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From Abeyance to Acuity: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Protagonists

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Literature has always reflected the reality, handled the social dilemmas and thereby treated the aridity that our lives have run into. However, irrespective of the progress that a country makes, there always remain certain basic things that need to be addressed, answered and changed. One such important dimension that needs contemplation is the issue of women marginality and their status in the contemporary society. How much aware are the post-modern Indian women? What are the crises they find themselves in? All these issues gain space in the works of many post-modern Indian novelists. Shashi Deshpande, being one, voices the problems which trap the middle class educated Indian women. The themes of marital incompatibility, identity crisis, imbalanced family relationships and the patriarchal gaze would be explored by taking into consideration Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, *Dark holds no Terrors* and *The Binding Vine*. All these novels highlight the struggle of the conscience of shackled Indian Women characters, their journey from darkness to light presenting the problems that majority of Women are still faced with both at the domestic and social levels. Shashi attempts to show a path necessary for a stable life by deconstructing the established ethos and seeks for women a space to breathe in all realms of life.

Indian English fiction has always committed itself to the exposition of realities. In the works like *Kanthapura*, *Untouchable* and *Malgudi days*, writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan respectively gave space to different national as well as social realities in order to arrive at multiple desired transformations. Be it the changing landscape of life, the country politics, geography, hunger, poverty or any other facet of reality, literature has incorporated everything within its domain. With the advent of post-modernism, the boundaries of Indian English literature expanded to more complex and realistic dimensions. Every fundamental issue overwhelmed in a transformational sphere became a subject for scrutiny. In context of immigrations and globalization, identities as well as literature witnessed a remarkable change. Post modern India has documented the universalisation of elementary education, realization of self hood, celebration of multi- culturalism and intellectualism. Changes have occurred at multiple levels and the national and social changes have corresponded with the literary changes. However, irrespective of the progress that a country makes, there always remain certain basic things that need to be addressed, answered and changed. One such important dimension that needs contemplation is the issue of women marginality and their status in the contemporary society. How much liberated are the post-modern Indian women? What are the crises they find themselves in? What are the various possible solutions to their problems? These questions are to be looked through contemporary lenses.

Women are not only viewed as a social category but a culturally conditioned and constructed category as well. It has been quite a 'great tradition' for women to follow the set norms of 'pavitrata' and surrender to the dictates of patriarchy. Women continue to suffer even in the Post-modern era whether at the hand of their own conditioned psyche or the society that

they belong to. Indian feminism, therefore, exists as a clear response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women. Due to a different historical and cultural background, the Indian feminist movement had to go along its own agendas and strategies which prevented its reduction to just the contradictions between man and woman. The predicaments and problems of Indian women found artistic expression in the Indian English literature after 1960's when writers like Kamala Das, Kamala Markandya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande came to the fore. All these mustered enough courage to question the oppressive role of the society, religion and culture and sought to find their own paths. Kamala Das's poetry introduced a new idiom and an altogether different sensibility. Anita Desai through her novels like *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain* and many others explored solitude and self concentrating on individual's salvation through self-exploration. The complications between the post colonial Indian society and the traditional set up were portrayed in the fiction of Kamala Markandya. She addressed the issues of social classes in India in her novels like *Nectar in the Sieve* and *A Silence of Desire*. An independent existence for women was sought through literature and this search for the self continues even today. The post-modern literature highlights many such issues which even today remain unresolved. One important contemporary voice is Shashi Deshpande who concerns herself with the struggle a woman undertakes in a society to find and preserve her identity as a wife, a daughter, a mother and above all a human being. Shashi, however, doesn't advocate a radical or strident kind of feminism which sees man as the cause of all troubles. Instead she highlights the need to harmonize the relationships, the need to grant others a space and a freedom to express. She seeks a re-orientation of societies in which balanced relationships find a room for cultivation. There is a constant tussle between patriarchy and tradition on one hand and self expression, individuality and independence for women on the other and it is this crisis which Shashi Deshpande brings into focus through her novels. The themes of marital incompatibility, identity crisis, imbalanced family relationships and the patriarchal gaze are brought to the forefront through her fiction. The established conventional ethos is questioned and deconstructed to get more constructive answers. In her novels *That Long Silence*, *The Dark holds no Terrors* and *The Binding Vine*, the crises that engulf present day women are very effectively reflected. The women protagonists pass through various stages ranging from the self-oblivion to self-awareness.

That Long Silence is an exploration of the nature of the cultural and social construction of female identity and behavioural pattern particularly as a wife and a mother. It projects a multitude of women's problems, dilemmas, disputes and frustrations. The novel revolves mainly around Jaya, a convent educated, middle class woman married to Mohan who is a materialist at heart. Apparently living a stable life with two kids and responsibly managing the household chores, Jaya suffers from an inner psychological crisis. The marriage fails to offer her the genuine respect and understanding irrespective of the fact that she places her own self at stake for the happiness of family. Jaya sets her life pattern in accordance with the likes and dislikes of her husband but ends up with nothing more than emptiness and silence. She loses her real life in her efforts to become an ideal wife and mother and this realization arrives to her when she self introspects. She tries to locate the cause of their marital incompatibility and finds that it is the 'long silence' that they dwell in which has destroyed their happiness. Jaya breaks the silence at one level by writing for the magazine 'Seeta' but even this annoys Mohan who believes that to be angry is to be unwomanly and Jaya sets her mind not to be angry even in writing. She confines her thoughts and defines her role according to the expectations of her husband.

Naturally she loses her 'true self'. The internalized anger turns her nervous and incompetent. She says:

"...no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? ... A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (p.147).

Jaya is not a feminist but a woman caught in a tussle between submission and assertion. However, the repeated allegations and accusations by her husband finally force her to react sharply. And she realizes that it is not only Mohan who is responsible for her plight but her own being also. It is she who allowed herself to be victimized. And when this realisation dawns upon her, she decides to come out of her cloistered self and be the real Jaya. Towards the end of the novel, she decides to break the silence, reveal her real self to the world, and start anew. She grows from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion. Her determination reveals itself in the lines:

"I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase that long silence between us." (p. 192).

Jaya is every woman who submits herself to roles assigned by the society and in living up to those roles loses her own identity. She is every woman who devotes her life to the family and in turn gets nothing more than emptiness and Jaya is every woman who has the potential to rise and establish herself in whatever way she can but is restricted by the dogma engulfing the society. Shashi Deshpande conveys a strong message to women through Jaya's portrayal: "women should accept their responsibility for what they are and see how much they have contributed to their own victimization." She advocates that women should sing of their true selves and transcend the oppressions. That Long Silence is the preparation of a woman towards the articulation which will break the chain of silence and offer newer solutions because "...life has always to be made possible" (p.193).

The life that we live is constantly shaped and influenced by different agencies which remain at work in the society. A family lies at the very base of the social institutions and it has a very important role to play with regard to human development and to women emancipation as well. Shashi Deshpande gives space to this dimension in many novels. One important novel being *The Dark holds no Terrors* which traces the fight of a woman for survival in a world that offers no easy outs. It is about a woman who symbolizes many others suffering at the hands of gender discrimination right from childhood and starting from the family itself. The way this discrimination shapes the psyche of a girl child and how it drags her into darkness is very explicitly revealed in the novel. Sarita, the protagonist, a doctor by profession, is discriminated against her brother Dhruva since childhood. The way subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operate within the institution of family is effectively shown. Right from the birth of a girl child, the concept of her being a liability, a debt creeps in and this happens even today. The girl child, Saru, in the novel grows up as a victim of her own mother's sexist and gender based bias which leads her whole life into deep crisis. Fed up of the patriarchal and biased inheritance, she seeks refuge in marriage. She marries Manohar, a poet, against the wishes of her parents but suffers there also. Saru emerges as a successful doctor after marriage and this disturbs Manohar. He envies her success and resorts to sexual assault which traumatizes and entraps Sarita. Disgusted with his behaviour, she leaves him and the children as well and returns to her father's house on the pretext of her mother's death. She completely alienates herself from the rest and thereby, gets an opportunity to examine herself and things as they are. Towards the end, she realizes that escaping from problems doesn't solve them. The solutions lie in facing the problems and this comes from within. Her self-analysis grants her the courage to face her husband. Her self-awareness makes her a new woman. Her search for refuge ends at her own

self and she realizes that no other refuge exists else than that. Sarita's problem is the problem of many educated professional women who are victimized by various social institutions. The novel doesn't offer a revolt or revenge but advocates an understanding which requires cultivation at various levels. Sarita emerges as an open challenge to the stereotypical norms- "A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband..." (p.137). She strips off the self-deceptions, guilt complexes and emotive illusions and decides to welcome a new life which is essentially her own. Shashi Deshpande through sarita's character vindicates a space for girls within the society which can allow them to establish and strengthen relationships rather than devouring their very spirits.

In her fiction, Shashi has explored togetherness and separation, presence and absence, in fact everything related to the psychodynamics of relationships. A search for the self, for an authentic life devoid of facades is undertaken by her protagonists who actually represent numerous women caught in the conventional clutches in this world. Her fiction provides an insight into the psyche of Indian women. Her novel, *The Binding Vine*, focuses on the struggle of the inner mind and self of shackled women characters. Urmila, the protagonist and a college lecturer by profession is a typically feminine voice who struggles through her own gloomy domestic atmosphere not subduing but voicing and trying to sort out things for her self and for other women also be they her mother-in-law Mira or the rape victim Kalpana in the novel. The novel begins in Urmila's personal loss. She, having lost her daughter, fights the despair alone as her husband, Kishore, a sailor by profession remains out mostly. Urmila is quite different from earlier protagonists in composure. She possesses a better control over herself and her relations also. Though being married to a man of her own choice, she is desperate of her marital life. Kishore and Urmila don't share the bond of love and understanding. The incompatibility results in alienation. Irrespective of being economically independent, Urmila requires Kishore by her side as a supporting oak to entwine herself around. The novel describes the trauma and anguish that she goes through and the stages through which she passes before coming to terms with the death of her daughter. While struggling, she comes across the poetry written by her Mira, her dead mother-in-law and through her diaries she gets to know about Mira's suffering as a woman and as a victim of forced marriage. Mira comes as a refuge to Urmila as she easily identifies with her and finds relief from the excruciating pain. Mira happens to be a silent victim of loveless marriage who faces death at a very young age but through her poetry is revealed her desire to be recognized as a writer and a poet. Mira happens to be a woman, who used pen as a vehicle for self expression, to save herself from abuse, from anonymity and mutilation in the prison like house of her husband. Mira represents a multitude of women who are forced into marriages at a very young age and succumb to the lust of their husbands. Urmila gathers the courage to publish her poems and reveals Mira's suffering to the world. Through Mira Urmila gains a new insight into herself. Though accused of being a traitor to Mira, Urmila remains firm enough in her resolution to break the silence of women in the name of social taboo or family honour. She advocates love as the binding force in relationships. The present day world views marriage as a business institution and that is why the hollow marriages are dissatisfying both physically as well as spiritually. Instead they confuse a woman whether to revolt or submit because both end in discontent and it is this set up which requires change. As Urmila herself says that "each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope..." *The Binding Vine* is projection of woman's biological needs and raises the questions of woman's right over her own body even within the marital domain. There is an effort to restore the discarded reality of life.

The post-modern fiction of Shashi Deshpande doesn't have debating voices or doesn't intend to develop any thesis in the debate. The novels are simply open examinations of the

experiences of people in specific settings. They are not just feminist in concern but packed with multiple issues at work. Jaya, Sarita, Urmila present in a literary microcosm the condition of society at large. They are women trying to understand their history, their place, their role in the society and above all their relationship with others and themselves. Shashi writes about “human beings and about other human beings who happen to be woman.” The characters are true to life and their problems such which nobody wants to talk about but they do and thereby, encourage others to break the silences on injustice. It is difficult for women to do away with the stereotypes and traditions especially for those who belong to the lower strata of the society. The maxim-“a woman has to do twice as much to prove herself half as good as man” holds true even today. There is a dire need in our society to harmonize the relationships. However, subjugating or destroying the male can offer no victory. Annihilating the existing order, being anti-men or anti-marriage doesn’t lead one anywhere. What is required is a reconciliation and a re-orientation starting with the self itself. Apparent failures at different levels can’t jeopardize the inner strength. On the contrary, extreme despair can ignite the superior self and grant an impetus to look forward for newer ways of living. Women need to rise from the quagmire of their troubles and tribulations as victorious not vanquished, rejuvenated and not exhausted. They can’t afford to be the ones who run away but they should become the ones to return with more firm resolutions. Shashi Deshpande’s literary interventions into the post modern Indian society need to be recognized for her writing in itself is an outpouring from a world within the woman. It is a vision of humanity and the value based fabric of life that she projects and the age that we live in does require such reinforcements.

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