major themes of *That Long Silence*. The image of loving wife and mother is perhaps the most respected and the most worshipped in Indian society.

Roots and Shadows:

The story of the novel revolves around the female protagonist Indu and uses the first person narrative. The story presents the dynamics in an Indian, Brahmin, joint family and all its conflicts, compromises and peculiarities. Indu's mother dies at childbirth and her father Govind, a photographer, leaves her in the care of her old aunt, Akka and her brother, Kaka who live in their ancestral home. Akka is dominant and rules the house with a whip. In the family, there is Atya (real name Narmada, widowed sister), Sunanda (sister) and two more brothers with their wives and kids.

Indu grows up as a rebellious and aggressive kid who wants to do things according to her interpretation and understanding. She finally succeeds in her mission when she leaves the house at age of eighteen and then marries a man of her own choice, Jayant. She works as a writer in a magazine

but intends to take up a different form of writing which would make her able to express her real feelings. She had to write only about the troubles and pain of women. She mentions, “women, women, women...I got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. And as if we had locked ourselves in a cage and thrown away the key. I couldn't go on” (78). She is a loving wife, devoted and self-effacing as the domesticated housewives she always resented. She often hides her dependence on Jayant and the hypocrisy of her emotions and actions builds a stream of anguish and guilt inside of her.

The family is upset over the tragedy especially the Old Uncle (his grandfather) and Indu. She even learns about the disastrous life story of Akka as a 12-year-old bride, abusive marriage, and widowhood. She realizes her lack of knowledge and intention to understand Akka and her rules bred their severity toward each other. Traumatized by Naren's death but unaffected by her own foibles, Indu decides to release the responsibility Akka had encumbered on her shoulders. She decides to support Mini's marriage and to sell the house and give everyone their share. She also decides to return to Jayant, her husband to confess her infidelity. She hopes that their relationship can endure the trial of such 'scorching honesty' and even if it doesn't she would find peace in the confession of her sin.

Shashi Deshpande, in her novels, has depicted different aspects of the middle class women's life. Without struggling against the patriarchal society and male domination, she has taken a reasonable view of life from a woman's point of view. Shashi Deshpande, in her prize winning novel, *Roots and Shadows* (1983), deals with a women's endeavor to assert her individuality and her freedom. Deshpande's theme is identity crisis faced by Indu, the intellectual and insightful married protagonist. Like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Indu too searches for liberation from the constraints of the traditional and tradition-bound Institution of marriage in search of an autonomous self.

In her quest for identity and fulfillment, Indu had sought escape from family relationships, but had revealed how relationships are roots of one's being and follow one like so many shadows that make life no more significant than a shadow—a life without identity. The realization of the need to conform for

survival and the consciousness that conformity is the great destructive force of selfhood, and the only self that can be achieved is the self-born in interpersonal relationship makes Indu cry out in distress. She speaks about her own incompleteness thus: “This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself”. “She painfully realizes that despite her education and exposure, she was no different from the women that circumambulated the *tulsi* plant to increase their husband's life span” (Sharma, 2005).

Indu is projected against the women of the older generation. Thus, the writer has very creatively juxtaposed two sets of women in the novel. In the novel, Akka, Narmada, Sumitra Kaki, Kamala Kaki, Atya, and Sunanda Atya represent one set; and Indu represents the other set. For the older generation, the aim of a women's life is only to get married, bear children, have sons and the grand children. And surprisingly the ideal woman is the one who doesn't have her own identity: A women who drops her 'I' and who loses her identity in her husband's. The new generation (here represented by Indu) perceives everything with reason. Indu interprets the ideal of detachment and freedom and tries to achieve these. She makes efforts to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. But, unfortunately, in all her efforts, she fails despondently either due to the impact of the culture and tradition or all these combined together

Deshpande, through the character of Indu, has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself, to realize her real self through her inner and innate potential for creative writing. She assumed that she could do this with the support of her husband but she was wrong. At the early stage her husband gives her a feeling of solidity and confidence.

“She hopes that her marriage with Jayant would enable her to realize the need “to belong”, to be “wanted”, needed and loved and as she desired the most primary thing for her is to own the freedom to express her true self to the world. But she painfully realizes that she has walked into just another trap. (Prasanna Sree, 2003)”

Indu wants to make herself free from her monstrous service, but her husband, Jayant, does not approve of this idea. He is a hurdle to her feminine urge for self-expression since he is confident that a

person like Indu can do anything by her pen. The nature of the husband and the wife are entirely opposite to each other. One is considerate to the ills of the society in the “system”, whereas the other is nonchalant. One is in search of an artistic selfhood, while the other is in pursuit of materialistic contentment. Despite these temperamental differences, Indu is quite submissive. She did not dare to ask him, “To go where?” Instead she mutely went back to her work, through hating it and hating herself for it. As a result, her self-alienation increases, as she becomes aware to the contradictory demands made on her by her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of demands passivity and her aspiration to be a creative writer. Thus, Indu perceives herself as a shadow of the female self.

In this way, Deshpande has very minutely and exquisitely projected the inner struggle and sufferings of the new class of Indian women through the characters of Jaya and Indu, who have raised many basic questions regarding modern women who are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the West. “Her women predicament is peculiarly Indian in the sense that it is born out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature” (Yadav, 2018). There was a time when the Indian woman was worshipped as a “Pativrata”, “a Sati,” and something, which has to be protected by man, but now she is a changed person who is aware of the stirrings of her conscience, her mission, her identity, her personality and her place and role in the family and society is whether to refuse and denounce her or to promote and cooperate with her in her efforts to establish a new image.

References:

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*. Orient Longman Ltd: New Delhi, 1983. Print
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long silence*. Penguin Books: New Delhi, 1989. Print
3. S. Prasanna, Sree. *Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study*. Sarup & Sons: New Delhi, 2003. Print
4. Sharma, Siddhartha. *Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Feminist Study*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors: New Delhi, 2005. Print
5. Yadav, Rachana. *Emergence of New Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai*. Laxmi Book Publication: Solapur, 2018. Print
6. Zanvar, Varsha. *Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Rut Printer and Publisher: Jalna, 2010. Print