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Quest for Female Identity: Exploration in the Selected Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract:

Women's suppression is rooted in the very fabric of a traditional society in religious doctrine and practices, within the education and legal system, and within families. Females have been judged by their biological structure and these differences construct their social identities. Therefore, a woman has to suffer as she has no identity of her own. Gender is a social construction. It depends on the location, time and culture where it is performed from the ancient times a woman has been trying to establish her identity in the male dominance society. Feministic theory has a distinctive and concerted approach to literature. Feminism continues doing struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements and for social and political rights. Male domination in a woman's life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society. Women are struggling on their own to break the shackles of their traditional position and search for their identity as an individual, rather than sacrificing at every step for the sake of their husbands and children.

Keywords: Female Identity, Marital rape, Marriage disharmony, Tradition and Modernity, Patriarchal society.

Literature has always been depicting the real picture of society. It has ability to describe the realism to people how the issues are related to our life. We often neglect many issues i.e, male dominance due to society, culture, rituals, poverty, marginalisation, exploitation and inequality. Therefore literature encapsulates these issues in society in which we can be able differentiate between reality and illusion. One of the major issues is identity crisis which has been become very prominent in the society. People suffer from identity crisis due to in migration, inequality, gender discrimination, poverty etc. In these issues women is the one who has been exploited in many ways because of their identities. The issue of identity has been a major issue in the contemporary psychology, social theory, cultural studies and literary criticism. There have been social, political, economic and cultural developments which have helped in the construction of identity. These various developments within twentieth century, social thought have forced an attention to identity. In general, identity

refers to a particular name or a particular person and the quality of being that particular person, the same person like before.

The term identity refers to a range of phenomena as a perception of me, my reaction to others, and the social categories that attach themselves to me. As Stuart Hall describes: Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not who we are or where we came from, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.(3). The concept of identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions, social and cultural situations. Identity is socially produced, socially constructed and worked out in people's everyday social lives. Straub in his book *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* describes, "Identity is however still considered to be a social norm in postmodern societies" (280). It is generally assumed that there are two genders i.e. male and female. They are part of any social justice because if there is some kind of injustice, they are exploited as socially culturally, economically, and politically. When it comes to thinking about identities it cannot adequately address the issues of what identity is and how it is possible. For example women feel inferior because of the power and privilege which men enjoy over women and women, who are exploited in every way and they do not have any power in social, economic, and political affairs. Females have been judged by their biological structure and these differences construct their social identities. Therefore, a woman has to suffer as she has no identity of her own. Gender is a social construction. It depends on the location, time and culture where it is performed. Language plays an important role in the gender performance. It means how we decide the names for men and women and how we pronounce them. This is known as the repeated enactment of a language as it is the society and culture which decides what kind of dresses we should wear and how we behave in the society like men and women. This misleading and partial understanding give rise to inequality in the society that is rooted in people's perception. Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble* claims: "Women constitute a paradox if not a contradiction within the discourse of identity itself, women are the sex which not 'one', within a language pervasively masculinist, a pallogocentric language women constitute the representable"(14).

Gender equality refers to imparting equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities to women and men. It refers to the social identity of men and women. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and relations between men and women where woman is inferior and subordinate to man. As Butler describes in her *Gender Trouble* "Gender has to do not with how females really are, but with the way that a given culture or subculture seems them how they are culturally constructed" (98). Gender analysis however is closely related to power analysis and recognised as an important conceptual tool in addressing different vulnerabilities and predicament of women arising out of the social norms and customs as woman is the only one who is ignored and exploited in the patriarchal society. The submissive nature of a woman is actually a patriarchal manifestation. If it is not so then prescribed norms of a woman cannot be different from man. The man made society determines the behaviour of a woman. Following the trends of Post-colonial feminism and

the mode of third world fiction, feministic writers are trying to merge these two concepts for the equal rights of women and their own identity.

Female identity is a process for the most fundamental of these differences. It relates to self-image self-esteem, individuality and usually refers to individuality of the women protagonists who submit themselves under the forced norms of the male dominated society and their families. In Nancy Chodorow's explanation about female identity in her book *Feminism and Psychoanalytical Theory*, she gives descriptive generalisation of sexism, patriarchy or male supremacy to analyse how sexual asymmetry and inequality are constituted, reproduced and changed. Women's suppression is rooted in the very fabric of a traditional society in religious doctrine and practices, within the education and legal system, and within families. Male domination in a woman's life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society. Women are struggling on their own to break the shackles of their traditional position and search for their identity as an individual, rather than sacrificing at every step for the sake of their husbands and children. `

Traditionally, woman has been known to bear primary responsibility for the well-being of her family. She is discriminated against systematically and deprived of access to resources such as education, health care, services, jobs etc. According to Millet in her *Sexual Politics* "Sex is determined biologically, whereas gender is culturally, socially, psychologically constituted through sex-role stereotyping and historical conditioning" (13). Psychological discourse also plays a major role to demonstrate the image of a woman, who because of the social changes has to accept all the deviations which have been imparted on her. She prefers to stay silent and this discreet thinking goes to her unconsciousness and this affects her psyche.

From the ancient times a woman has been trying to establish her identity in the male dominance society. Feminism continues doing struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements and for social and political rights. This struggle marked by such books as Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the rights of Women* (1792), John Fuller's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Shashi Deshpande is one of the most accomplished novelists. She portrays the middle class women who are struggling to adjust their self in the society. She successfully presents these women as they are engaged in the complex and difficult social and psychological problem of defining an authentic self. In her first novel she presents the situation of woman who is suffering between tradition and modernity.

The Dark Holds No Terror (1990) is a reflective novel of the feminist aspirations. The disharmony, disappointment and discrimination of the educated woman in a tradition bound 'Indian Society' is the major theme of the novel. But at the end, after a continued mental dilemma and a long drawn self-analysis or women's quest for self-exploration is recognized as the principal theme of this novel. The protagonist of this novel Saru articulates her aspiration to stay all her life and her mother say: "you cannot. But her brother Dhruva can stay; he is a different he is a boy."(4) This statement also shows the gender difference which makes Saru forces to think about her individual identity. She is unable to identify herself as a

beloved daughter to her mother and when she grows up she is unable to be attractive enough to be beautiful. She understands that what she is to become is going to give her identity that she is searching for. In her childhood days she was told that, "I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me, must be meek and submissive, why? I had asked. Because you are female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive"(158). In the patriarchal society a woman is taught to be shy and submissive because of her well-being. In the novel Saru realises the women's critical life in the society. She wants her own identity to survive. She tries to escape from the traditional way of her life with her husband. She said says, "Everything in a girl's life is shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male" (148). In the novel she wants to enhance the idea of liberation of a woman in every way.

That Long Silence: As the title suggests this novel is about the silence of a woman in which she is suffering and searching her individual identity. *That Long Silence* (1989) is an expression of the modern Indian house wife and depicts the inner conflicts of the protagonist and her quest for identity. The silence between the protagonist and her husband further deteriorates the situation. Towards the end of the novel, she realizes that she should break the silence and try to achieve her identity as an individual through self-realization and self-assertion. Her husband cannot understand her feelings as a result of which she decides to move on. This whole story revolves around Jaya's quest for identity.

In the novel she has to face the gender discrimination and she was nurtured with the idea that male is everything and woman is nothing. As her mother says, "Husband was like a sheltering tree, without the tree you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable"(32). In this way she negotiates her past experience and analyse her individuality. As she was christened as Jaya which means victory and her name has been changed as Suhasini which means submission. As she says, "His dispassionate tone, his detached touch, had somehow angered me; actually, my name isn't Jaya at all. Not now, I mean, it's Suhasini, Where did it come from? Marriage. It is the name Mohan gave me when we got married?"(15). Later, she rejects this name and protest against the male domination society. Shashi Deshpande presents the most crucial issues in this novel that is marital sex. As she speaks her feeling to her husband "In fact had never spoken of sex at all. It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened; it never existed in word" (95). She describes her relationship which is only physical as she further says: "My need was now less: I could stay apart from him without a tinge. I could sleep with him too, without desire"(97). In the Indian society Women married off with the strangers and they don't have the compatibilities. These social taboos associated with marriages which make her woman. Jaya comes out with this situation and suffering between her self-respect and her body.

The Binding Vine revolves around the lives of three women who are suffering in their situation. Urmi, an upper middle class woman, is the central character. Urmi is anguished over the death of her baby daughter the second woman Mira is Urmi's mother-in-law who exists only in the note books she has left behind. They are discovered by chance in a trunk. The third woman Kalpana, a survivor of brutal rape forced silence. She is between life and death and watched by her mother with whom Urmi forms an unlikely bond of mutual

comfort. The lives of three women are haunted by fears, secrets and deep grief and bonded together by hope. Kishore the archetypal Indian husband never understands the depth of Urmi's feelings. From the very first night of their wedding she feels distanced from Kishore. She realises that "He Looked trapped" (137). Marriage which was believed to be a spiritual bond in the old times has become only a sexual legal bond in modern days. She openly reveals her emotional insecurity. She says, "Each time you leave me the parting is like death" (139). Mira and Shakutai also face the same problem because Mira is a victim of marital rape. Shakutai's husband has left her that's why man woman relations in *The Binding Vine* are strained. *The Binding Vine* reveals the reality of modern Indian women who are still underprivileged of their Human rights and are mistreated in love and marriage. Shakutai's daughter Kalpana is a victim of rape and is fighting between life and death in a hospital ward. Urmi fights for her rights. Kalpana's tragedy is compared with Urmi's mother-in-law's tragedy. "What has happened to Kalpana happened to Mira too" (78). Kalpana was raped by her uncle. Her situation is similar to Mira's who was a victim of marital rape. Both were victims of the same crime but in different situations. *The Binding Vine* deals with the theme of quest for identity. Women play different roles as a wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. The novel contains a poem by Venu, a poet who questions a woman's urge for creativity: "Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men" (69). The absence of Kishore brings about frustration and loneliness in Urmi's life but she intelligently overcomes these problems. She takes a stern decision to stand strong and live for her son Karthik. She believes she can manage everything. Her consciousness assures her that she is strong enough to live on her own.

The present paper is about the circumstances and conditions that analyse the protagonist's path of purpose and fulfilment against marriage from feministic perspective. The present study analyses the clash between body and mind. This combines the independent woman's attitude that explores deep into her psyche and elaborates her needs without compromising and searches for that solution. She declares herself free from that bondage which had previously rioted over her entity. All these chosen texts are contemporary texts which deal with the issues such as quest for female identity, marital disharmony, discrimination, rape, repressed desires, and women as silent victims. These contemporary writers through their writings have addressed these issues. With the change of time the problems and issues faced by females have also changed and have been portrayed efficiently by these writers. These texts give voice to the repressed women thus helps them to make an identity of their own by coming out of boundaries in which they are kept by patriarchal society.

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