

Depiction of Women in Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De's Works: A Contrastive Study

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande depicts her women as an emergent woman of the modern industrial age, who wants to achieve individuation and authentic self-identity without changing the culture and tradition of the society. Shobha de has successfully depicted her women characters as an individual with freedom of choices. She has projected the urges, dreams and desires of the upper class house wives who refuse to be suffocated by their environments. This paper has made an attempt to depict how the attitudes and behavior of women differs according to the society she belongs to, by highlighting the works of Shashi Deshpande and Shobha de.

Indian English Literature in the recent past has attracted a wide spread interest, both in India and abroad. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Women writers in English present an insight and understand the dilemma which modern women are facing in a traditional society, where dual morality is the accepted norm. Self-willed and individualistic women have to face suffering caused by broken relationship. Women who are conscious of their emotional needs are striving for self-fulfillment, rejecting the existing traditions and social set-up and longing for a more liberal and unconventional ways of life.

Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De are the most accomplished contemporary Indian women writers in English. This paper has made an attempt to depict how the attitude and behavior of women differs according to the society she belongs to by highlighting the works of Shashi Deshpande and Shobha de.

One of the most striking aspects of the fiction of Shashi Deshpande is that she has tried to project a realistic picture of the middle class educated women who are financially independent, also represent a large part of the contemporary Indian society.

Shobha de's novels mirror the life styles of the elite and the upper middle classes of urban world. She explores the lives of bored housewives and their loveless rich husband and family. She always tries to give her female characters their own identity in the society by making them bold, confident and professional in an urban atmosphere. She depicts the urban world where man and woman do not become one in marriage; they merely act as partners in love. Materialistic success of urban world has wiped out all human values.

Shashi has minutely dealt with the issue of women, after attaining all types of rights, now struggling to adjust rather than to be free from the traditional world. Her novels mostly deal with the problems of adjustments and conflicts in the minds of female protagonists and their ultimate endeavour to submit to the traditional rules, in a traditional society.

The woman she portrays neither represents the old, orthodox image, nor a modern westernized one. She is the "every woman" hard to rise above tradition but is involuntarily adapted into it. The new women of her novels feel that marriage is not a matter of contract for men and women and hence fight against tradition and everything traditional.

In her novels, the plot begins with an unconventional marriage and later on deals with the problems of adjustments and conflicts in the minds of the female protagonists and ultimately their endeavour to submit to the traditional roles. In the end comes the realization that the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to do it. That alone can bring harmony in life.

In the middle-class Indian society, Education and economic condition have changed the attitudes and have created a need to work. She is not able to combine the two roles thrust upon her, those of the woman in the family and the woman as a worker. She does not want to lead a passive married life of a sacrificial and shadowy creature.

Promila Kapoor, a sociologist thinks that the husband is mainly responsible for the tensions. "They like wives to take up jobs but dislike them to change at all as far as their attitude towards their roles and statuses at home are concerned and dislike their traditional responsibilities being neglected which results from their Pre-occupation without – of home vocation. Their attitude towards their wives being employed is found to be ambivalent"(1974:73).

In the Dark holes no terrors Saru's marriage with Manu is an assertion and affirmation of her feminine sensibility: "I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted"(1980:35). But after she sets herself up as a doctor, the situation changes, "he had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (1980:37)

Saru's busy profession and her inability to procure time for herself and her family upset her married life. As she gets busy in her career Saru starts neglecting her husband. Her works keeps her away from Manu for longer hours and she reaches home late at night; "He sulked and I was either impatient with him or Ignored him" (1980:92)

The burden of double duties gradually imbalances the marital balance between Manu and Saru. She would like to stay at home, look after the children, do the cooking and cleaning. Manu's reaction to Saru's proposal is that of a shock: "you are joking" (1980:80). He shudders at her suggestion of giving up her job and his immediate reaction is: "And how will we live?"(1980:81). Manu feels that will bring down their standard of living and expresses "on my salary? Come on Saru, don't be silly, you know how much I earn" (1980: 73).

When Saru succeeds in her profession, Manu's male ego is hurt by her superiority complex. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon Saru. Thus the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night. In the mornings he behaves normally without any change and difference. Therefore' she could never ask him: why did you do it? Had he done it all? I began to think after a while... how could any man do such a thing and be so changed? that I had perhaps dreamt it. May be a nightmare." (1980:202). Saru becomes a mute sufferer wallowing in self-pity and choked silence. "I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death" (1980: 88).

When she returns back to her parent's house, her father shows her no pity, no sympathy and treats her like an unwanted guest. At her father's house, Saru has enough time to analyze dispassionately the hidden causes behind the two facets of her husband's personality. It gives her a chance to have a better understanding of herself and her relation with her husband. Though Saru considers Manu at fault for shattering the eternal dream of a woman to find happiness in marriage and though she wants to be free from her terrifying loveless trap, she feels guilty of

breaking their marriage. At the end, she is able to confront reality and the dark no longer holds terror.

In 'That Long Silence', Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the irony of a woman writer who is also a young house wife. As a writer, she is supposed to present her views and ideas before the society but she remains silent probing into her past, struggling with her present and trying to establish a rapport with her future.

Jaya is basically a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Mohan is a traditionalist rooted in customs. To Mohan, a woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is the real 'strength' of a woman, but Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause of their failure to understand each other.

Even she has no right to be angry. She realized that to Mohan anger made a woman 'unwomanly' (1988:83). Mohan also feels that it is unworthy to be angry and Jaya thinks.

"A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either. There's only order and routine-today. I have to change the sheets, tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms: the day after, clean the fridge" (1988: 147, 148).

All the protagonists think marriage hampers their individuality and see it more as a 'trap' than a bond. The relationship between husband and wife is forced and not a natural one. Jaya, the protagonist protests against her husband's dominance, challenges the social taboos and social norms, but gives in ultimately. Jaya confesses to Mukta, her neighbour, "without Mohan I don't know what I am" (1988:185). She makes a compromise realizing that it is the only course open to her to save her marriage.

Regarding the physical relationship between the couple, again it is the case of a domination husband and a suffering wife. Even if the husband hurts the wife, she has to remain silent and tolerate everything. "The emotion, that governed my behaviour to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him" (1988:98). This certainly does not show a natural and harmonious relationship between the two.

Not satisfied with her married life, Jaya recalls her past days, her up-bringing, the environment in which she was brought up and the preachings that were thrust upon her when she was growing up. She has been taught that "a husband is like a sheltering tree" and "Take your pain between your teeth, bite on it, don't let it escape..." (1988:32).

Jaya feels that women have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership. It is not the fault of men alone that has caused the feminine discontent. Women should accept their own responsibility for what they are; see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. It is only through self-analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage that they begin to change their lives. They will have to fight their own battles, and not rely upon others to do it for them.

In the Indian context, once a girl gets married to a man, whether it is a love-marriage or an arranged one, the husband takes complete control over her. When Mohan is caught in an act of malpractice and is supposed to be unavailable for certain period, she blindly accompanied him and expresses as "both are yoked together, so better to go to the same direction, as to go to different directions will be painful" (1988:10).

She was denied to continue her writings. Her image becomes like that of a bird who has got wings and knows that it can fly, but, somehow, does not. In the same way, Jaya is aware of her abilities and she knows that she can expose them openly, but somehow, she does not. She is deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of her husband. She says:

“I had known then that it had’t mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him. To Mohan, I had been no writer only an exhibitionist.”(1988: 144)

Thus Shashi deshpane’s women think marriage hampers their individuality and it is more as a “trap” rather than bond. They look upon marriage as a system, which make one so dependent. They consider love to be a “big fraud, a hoax, a trap-a process of making one humble and dependent” (1983:173). Despite their disillusionment with marriage and all that it entails, they are able to preserve their identity, realizing their own personal and private limitations. Within the binding relationship they are finally able to affirm their own individuality, Deshpande upholds marriage as the back bone of the society, what is stifling is the persona of the wife and not the institution of marriage. When the heroine returns, it is with the determination to be an individual and not a mere role/persona.

One of the major reasons for Shobha De’s popularity as a writer is her treatment of the contemporary urban woman’s position and the challenges she faces. She is a modern novelist who recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She constantly tries to shatter patriarchal hegemony and raises a voice of protest against male dominance.

Shobha De’s women are more mature than their mates. Though in the Indian male-dominated society, women are marginalized by their husbands but Shobha De’s women are certainly different. Her women revolt against the traditional image of Indian women in words and deeds. In a sense, she is the fore runner of the emerging Indian women with her liberated womanhood.

Shobha De’s woman is a mouthpiece of the New Indian woman of the upper class society. Khushwant Singh represents an old age view about Indian women. “ this is all most Indian women know of sex-an unpleasant subjection to men’s desire-necessary in order to have sons, bearable because of its brevity”(1959:42,43)

Mikki, the main protagonist of the novel ‘Sisters’ feels lonely after the sudden demise of her parents. Unlike Shobha De’s other women-heroines who generally tend to free themselves from the clutches of married life, Mikki marries Binny.

At first, she feels a sense of security after marriage. Later when she learns that Binny, a womanizer, has already got a family and his marriage with Mikki is only to keep up his image in the society. However, she remains silent but cannot tolerate Binny’s indifference to her.

She does not like the kind of life she lives. All her property is transferred to Binny and she is even denied of motherhood, for she has to always keep fit for him. He does not like Mikki’s desire to be an active partner both in life and business. Thus, once he expresses that he needs a wife “who stays at home and looks after me..... our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfil their husband’s every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going” (1992:109)

Mikki's situation in the novel throws light on the harsh realities of the patriarchal society. When she pleads with him: "I can look after you and look after at least a part of the business. We could work together....I won't have to wait hours to see you" (1992:109).

Shobha De's women have been liberated from the economic constraints. What they search for is the personal freedom, and when they are denied this, they turn rebellious. They express their anger either by breaking the marriage oaths or indulging in extra-marital relations.

Mikki is constantly at war with herself as a woman and as a human being. Her dream to enjoy the fruit of marital life is shattered when Binny, suspecting her chastity, turns her out of his home. She pleads innocence and tells him: "Binny..... I love you. Only you I can't live without you" (1992:141)

Shobha De's woman is the woman of action ready to break all social orthodoxy, which shows her determination to grab the huge fortune with a strong individualistic identity in a habitually male dominated society. She has power to smash the traditional image of woman and she has a strong hatred towards this patriarchal male culture. Simone De Beauvoir writes: "What they demand today is to be recognized as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality"(1972:123).

In her novels, woman characters are not victims of male chauvinism. They are also enjoying the same rights as men.

Mikki initially agrees to marry Navin with the hope that he would support her to save her father's industries. The moment she realizes that he would be of no help to her. She unhesitatingly breaks off her engagement with him.

Alisha, Mikki's sister's affair with Navin gives her no inner satisfaction. Her relationship with Dr. Kurien, her mother's doctor was only passionate without any sense of fulfillment. Initially Dr Kurien was very reluctant but later he accepts her love. But the death of his youngest child gives him a sudden sense of realisation and immediately withdraws him from Alisha. In the end, Mikki took drugs and hypnosis in order to forget Dr. Kurien.

Shobha de's works reveal the trauma, insecurity and agony that lie beneath the opulence of such women's lives. Once the women do not find happiness in marriage, they unhesitatingly go out in search of more fulfilling relationships. Nearly all her women have pre-marital sex.

Shobha de seems to mock the attitudes of the educated and sophisticated men who fail to look into the hearts of women. Most of the men fail to go beyond the boundaries of beauty, there by debasing women to the position of mere celluloid dolls.

Second Thought deals with the story of a young middle class Bengali girl, Maya. The young bride is more fascinated and in love with Bombay than at the prospect of having married Ranjan. Later she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Bombay but also her marriage. Shobha De has explored the hollowness of Indian marriage system in this novel.

She realizes that despite Ranjan's stay at abroad, he is very traditional and above all an insensitive husband. Maya was fascinated by "Bombay but was taken aback when she sensed that Bombay smelt of desperation and deceit" (1996:1).

In their first meeting before the marriage, her mother expresses Maya's interest to pursue a career later in life, Ranjan does not approve and declares: " I am earning well enough to support a wife and family. I believe it is a woman's duty to run a good home" (1996:11). before Maya agrees or disagrees, her uncle intervenes, "In any Indian family, the husband's comforts always come first. Everything else follows" (1996:11)

Maya's longing for adventure and romance often suffers a setback. Her desires are rudely snapped and dissolved by sharp- edged words like, "There are certain rules. You have to abide

by them whether you like them or not” (1996:83) Ranjan’s responsibility towards Maya is nothing beyond providing her financial support, a decent house and four square meals a day. “As far he was concerned, he had redeemed his pledge” (1996:263) it is upto Maya to accept or reject it. And it is this detached attitude of Ranjan that hurts Maya immensely. Ranjan constantly reminds Maya of her duties as a married woman. He is hardly aware of her presence in “his home”.

Related to their physical relationship, Ranjan has a genuine lack of interest in Maya. She is quite sure that if Ranjan continues to maintain stiffness in sex affairs, she would in all probability be childless. When Ranjan returns from Calcutta after ten days, Maya shyly snuggles up to him and caresses him but, he jumps back “as though he had received an electric shock. He had lain trembling in bed for a long time, his breathing heavy, his eyes screwed shut” (1996:259). As a dismayed and lonely Maya puts her head wearily on the pillow, Ranjan starts snoring- not at all aware of the pain he has caused to Maya. Their relationship is not only a failure at the sexual level but even otherwise their temperaments are different and they lack compatibility.

She wonders whether he considers her his rival, or does not have enough faith in her. Once she dares ask him and Ranjan replies without taking his eyes off the T.V. screen: “Of course I trust you but my mother is my mother. I have known her longer than you. These things take time” (1996:205)

Even in love making her husband acts differently. In one occasion, when she is in a love-making mood, he asks her to wait and says: ‘I am not ready yet Maya... you will have to be patient. It is going to take time. I can’t. I just can’t’ (1996:53). On another occasion, when she tries to caress him, Ranjan recoils- jumping back as though he had received an electric shock. He kept trembling in bed for a long breathing heavily and asked her to ‘stop behaving like a cheap woman. A prostitute (1996:259).

Nikhil uses the weapon of flattery and with his words he succeeds in carving a niche in Maya’s heart. In order to get rid of her loneliness, Maya developed an explosive and passionate friendship with a college going young neighbour, Nikhil. She knows that her dreams would not be fulfilled with either Ranjan or Nikhil. But these breaks, the dreams “served as a safety valve” (1996:215) or else her mind would have exploded.

Both Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande have used the device of first- person narrative to ensure its credibility by making the protagonist read her inner mind and thus representing the psyche of the modern learned women.

When it comes to comparison, there are two types of roles played by women in Indian fiction: the conventional and unconventional. The conventional woman may sacrifice her happiness for the sake of the well-being of the family as a unit. Shashi’s characters represent this category who struggles to adjust rather than to get free from the traditional world. The unconventional ones are seen to suffer for their violation of accepted norms of society. Death is the only way for them, unless their experiences teach them to realize the wisdom of the traditional ways. Shobha de’s characters suffer a humiliation as for their social, economic and cultural life is concerned but they also find themselves capable of struggling, compromising and realizing their existence in the end.

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