

**A CONTEMPORARY STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF
SASHI DESHPANDE****P.RAJYA LAKSHMI**Research Scholar English Shri JYT University
rajyalakshmi691@gmail.com**DR.N.ARVINDA**Associate Professor English Sreenidhi Institute
of Science and Technology
naravindareddy@gmail.com**Abstract:**

For the purpose of this study, three of her novels have been considered, but the thrust of this research is on three of her major novels viz., The Dark Holds No Terrors, Roots and Shadows and That Long Silence. These three novels have won awards and have been translated into a number of foreign languages. This study critically analyses their response to the emerging situation in life so as to fit them in the contemporary society. Without probing deeply into the novelist's conviction of what would serve as the ideal panacea for the different kinds of challenges, the study considers the problems of her characters which have had to contend with the given situations. Her stories suggest that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run of the middle-class women in India. We have studied the women characters in the those novels.

WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

Shashi Deshpande has written eight novels and four collections of short stories. This chapter deals with her earlier novels and studies women's issues in these novels. Trapped between tradition and modernity, we find her women protagonists undergoing great mental trauma in their quest for identity before they affirm themselves in these novels.

Roots and Shadows, her first novel, depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male dominated and tradition-bound society. The Dark Holds No Terrors, her second novel, is all about male ego wherein the male refuses to play a second fiddle role in marriage. That Long Silence, her third novel, is about self-doubts and fears which Jaya undergoes till she affirms herself.

A detailed study of these three novels will throw more light on their nature.

Novel 1:ROOTS AND SHADOWS

Roots and Shadows, Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel, is about the struggle of the protagonist Indu who is a representative of the educated middle-class. It describes her assertion of her individuality to achieve freedom leading to her confrontation with her family and the male-dominated society. Feeling smothered in an oppressive male-dominated and tradition-bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality. It tells about Indu's painful self-analysis. Many other themes form part of the novel like the theme of bohemianism and the sorry state of women.

IMAGE OF WOMAN IN ROOTS AND SHADOWS

Indu returns to her ancestral home after a gap of eleven years, which is occasioned by her cousin Mini's marriage. She leaves home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loves,



She returns on being summoned by Akka, the domineering matriarch, as Akka is on her deathbed. Akka has made her sole heiress to her property which the others resent. Deshpande presents with vivid details a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household, and the myriad women characters, their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments, and their anguish.

CHARACTER OF INDU IN ROOTS AND SHADOWS

Indu, a central character in Roots and Shadows shares the fate of Sisyphus. Her crime is the revelation of long hidden inner world of women in general and Indian women in particular. Her suffering is deeper and deadlier than Sisyphus's as he was to roll up only one stone, while she is rolling up many, that is, the ideal of independence and completeness, the concepts of self, sin, love, the ideal of detachment and freedom.

The writer has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of women in the Indian society. To the first orthodox group a female could "neither assert, demand nor proclaim," and an ideal woman is one who "sheds her 'I', who loses her identity in her husband's." According to this group, a woman has to "adapt herself to her circumstances and environment." Against this age-old set up of woman's life is placed the new one represented by Indu. She views and reviews the concepts of self, sin, faith, love and other values. She has visions and revisions of her ideal of detachment and freedom and tries to achieve them. She tries to see and listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. But in all her efforts she fails miserably either due to the impact of the sanskar or fear and timidity or all these together.

Indu's struggle for selfhood, her struggle towards liberation of the mind, her struggle for an emotional and intellectual definition of herself as a self-actualizing person is in a sense a fight against her womanhood. She felt limited by her sex and resented her womanhood because it closed many doors to her. It is Naren, who by his touch of love discovered Indu to herself, gave her the experience of release from shadow existence and be her 'real' self.

Indu had sworn proudly that she would never pretend. But she had pretended before Jayant, her own husband, by not revealing to him her whole self but revealing only that which he wanted to see. In doing so, she had wronged both — her own self as well as Jayant. She decides to resign her job and devote herself to the kind of writing she had always dreamt of.

Thus Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposing ideals and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude.

Novel 2: THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS

The Dark Hold No Terrors, Shashi Deshpande's second novel, is about Saru — an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife — who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents'



house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unbearably strained and she returns home for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva.

Saru was ignored by her parents in favour of her brother Dhruva, in her childhood. No parental love is showered on her and she is not given any importance. The preference for boys over girls can be openly witnessed in most Indian homes, and is inextricably linked to the Indian psyche. Sons bring in dowry could be one reason, but the Indian society, steeped in tradition and superstition, considers birth of a son as auspicious as he carries on the family lineage.

Saru was an unwanted and perplexed child. All through her life she is haunted by nightmarish experiences of scenes she encountered in her childhood. She is dissatisfied with her marriage, but in her quest for the wholeness of her identity she does not advocate separation from Manu but a tactful assertion of her identity within marriage. In the end she leaves her father's house and goes back to Manu with a determination to assert her identity.

THE CHARACTER OF SARU IN THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS

The Dark Holds No Terrors tells the story of a marriage on the rocks. Saru in the daytime works as a successful doctor and at night is a 'terrified trapped animal' in the hands of her husband Manu, an English teacher in a third-rate college. Saru is highly self-willed and her problems ensue because of her outsized ego and innate love for power over others. She defies traditional codes. In Saru's case, defiance is her second nature. As a child Saru had seen the predicament of the grandmother separated from the cruel husband and considered "an unwanted burden" by her own people. After her marriage Saru is hurt to hear from a mutual acquaintance that her mother has said, "let her know more sorrow than she has given me". Saru thinks at one point that she is 'unhappy and destroyed' in her marital life because her mother has cursed her. But gradually her hostile attitude towards her mother changes to a positive one. Saru's character can be truly understood only in the light of psychological precepts. First, she carries within her the sad effects of gender discrimination. Social psychology deals with the stereotypes about the two genders. Saru's type of feminism springs out as a reaction to this discriminatory psychological set up of society at large and her parents in particular. Saru does reach depths of self-actualization. She introspects philosophically and reaches to the conclusion that escape is a ridiculous idea. There is no escape. It is an individual's own life.

THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS

The Dark Holds No Terrors by Shashi Deshpande is a totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man's superiority and the myth of a woman being a paragon of all virtues. It is based on the problems faced by a career woman, a refreshingly new phenomenon



in Indian English fiction. We see the character of Saru representing the middle class working woman in modern India. Her mother had successfully erased Saru from her household with the exception of a photograph only because Dhruva was in it too. Shashi Deshpande is certainly aware of the woman's predicament in a male-dominated society especially when the woman is not economically independent.

If a woman's very awareness of her predicament, her wanting to be recognized as a person rather than as a woman, her wanting to have an independent social image be considered outstepping the limits, the novel has definite feminist leanings. Perhaps in the Indian context, it certainly is a feminist novel. Saru's feminist reactions date back to her childhood when she had to contend with sexist discrimination at home. The framework of the novel provides good acoustics for a woman's voice and establishes that a woman too has choices in life. Shashi Deshpande does not glorify a woman's sufferings, but she enlists a sufficient amount of sympathy for her protagonist. Throughout the novel, Shashi Deshpande maintains commendable objectivity and avoids generalizations and partial views. In fact the novel explores questions like "Who is the victim and who is the predator? Are the roles so distinct, so separate? Or are we, each of us, both?"

Shashi Deshpande is certainly aware of the woman's predicament in a male-dominated society especially when the woman is not economically independent. Through this narrative, Deshpande questions the assumption that the employment of the wife can serve as the means of her economic independence and self-actualization. At the same time the profession of women does not entail the potential to reduce the gap between men and women.

Novel 3: THAT LONG SILENCE

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. Many women writers tried their hand at expressing this long silence that had turned women into non-entities. Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya the main woman character of the novel and her quest for the self or identity.

The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into the old Dadar flat in Mumbai from their cosy and palatial house. Her husband is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry against him is set up. Mohan is consoled to find that the children, Rahul and Rati, are away on a long tour with their family friends, and expects Jaya to go into hiding with him, which she refuses to comply with.

Jaya represents the urban, middle-class woman who is educated and has had exposure to liberal Western ideas. Her upbringing demands the suppression of the self so that the marriage can survive. When the occasion to choose between her family and husband arises, she chooses the former.

Jaya complies with her husband's decision and accompanies him in silence to their present exile. It is here, that the process of self-examination begins for Jaya. She reminisces her



seventeen year old marriage, its frustrations and disappointments and her personal failures. All her fears, guilt, strangulated anger and silence begin to haunt her and consequently through a period of intense introspection she kills Suhasini, the silent, submissive partner of Mohan. Her association with Kanmt proves to be fruitful for she realizes that justice has not been done to herself and her talents. She renews her creative activity as a writer and shortly emerges as a new being.

THE CHARACTER OF JAYA IN THAT LONG SILENCE

Jaya, like Indu of Roots and Shadows and Saru of The Dark Holds No Terrors, journeys from ignorance to knowledge through suffering. Going through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization, she emerges as a confident individual, fully in control of herself, significantly more hopeful and able to accept life like the other two characters. If Indu is a journalist and Saru, a doctor, Jaya is a successful columnist and an aspiring novelist.

In the early years of jaya marriage, Jaya has been on the threshold of acquiring name as a creative writer of some merit. It is Mohan her husband who has been encouraging her to write. In fact, he introduces her to editors of various papers and magazines. On Mohan's advice, she begins writing middles. She had made a good beginning with a story about a man "...who could not reach out to his wife except through her body." This story won a prize for its realistic portrayal of life. Yet Mohan assumes that the story portrays their own personal life. He is very apprehensive that people of his acquaintance may assume that he is a kind of person portrayed in the story. But Jaya knows that there is no truth in his accusation, still she does not try to reason with Mohan, as she does not like to risk her relation with him.

Jaya, suppressed at every stage of her life, compromises to conform to the role of an ideal Indian woman. She feels that she will 'break-down', that she can't go on, and 'can't cope' to live in deception but does not give expression to these feelings because of her fear of hurting Mohan and jeopardizing her marriage, her fear of destroying the veneer of the happy family she tries to project and her fear of failing as a writer.

Just as Indu, who obeys her husband's wishes and fancies, and like Saru, who thinks that a wife must be a few feet behind her husband's, Jaya also bows to the male superiority. Sometimes, Jaya appears to be not very different from other women — who suffer their husband's humiliations silently and who think that a woman without her kumkum on the forehead is nothing.

Marriage to Jaya portrays the image of the pair of bullocks yoked together and suggests that yoked bullocks should share the burden between themselves, but no one knows whether they love each other or not. The image of the beasts performing their assigned duties mechanically undermines the relationship of husband and wife who are united in marriage for love, but not for leading a mechanical life which results in ending up in mutual hatred and distrust.

Jaya thinks that real emotional involvement is unlikely between a man and a woman. Her blunt confession is "Love? No, I know nothing of it. Jaya is romantic to begin with, but later



she is so disenchanted that she gives up her efforts to please Mohan and look attractive for him and describes it as "a man and a woman married for seventeen years without mutual love or understanding".

For Indian women marriage and motherhood are considered mandatory for fulfillment and happiness. Jaya is caught in this dilemma, firstly trying to be a suitable wife to her husband and secondly, struggling to express the emotions of women's experience, seldom expressing them in a male-dominated, chauvinistic society. Deshpande herself admits this kind of dilemma when she says that women have this kind of emotions but never come out. Jaya knows that her relationship with Mohan is spoiled by incompatibility and lack of communication. If she suffers, it is in silence, if she revolts, it is also in silence. She suppresses her feelings lest they should spoil her relationship with her husband.

THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN THAT LONG SILENCE

Generally, a woman's identity is defined by others, in terms of her relationship with men, i.e., as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, and so on. Her name keeps on changing according to the wishes of others. In *That Long Silence*, the writer has presented this phenomenon through the character of Jaya, who is known by two names: Jaya and Suhasini. Jaya, which means victory, is the name given by her father when she was born, and Suhasini, the name given after her marriage which means a "soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman." Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality.

In her childhood, she had been brought up in a loving and affectionate manner without any responsibility. But after her marriage, she changes automatically. As a child she used to get angry very soon. After her marriage she controlled her anger. She realized that to Mohan anger made a woman 'unwomanly'.

In her stream of thoughts, Jaya, too, looks at her marital relations where there is no conversation with her husband. This unhappiness is reflected not only in her conjugal life, but also in social life. Her books, her stories lack anger and emotion. Her writings are rejected by the publishers. And when, finally, Mohan angrily walks out of the house, she feels that she has failed in her duty as a wife.

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande portrays modern educated and career-oriented, middle-class women who are sensitive to the changing times and situations. She depicts women in the roles of wife, mother, daughter and as an individual in her own right. In her first novel, *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande suggests that the modern Indian woman represented by Indu should learn to conquer their fears and assert themselves. The novel ends on a note of compromise which is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude. In the second novel, *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, a mature Saru shuns extremes and takes a practical view of the circumstances. She is neither the typical Western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. Shashi Deshpande does not let herself get overwhelmed by the Western feminism or its militant concept of



emancipation. Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence* has raised her voice against the straitjacketed role models of wife and mother, and rebels against the suppression of the age-old patriarchal set-up. Her silence is her armour when faced with despair, but there comes a time when she sheds this silence. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are strong women who refuse to sacrifice their individuality in order to uphold traditional role models laid down by society. They display a tangible development and attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal. These protagonists evolve their own role models.

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