

THE PREDICAMENTS OF DOMESTICITY IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of domesticity in a proposition to scrutinize the private and personal truth of individuals and their relationships within this milieu. This study aims at re-reading the socio-cultural parameters and brings to light the intricate socio-cultural politics at play within domesticity. Contemporary woman novelists represent the frustration of women and tend to challenge and defy the existing familial and social structures. A different kind of scheme underlines the novels of Shashi Deshpande. She deals with the problems and predicament of the man-woman situation located within the fabric of the family and the pressure of living within relationships. She deals with the domestic life in a manner which reflects its complexity in the context of Indian culture, more specifically the Hindu worldview. With this intention in her writings, she provides a reevaluation of the socio-cultural practices within domesticity to reach a significant and artistic re-elucidation of them looking for a new knowledge of human relationships, women in particular to discover what is significant to their lives today.

Keywords: *familial relationship, domesticity, socio-cultural, re-elucidation, wifehood and motherhood.*

The genre of Indian women writings in English witness a new phase of development after independence in relation to its imaginative expansion, thematic and technical maturity. Contemporary woman novelists represent the frustration of women and tend to challenge and defy the existing familial and social structures. A different kind of scheme underlines the novels of Shashi Deshpande. She is one of the most artistic contemporary women writers and writer of women's lives in English, whose novels deal with the breakdowns in communication, the silences, and the lies that marriages and families struggle with. Her novels are imbued with the position of contemporary women's position within domesticity and society in general. Her novels generally center on family relationship-particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the latter's dilemmas and conflicts. She deals with the problems and predicament of the man-woman situation located within the fabric of the family and the pressure of living within relationships. She deals with the domestic life in a manner which reflects its complexity in the context of Indian culture, more specifically the Hindu worldview. With this intention in her writings, she provides a reevaluation of the socio-cultural practices within domesticity to reach a significant and artistic re-elucidation of them looking for a new knowledge of human relationships, women in particular to discover what is significant to their lives today. From her first novel, Shashi Deshpande has been intrigued by man-woman relationships within familial and social context and through

her novels she provides a platform to voice her doubts and wish regard to the age old institutions like family and marriage.

The concern in this paper is the liberal space of the modern India home itself entrenched within familial relationships - not class, or nation. Her writings emerge out of middle class women's confrontation with the specific social and cultural norms which construct them and reproduce the domestic space as the 'private' space of patriarchy, as the non-modern space of the modern nation. Each of the narratives so familiar, so reassuring, becomes linked to histories of horrific domestic violence, marital rape, abuse and hurt, which get woven into the very texture of 'home', 'domesticity', or the 'private sphere'. Deshpande deviates from the idealistic model of human relationships within the family to expose the excruciating and repugnant moments of family life buried under the idealistic picture of identity in familial roles. Deshpande's protagonists placed within the vortex of domestic crisis experience a sense of terror and foreboding and coldness flows out of the cracks and crevices in their familial relationships. The protagonists positioned within such context enable them to probe into their present situation. Their explicit and hidden responses to people and incidents, their aptitude to rethink and re-evaluate their opinions and attitudes- everything happens within the precincts of the family. A study of Deshpande's man-woman relationships, woman in particular would be

incomplete overlooking their position in the context of the family as family remains the priority in her novels.

This paper makes an effort to assess domesticity in relation to the multiple aspects that decide its role, nature and construction to reach a perceptive of how family life and its associated responsibilities function as a cultural construct within the life of individuals, women in particular. With this apparent insignia behind, it attempts to investigate various facets within domesticity in relation to Shashi Deshpande's novels, **Roots and Shadows, The Dark Holds No Terrors, and That Long Silence**. It makes general survey of the development of the family to arrive at an understanding of domesticity as a construction of socio-cultural connotation. These novels explore how women situated within domesticity have to experience biasness regarding gender, space, and power. Situated within the given structured space, women tend to internalize current socio-cultural conventions regarding gender behavior and try to conform to what is considered normal and expected behavior. For a woman the ideal role advocated is that of a dutiful daughter, a dutiful wife and a loving mother.

Domesticity with its embedded images and stereotypes exhibited in the religious scriptures remain as 'residue' that wields an overriding sway on the collective consciousness of the people. Deshpande scrutinizes the prescribed ideal roles of women within domesticity as cultural constructs that very often inclined to deny them the very right of self-hood. The auto-genous impression of man about woman is that she is the second sex but this submission by woman comes only as an emitted response because society has groomed her to act dependent. To have herself to her place in society and the family is an unconscious acceptance of her status. The finite dimension of the relationship between man and woman has been prescribed by man and not by the woman. Her limits have been imposed on her by man who is ruled by the mastery motive. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons. Being engulfed in this vicious circle of ignored resignation, she has brought about social disorder. It becomes necessary for the woman to empower herself socially, politically, economically, legally through 'Emancipation of the self' but emancipation also demands the slaughter of the 'Angel in the House' according to Virginia Woolf. As she says:

You may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took

the leg, if there was a drought she sat in it- in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish to her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (128)

Indian women cannot assert their identities with dignity as long as they are following the model of utilitarian society are they do feel insecure. As Jasbir Jain comments:

Gender roles are defined and adopted for reasons of utility and security. That is why women sew buttons and clean floors, cook food and bear children so that they can be useful. (318)

Roots and Shadows, as the title suggests, is a symbolic representation of the dialectical nature of man and woman set against each other in material terms for power struggle. Indu, the female protagonist in the novel, is like a bridge between the 'Roots' and 'Shadows'. When the shadows start surfacing at the death of Akka, it is the roots that start disintegrating. Indu appears as a determined girl and longs for her freedom and independence. She compels to hide her feelings, "as if they were bits of garbage" (RS 41). Indu states:

This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant ... somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant. And lost the ability to be alone. (RS 34) For her marriage is a complete surrender of herself, a 'total surrender' (RS 52), a gate closing all the paths to freedom. In order to maintain domestic harmony she plays the role of an ideal wife but this role-play circumscribes her self-development by expunging her creative potential. Thus, as a married woman she becomes an enduring wife. Michael Foucault, the French Critic rightly notes:

Power relations are dependent upon a number of deftly-designed strategies: most important role of these strategies is the tendency on the part of dominant to ceaselessly refuse to acknowledge the dominated subject's separate identity and ... as related to a larger exploitative pattern perpetuated by patriarchy. (Foucault 125)

The protagonist Saru, in **The Dark Holds No Terrors** who had an insecure childhood and despite being professionally successful leads oppressive married life; however ultimately achieves self-realization after a span of contemplation. As a child, Saru in **The Dark Holds No Terrors** was a victim to her mother's sexist and gender-based bias and suffered the bullying and curtailment of activity by a conservative mother who has been taught to rear a girl in a particular fashion. In traditional Indian

society, marriage means only fear, agony and frustration on the girl's side. After marriage Saru and Manu enjoy a harmonious relationship so far as Saru was only his wife. But after she assumes the role of a lady doctor and that he is recognized only as her husband, the equation changes, he becomes a jealous; sexually aggressive husband. Manohar's sense of inferiority change him into a sadist, who gets pleasure by insulting his wife, harassing and, hurting her sexually. She is two persons in one woman, she is a successful doctor during day time and a trapped animal at night. However marriage proves to be no escape. Finding it difficult to cope with the tensions arising out of their professional roles and domestic expectations, the Deshpande women initially seek relief through abandonment of their professional roles. They quit their professions and try to seek peace by confining themselves to their familial roles as homemakers. To Deshpande's women, relinquishing of roles as daughters, wives, mothers, homemakers and also professionals is a very painful process.

Deshpande portrays a picture of Indian woman who is sensible, educated, attached to her roots, economically independent and yet who is different from her past image as a 'full- time home- maker', 'an angel at home', 'an evil counterfeit' and 'a weak vessel'. The degree of self-reliance achieved by these professional women is limited and the patriarchal society interprets their self-sufficiency as deviance from their femininity. Krishna Chakraborty in her book **The Conflicting Worlds of Working Mothers** records the dilemma of a working woman, which is created by the contradiction between their occupational pursuits and domestic obligations. "There is an unconscious fear among all including women themselves, that to alter the traditional arrangement might change or even destroy the family and femininity" (20). Malashri Lal in her **The Law of the Threshold**, locates her feminist theorising in significations of "home" and "not home". She applies 'Indrocentric approach' and argues that traditionally "men pass over threshold unchallenged". Whereas "for women, a step over the bar is an act of transgression" (Malashri 12). Deshpande's Saru, Indu and Jaya are examples of women who make complex negotiations in the space on and around the threshold.

That Long Silence is apparently different from the other novels as far the theme is concerned but the motif remains the same. The novelist projecting a character who hails from a conservative, middle- class family background. Jaya is in no way different from that of the other female characters of Deshpande in regard to her critique of her

relationship with her husband, with her mother, brother, the society and her strong resentment against the social taboos. Mohan, her husband, is full of praise for his mother who silently bore all humiliations heaped upon her by his father but Jaya has a different interpretation for this. She sees the silence in Mohan's mother 'a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon' (TLS 36). Jaya too tries to fall into the same pattern by suppressing her own wishes and act according to her husband's intentions. She follows him so closely that finally she is left with no identity of her own, 'just emptiness and silence' (TLS 144). She is up in arms against the traditional notion of an ideal marriage. She violently projects her resistance to such a tradition:

If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly I didn't want to know anything. (TLS 61)

Thus Deshpande's novels demonstrate that the familial and cultural notions which seem to render the strength and assurance to the family life themselves become the source of destabilization. The social and cultural code embedded within domesticity which is predominantly patriarchal in nature apparently expects a conventional man-woman relationship. Situated within such familial and cultural context which is dominantly patriarchal in nature tend to provide the males with greater access to power and space than the females. The females are considered as inferior compared to the males and hence expects women to lead a life of acquiescence remaining confined within the enclosure of the domestic sphere. Deshpande through her novels reveals that this space which seeks to provide security to the females on the contrary is a gender retreat. However, Deshpande's women though sensitive of the prejudices but positioned within the familial context she depicts their inability to make it public for the sake of family honor. Hence, the notion of woman's struggle for equality is deeply entrenched in the situatedness of the woman within the social and cultural paradigms of family and familial relationship. Deshpande, however, objects to this kind of limitation inflicted upon the woman and provides her protagonists other options in life apart from a career in wifehood and motherhood which has enabled them to live their lives in their own terms and towards the end they learn to face their crisis with a brave heart waiting for a resolution.

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