

PROBLEMS AND PREDICAMENTS OF WOMEN IN SHASHIDESH PANDE'S SELECT NOVELS

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Shashi Deshpande is an acclaimed post-colonial Indian novelist. Deshpande, as one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India, takes us inside the consciousness of her modern educated middle class women characters to present their plights, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore ways to fulfill themselves as human beings. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations.

Shashi Deshpande's novels narrate the story of those women who suffer a lot, but remain silent because of the circumstances in which they are born, brought up and forced to live. One of the major causes of suffering of these women is their meek and submissive nature. The novels are an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewives who think and feel, but hardly react. Shashi Deshpande's approach to the long silence of the Indian women is different in the sense that she has presented the reality of life based on her experiences.

In this paper, the problems and predicaments that Deshpande's women characters face are discussed. The common problems shared by all sections of women, irrespective of difference in caste, class, creed, binding them together under the same umbrella of having been born women are taken into account particularly in the novels *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* & *Roots and Shadows*.

Shashi Deshpande points out that women have been trained at family level for the future unequal and partial treatment in the larger society. In *The Dark Holds*

No Terrors, Saru, the protagonist of this novel, recalls that there was no special celebration of her birthday like that of her brother. As a child, Saru suffered emotionally and mentally when everyone, especially her mother, showered all her love and affection upon her son. Such a gender divide that ultimately leads to women's sense of sexual discrimination has affected women's life, in general, right from their childhood.

In *The Binding Vine*, Vanna is neglected by her father while his attention and affection are directed towards his only son, Kishore. To her father, she is as if she were non-existent; she fails to draw her father's attention even if she tries to do so by laughing rather too long, but alas the former remains quite indifferent to his daughter, much to the shock of Vanna. For him, there was only his son, Kishore. Urmila, the central character, heard Vanna say once that her father expected nothing from her. Maybe he neglected her because he had been extremely possessed with his first wife, hence his possession with her son only. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, the protagonist, wondered whether her father would have been more attentive if she were born a son. She was with her grandparents after her mother's untimely death, and her father hardly visits her. She recalls, "How else could have parted leaving me a fifteen-day-old motherless baby, with the family...but that, perhaps, was because I was a girl. If I had been a son..." (163)

Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, remembered how her mother's love, affection and care, over her brother but not giving much attention to her. When girls grow up and get married, there is still no end to their problems. When Indu speaks of her childhood experience with so

many restrictions, so many 'dos' and 'don'ts', she reminds us of every girl child's unstable life in store for her:

As a child, they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, you are a girl... it is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive. (158)

No wonder, such a society does not permit a girl to choose her life partner independently. If, on the contrary, a girl chooses her life partner, she runs the risk of disobeying her parents. In such cases, girls have to pay a heavy price. They are no longer welcome to their own house. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* when Saru decided to marry Manohar, the man of her choice, her mother said, "I know all these love marriages. It's love for a few days, and then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then" (69). Talking about marriage, it would not be wrong to say that marriage, to most Indian women, educated or uneducated, rich or poor, high class or low class, means a change of surname, habits, attitudes, identity, personality, lots of sacrifice, surrender, adjustment and sometimes, even change of names.

After marriage, it is generally the women who have to adjust and sacrifice many things, sometimes even their names and career, to be accepted, loved and admired by their husband and in-laws. Urmila in *The Binding Vine* recalls what her grandfather had said about the importance of people's names:

People's names are very important, he used to say. You shouldn't take liberties with them. It is funny, because his wife, my Baijiji, systematically took people's names away from them. Maybe because she had lost her own. I never knew her name Kamala; everyone, even papa, called her Bai. (119)

Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, has changed her name; now she is called Geethanjali or Anju according to the wish of her husband. He gets very annoyed if anyone calls her Sarita. In *That Long Silence* also the protagonist's name was changed from Jaya,

given to her by her father at time of her birth, to Suhasini given by her husband at the time of their marriage. There seems to have been a drastic change in almost everything including the names and identities between the life before and after marriage for women as if marriage is a second birth for women. Mira, in *The Binding Vine*, was called Nirmala after her marriage much against her own wish as we find in her poem:

Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still.

Do you build the new without razing the old?

A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold

Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira. (110)

This shows woman is a territory to be conquered and named by man—a traditional position of woman in a highly genderized world. Man uses woman as his property; mostly woman treated as a man's land and land is power and property. Men have every advantage to mould and use women to satisfy their desire and imagination. Women have been taught that "a husband is like a sheltering tree" (32) even if he is a drunkard and has mistress, he must be worshipped like god because without that tree, they would be "dangerously unprotected and vulnerable" (32). Mohan's mother in *That Long Silence* waited on her drunken husband however late he was. After giving dinner to her children, she again had to cook rice for him because he wanted his rice "fresh and hot, from a vessel that was untouched" (35). The next moment he picked up his heavy brass plate and threw it at the wall, and walked out of the house. Disturbed by the noise, two of her older children woke up, but she told them to sleep, saying it's nothing. She asked the boy to go to the next-door neighbor to ask for some chilies. She lighted the fire again with the wood that was difficult to burn. Her eyes were red with the smoke. Meanwhile her baby woke up and cried. She hushed it by feeding. Mohan narrated the above story to his wife Jaya. She found the story painful and he commented that women in those days were tough. Jaya reacted: "he saw strength in the fire, but I saw despair. I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon, silence and surrender." (36)

Mohan's mother had to suffer in silence as if it's nothing when everything went so wrong. Such is not an isolated case; millions of women face this problem everyday in Indian society. Suffering, silence and surrender are part of life of higher middle class women, no matter how educated they are. Jaya has to suffer like the mythical women, like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Gandhari etc., when her husband is accused of business malpractice. Mohan thinks that his wife would share in his fall; without saying anything, she follows her husband.

Another aspect of marriage is the eventual loss of women's identity. It seems women have surrendered their identity in their families at their husband's place. As if they had nothing to contribute, they are always excluded from important discussions. In *Roots and Shadows*, even the most powerful woman, Akka, mother image in the novel, has not been given place of her own during family discussions. Women are insultingly removed from the family tree as Jaya sees and reacts in *That Long Silence*. What is apparent here is the lower position of women to the margin in the patriarchal society. All this is evidence to the long suppression of women in patriarchal society. Jaya complains that there is no room for her anger. Saru too has her own grievance attached to her sex despite her position as a doctor.

The novelist does not stop at that. She brings into light the plight of widows, their hardships and the inhuman treatment meted out to them, evils of child marriage, dowry, and problems of barren women. Women of all classes as a group suffer because of all those expectations, impositions and constructed images created by patriarchy. Their main problem lies when they fail to do or follow or fulfill these culturally constructed roles assigned to them. In *Roots and Shadows*, Akka was only twelve years when she got married to the man of well past thirty. She became a victim of child marriage. When she refused any intimacy, she was locked up for days without food. The same is the case of Mira in *The Binding Vine*. To her marriage acts like imprisonment, not building relationship based on mutual love and understanding.

Barrenness is another cause of concern and anxiety in the life of women in a society where motherhood is idealized to a great extent. Childless women are looked down and treated like sinners and considered as incomplete, even intelligent and capable woman like Indu in *Roots and Shadows* who is childless by choice. As Indu observes, "Nothing about me- my academic distinctions, my career, my success, and my money-none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman" (128). Deshpande depicts the painful and insecure life of childless women.

Women are often threatened by their husbands as in the case of Shakutai's sister, Sulu, in *The Binding Vine*: "Sulu was frightened; she was always frightened because she had no children. She was afraid he would throw her out, take another wife" (192). Thus the many layered structure of patriarchal oppression and multiple injury unleashed as women are unfolded by Deshpande in many of her novels.

An important problem faced by women of all classes is rape within and outside marriage. Rape within marriage is a new concept in Indian society. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was subjected to brutal rape every night though she was still the confident doctor with an aura of success during daytime. In this context, what Kate Millet says in *Sexual Politics* is worth mentioning: "The position of women in patriarchy is such that they are expected to be passive, to suffer and to be sexual objects, it is unquestionable that they with varying degrees of success, socialized into such roles". (144)

Saru husband, Manohar, was a lecturer in a third-rate college and he could not bear when her wife earned more money and fame than him, who was before a kind and loving husband. He became a sadist when a girl, who came to interview Saru, asked him, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200) From that day onwards, he attacked her like an animal just to prove his manhood. Saru had to bear all just to save her marriage. Likewise, in *The Binding Vine*, Mira and Akka, the first and the second wives of the protagonist's father-in-law, were victims of rape within marriage. After the death of Mira,

Urmila's father-in-law remarried Akka just to provide a mother to his son. The novelist carefully and successfully juxtaposes by intertwining the story of these two suffering women. Perhaps, the only difference of their suffering might be that Mira suffered because of too much possessive love of her husband while Akka suffered because of the lack of the same. Urmila comes to know about the pain and suffering of her dead mother-in-law Mira through her poems and diaries. The protagonist points out that there may be so many women like Akka who are not able to speak their sufferings.

Women are also subjected to rape outside marriage. The novelist, through her women characters, exposes the harsh realities that women have been subjected to in the world of patriarchal domination. Men have been inflicting sexual violence on women for ages to assert their manhood and supremacy. In *The Binding Vine*, Kalpana had refused to be the second wife to her uncle. To take revenge on her, he had raped her and injured her. She was in coma, fighting for her life. Urmila, the protagonist of the novel, and Bhaskar, the doctor who had examined Kalpana, wanted to record it as a rape case, but Shakutai, the mother of the victim and the police officer who had to handle the case, wanted to record it as an accident for different reasons. The police wanted to do so just to avoid further complication generally associated with the case of rape. Shakutai was really worried about the possible scandal that would follow and its consequences in the future life of her two daughters. She pleaded with Urmi not to tell anyone: "don't tell anyone, I will never be able to hold up my head again, who'll marry the girl, we're decent people. If a girl's honour is lost, what's left?...I have another daughter, what will become of her? (58-59). Here it seems that Shakutai was reflecting the attitude of the society that gives too much importance to the institution of marriage and chastity of women. It is quite ironical that the same society has clearly seen no objection if a man loses his chastity. As Simone de Beauvoir states in her *The Second Sex*, "Virginity is valued so highly in many circles that to lose it outside legitimate marriage seems a real disaster. The young girl who yields through impulse or

surprise thinks she is dishonored" (380). Lastly it may be observed that women of all classes suffer not because they lack something but mostly because of the culturally construct roles that are assigned to them by the patriarchal system. Most women of Shashi Deshpande struggle in silence for a very long time but a few of them are able to come to terms with their problems. They find a kind of balance, harmony and meaning in life as they are no longer confused with themselves. Their approach is neither total acceptance nor rejection. It is a kind of the mixture of the two in the sense that they accept and acknowledge the value of family and the need to live within relationships and society but reject those oppressive systems and values patriarchy develops for the suppression of women. The state of acceptance and rejection is Deshpande's concept of women's growth and enlightenment.

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