

Predicaments Of Women In The Novels Of Shashi Deshpande

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ABSTRACT

The Indian English women fiction writers of independence era successfully present the urges, dreams and desires of Indian women, especially the middle-class women who resist the male domination and their surroundings. These writers are preoccupied with inner life and the interpersonal relationships. They describe women in the context of the contemporary world, as an individual with the freedom of their choice. They present the image of women who resist the traditional boundaries, the cultural obstacles, the problems and sufferings, joys and worries of women which have universal significance.

Shashi Deshpande lets her women characters experience the confusing and disturbing silence within, get a glimpse of their inner being and empower them to confront power politics, comprehend the situation and come to grip with the crisis. Though she writes about the issues of women as a feminist in the true sense of the word, she is not the strident and militant kind of feminist who sees the male as the whole cause for all women's troubles. Though she disagrees, Shashi Deshpande has been called a 'Feminist' because her novels deal with the description of middle class educated women, their inner conflict, their struggle for identity, parent-child relationship, marriage and exploitation.

The women characters of Shashi Deshpande undergo a psychological turmoil within the restricted domestic life. She does not make her women characters bolder than they

actually appear in their life. She portrays them as they take their own course of life based on the circumstances. Almost all her novels portray a crisis in the protagonist's life. The narrative moves back and forth in time so that the narrator can describe the incidents with the advantage of retrospection. Therefore, she portrays in depth the meaning of woman in modern India. So, Shashi Deshpande is compelled to portray women concerns not by political ideology but by her concern as a woman and as a human being more than anything else.

The article emphasizes the beliefs and thoughts of women in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. Deshpande derives the title of her novel, *That Long Silence*, from the classic understatement by Elizabeth Robins made in a speech to a world body. This Long Silence was unfortunately punctured by a few early women writers who did not present facts as they were preferring, instead, to dwell on superficial matters and more often than not, churning out mushy, sentimental romances which had no connection with reality. Judged against this backdrop, *That Long Silence* comes relatively close to real life experience. The novel achieves greater credibility from the fact that Jaya, the protagonist, is a very well-read person, possessing a literary sensitivity which corresponds with her fictional role.

The novel *That Long Silence* portrays the conflict in the mind of the narrator between the writer and the housewife. For seventeen long years, Jaya manages to suppress her feelings, thinking that it is more important to be a good wife than a good writer. She perhaps would have remained in the shadow of her husband, Mohan, for the rest of her life if it had not been for the jolt received to the carefully constructed edifice of her family. A crisis is sparked off by her husband's involvement in a shady deal. There are charges of corruption against him and it is expected that an enquiry will be conducted. He feels consoled to some extent that the children Rahul and Rati are away on a long tour with their family friends. He

takes it for granted that his wife will go along with him into hiding. Jaya follows her husband into exile as unhesitatingly as her mythological counterpart Sita.

The silence becomes deafening. Jaya's loneliness is further accentuated as she ponders over the intrinsic isolation of the human condition. Jaya appears to be a satisfied housewife married to an apparently caring man and having two normal, healthy children. Ensnared in a comfortable home, without any dearth of material comforts, Jaya seems to lead an enviable life by any standards. However, a closer scrutiny of her life, as gleaned from the retrospective account of her marriage, reveals that to achieve this stage of fulfillment as a wife, Jaya has systematically suppressed many traits of her personality that could not fit her role as wife and mother. The two most striking things she had to suppress were her writing career and her association with Kamat, her neighbor at one time.

The fourth novel of Deshpande, *The Binding Vine*, she uses the personal tragedy of the narrator and the protagonist Urmi to focus attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira-victims of man's lust and woman's helplessness. The novelist makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape-a theme which perhaps has not been touched upon by any other Indian writer in English. Urmi tries to reconstruct the pathetic story of a bright and attractive girl, Mira, who wrote poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage to alleviate her suffering. Urmi also crusades for the cause of another victim, Kalpana, who is brutally raped and is on her death bed. The novelist deftly handles the juxtaposition of the two situations rape committed within the precincts of marriage and outside it. The novelist gives a moving account of the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence than be exposed to the humiliation involved in publicizing the event and that of married women whose bodies are violated by their legally wedded husbands but who would never dare reveal this to anyone. They would rather stifle

their voice of protest for the sake of social and moral security. Deshpande, through the voice of Urmi, also offers us a glimpse into the lives of myriad other women, who are ostensibly more liberated than their predecessors but, who, nevertheless, are victims of some form of violence or deprivation.. The novel is essentially the story of three women from three generations from the same family and how they cope with the tragedy that overwhelms them. In this chapter four novels of Deshpande have been chosen for analysis.

In *The Binding Vine* is obvious Urmi, the protagonist. At one point, in a choked and guilt-laden voice, Inni bursts out that Urmi had been sent to Ranidurg as a child to be brought up by her grandparents, because Urmi's father did not approve of the way his wife was bringing up the child. Shakutai also shares a love-hate relationship with her daughter, Kalpana. She keeps vacillating between praising her daughter and blaming her for the catastrophe.

This illustration reveals that the relationship between mother and daughter in Deshpande's fiction is far from being warm-hearted. Adele King rightly comments: "in all Deshpande's works there is no mother who could serve as a model for the daughter". In an interview to Vanamala Vishwanath, Deshpande admits that she does not believe in painting a rosy picture of motherhood

In *Small Remedies* (2000) Deshpande deals with a range of people belonging to diverse communities, professions and levels of society. Madhu Saptarishi, the protagonist of the novel is subjected to the oppression, suppression, marginality and domination in her married life like Indu, Sarita, Urmi, and Sumi of Deshpande's earlier novels. She writes about a Goan Christian family and also refers to a Muslim tabla player and gives a brief account of his life and the people around him, especially his grand-daughter, Hasina. She also touches upon classical music for the first time in this novel which requires a deep

understanding of Hindustani music on the part of the author. Madhu is also an urban, middle-aged, educated woman. The main plot moves around Madhu's attempt to write a novel. Madhu writes about the lives of Savitribai and her own aunt Leela who seem to resist the caste and conventions and marries a Christian and dedicates to the cause of the trade workers. Shashi Deshpande portrays the growth of the protagonist Madhu who acquires strength from recollecting and recreating the lives of other characters like Savitribai and Leela. Hasina and Savitri are fond of music and the relationship between melody and rhythm, between the singer and the tabla player represent the image of human bonds.

In her novel *Moving On* (2004) Shashi Deshpande is once again concerned with patriarchal resistance. Manjari is the new woman, who redefines freedom and also relationships. She is a model practitioner of relational autonomy, situated in family and bound by relationship, yet subservient to none. As an affectionate daughter, a loving sister, a caring mother and a good friend, she is hardly imposing or demanding, and is not dependent on anyone. The novel begins with Baba's diary and in the following chapter Manjari is introduced. Manjari is not only a narrator, but also a reader herself and she reads her father's diary and discovers the past life of their parents. Her independent disposition is noticeable in the way she marries a man of her choice. She displays enormous courage and steadfastness in her decision to give up medical studies. She prefers to live on her own and declines financial assistance from her father after Shyam's suicide. She undergoes a painful period of struggle and strain, and turns down Raja's repeated proposals to marry her just because Raja wants to unite their two establishments. Manjari puts down the proposals of marriage without the foundation of love and only as a means of social security for a single woman as these are not acceptable to her.

Manjair is the new woman, who redefines freedom and also family and social relationships. She is thus a model practitioner of relationships. She is thus a model practitioner of relational autonomy, situated in family and bound by relationship, yet subservient to none. An affectionate daughter, a loving sister, a caring mother and a good friend, she is hardly imposing or demanding, and is not dependent on anyone. Thus, Manjari finds *Small Remedies* to the day-to-day problems through her resistance. A detailed analysis of the novel is done in the next chapter.

In The Country of Deceit (2008) is Shashi Deshpande's recent novel deals with the story of Devayani who chooses to live alone in the small town of Rajnur after the death of her parents. Her family and friends gently disapprove of her decision. Then she meets Ashok Chinappa, the new District Superintendent of Police of Rajnur and they fall in love despite the fact that Ashok is much older and married. This novel continues Deshpande's earlier probing into women's experience, and the constraints of family life, and the problematic of matrimonial relations. In the novel there is a house, a potent metaphor of the space allotted and allowed to women. The novel as an extended discourse on desire, the discourse unfolding itself on the one hand through Devi's experiences of her body and on the other through her aunt Sindhu's letters in which she reveals her own life and, thought at first unintentionally, comments on or complements Devi's experiences.

In The Country of Deceit (2008) on the contrary, not only does the sub-plot, just like the one around Rani, serve to situate the main plot in a wider, socio-economic context, it also provides a glimpse of hope for Devi, of future fulfilment at least through professional activity. This glimpse of hope, however, does not make for a tired ending. Deshpande has never had pat solutions, no facile evasions for her female figures.

Like its forerunners, *In The Country of Deceit* is a carefully constructed and calibrated novel, its first-person narrator's voice and limited view finding their counterpoint in a series of letters, first and foremost those of her clear-sighted and frankly outspoken, admirable aunt Sindhu. It is mainly through these letters that Devi is forced to consider and reconsider her own position and come to her own decisions, and it is these two voices, Devi's and Sindhu's that contribute to the charm of the novel.

Deshpande's modern women trying to come to terms with themselves and their place in family and society; trying to reconcile their individual freedom with that of their 'given', which is not simply 'culture' of 'society' or class/caste, but also the freedom of others in their own personal feelings and responsibilities

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