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QUEST FOR IDENTITY BY THE WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The quest for identity has been a theme more frequently explored by women writers. Women writers in Indian writing in English have drawn various exemplary characters in their quest for identity, who become transgressor of achieve their independent identity and assertion as individual.

KEYWORDS : Indian writing , women writers , *That Long Silence*.

INTRODUCTION:

In this article, it has been endeavoured to discuss the quest for identity portrayed in the female character of Shashi Deshpande's novels particularly *That Long Silence*, *The dark Holds No Terrors* and particularly her protagonists.

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad in Karnataka, India in 1938. She is the daughter of the renowned Kannada playwright and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar (Sriranga), who was also known as Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre. She is gifted with an inborn literary bent of mind which matured with her experiences in life. She has nine short story collections and eight major novels to her credit. Her maiden collection of short stories- '*Legacy*' was published in 1978. Her first novel '*The Dark Holds No Terrors*' came out in 1980. Then other novels are *If I die today* (1982), *Come up and Be dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1986), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000) and *Moving on* (2004) . She has also written the script and screenplay for a Prize-winning Hindi Feature Film *Dristi* and translated a play. Her books for children – *A sum Adventure*, *The only Witness* and *The Hidden Treasure* – all are on lines of Enid Blyton, who has defined the parameter of Children's fiction in the west. Her fourth novel for children, *The Narayanpur Incident*, is based on the quit India Movement and the role of children in it. Among the many awards she received for her works, the most noteworthy is the Sahitya Academy Award that she received in 1991 for her novel *That long Silence*.

Deshpande's authorial self is intensely plagued by a deep sense of her isolation and she writes out of a step with the mainstream writing. She believed and maintained that she wrote about 'person to person' and 'person to society' relationship.

An attempt has been made to point out certain aspects regarding her women characters.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique position among the Indian women novelists of post colonial period. She dwells upon different themes like quest for identity, desperation, frustration, ambition, quest for identity, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness and alienation of sensitive women.



Shashi Deshpande's approach to women's problems as depicted in her novels, is quite distinct. It is possible to differentiate her approach from that of her contemporaries who either protest against the existing norms of the society or remain indifferent to the social system responsible for the oppression of women. Shashi Deshpande did not choose the way of protest as such. Deshpande's protagonist who are educated women and most of whom are financially independent, have not necessarily developed an anti-male attitude. When one such character suffers and the husband is blamed, her father brother or some male friend is found to be her saviour.

Responding to the demands of tradition, the women protagonists in Deshpande's novels usefully start with their roles assigned to them by the society. Other women in their surroundings appear to adjust themselves with their roles but her protagonists cannot be happy as they have a strong urge to make a free choice for themselves. Deshpande's women protagonists who are intelligent and highly conscious individuals, proceed through the hazardous way of making decisions on their own for this is the only way to assert oneself. Jaya From '*That Long Silence*' is an exemplary character showing this. Towards the end of the novel, Jaya realized this. A few lines from the novel can be quoted in this context.

"The final words of Krishna's long sermon to Arjuna 'Do as you desire'. I'd thought it something of a cheat. Imagine the Lord any Master telling his disciple 'Do as you desire'! What are prophets and masters for it not to tell you what to do? But now I understand with this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. 'I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire' (p.192)

In Deshpande's fifth novel '*That Long Silence*', woman's predicament is indicated in the beginning. Jaya's subjugation to her father is for her choice of music. The submissive attitude towards her husband is for fear of creating an unpleasant atmosphere. Her traditional upbringing has led to her obedience even in adulthood. Unconsciously Jaya is bound in the traditional opinion drilled into the minds of girls from childhood. They are taught to believe man as superior and women subordinate to men. For the same reason Jaya rejects telling the story of 'the crow and the sparrow' to her children as the female sparrow in the story cleverly kills the male sparrow, raising the question whether a female can destroy a male. It seems that Jaya like other women represented by the female sparrow stop caring for the rest of the world and be happy if she and her family are safe. Jaya hates the story. By the inclusion of this story, Deshpande wants to project a 'new woman' who has overcome this silly barrier and thinks independently. At a point of time Jaya understands that safety is unattainable. Any moment disaster may befall one and one is finished.

Disaster does befall her and Jaya gets a terrible jolt. Her husband Mohan is involved in some bribery scam and is forced to go underground for fear of being arrested. They retreat to their Dadar flat during this disaster, which gives Jaya an opportunity for self-discovery. The catastrophe in Jaya's life can be interpreted as a blessing in disguise. The disaster helps her in realizing the 'Power of women' in her.

Silence is one of the greatest drawbacks that hinders the progress of women. Raising the voice and expressing the desires and demands are very much important. The most important thing in life for any person is to live an independent life, without fear.

Towards the end of the novel Jaya understands the weakness in her own personality. She now decides to view her family not only as a wife and mother but also as a woman who will assert her wishes. She says,

"I'm not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible" (p -52).

Jaya's evolution starts with the realization of the reality that her long silence should be erased.

Deshpande's first novel '*The dark Holds No Terrors*' presents the condition of the women in the Indian society. The protagonist Sarita alias Saru is an educated, economically independent, middle class lady. She is a successful doctor living in Bombay. She is married to Manohar, a Lecturer in a college. She has two children – Abhijit (Abhi) and Renuka (Renu) leading a happy contented life. She is suddenly confronted with problems in marriage.

Manohar(Manu) her husband, a normal loving person during daytime becomes a brutal monster at night. Saru feels trapped like an animal, which leads to the terror of darkness. She has been very much conscious of her gender as a child and loveless relationship with her parents and strained relation with her husband. The novel begins with Saru's return to her parents home after fifteen years of her marriage with the man she loved.

Here she gets a chance to think over her relationship with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother. The novelist consciously exploits this to reveal the mind of her protagonist Saru who undergoes the process of self-analysis and thus evolves as a more mature person in the end.

The theme of the novel is women's predicament. Her struggle to create an identity for herself in the family is depicted. She wants to prove her living overcoming all the obstacles that come her way and lead a life of worth. When her mother's attitude towards her changed with the death of her brother Dhruva, she senses, "I just did not exist for her, I died long before I left home" (P-28). Her mother cursed her in agony, "why did not you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?" (P-29).

The conflict between Saru and her mother represents the clash between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. Her mother is an obstruction in her path to self-realization. Saru's education helps her to accept the rational thinking.

The novel *'The Dark Holds No Terror'* reflects the pictures of the inner world of women who are striving towards self-realization. Protagonist of the novel is actively engaged to trace out her identity as an independent being. Saru tries to find meaning in marriage and try to retain at the same time her own individuality.

Saru's success as a doctor brings insecurity in Manu and Saru recognizes the fact: "Now I know that it was there it began.... this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage". The transformation of Manu from a doting husband into a sadist invokes terror in the heart of Saru. But Saru refrains from announcing it to the world that her marriage has been a failure.

It seems Saru marries Manu defiantly in order to get away from the mother who accused her of having killed her brother. She comes back to her parental home in an frustrated mood. Even the parental home does not provide the expected refuge.

In due course of time Saru realized that neither Manu nor her father can be her refuge. She has to seek her own refuge and find her true self.

This journey into herself reveals to her that she has to be at peace with herself before achieving anything.

Learning to trust oneself is the first step towards self-actualization and Saru is able to achieve this. Her earlier doubts as to retaining her professional integrity as a doctor evaporate in air as she tends to Sunita's illness. She tells her father: "And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can" (P-221)

Despite her disillusionment with marriage and all that it entails, Saru is able to preserve her identity, realizing her own personal and private limitations. Thus she becomes sign and signature of new women of today who claim to be equal to her male counterpart in all spheres of life. She makes personal decision of her fate. She has been able to come out from the traditional, Socio-cultural and familiar structure which make her independent and emancipated for which she fights. This is true with Deshpande's other heroines also. Indu, the protagonist from the novel *Roots and Shadows*, shares same predicament in life. Both Saru and Indu, finally engaged themselves in self-exploitation, realize 'their own truths' and assert their individuality.

Deshpande not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary women. By tradition she means those values of security and harmony that symbolize the Indian way of life. While modernity essentially refers to the assertion of the independent, individual self.

Deshpande's commendably realistic depiction of the contemporary Indian women's situation and the pragmatic solution she puts forward, accord her novels an imperishable importance. Her novels offer affirmative, eloquent message for women and the whole humanity as well.

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande while portaying struggles of her women characters for identity drives her points home with great subtlety and delicacy.

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