
A THEMATIC STUDY OF SELECTIVE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AGONY OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the eminent contemporary women writers, in Indian writing in English. Her protagonists find themselves entrapped in the roles assigned to them by society, but achieve self-identity and independence within the confines of their marriage. The present study, based on the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande deals with the complexities of man woman relationship especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of disturbed **adolescence with reference to four novels of Shashi Deshpande namely** *That Dark Holds No Terrors*(1980), *The Binding Vine* (2002), *That Long Silence* (1989), *A Matter Of Time* (2001). She depicts what happen to men and women in and after marriage, what they have been, what they have become and what is in store for them. The changes in status of men and women after marriage and the changing nature of marital relationships are presented in these four novels. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Shashi Deshpande's novels also show how carefully she expresses the frustration and disappointment of women which they experience in their marital relationship. It suggests concerted efforts by men and women towards creating a mature and balanced gender relationship.

Keywords: Entrapped, Assigned, Self identity, Confines, Complexities, Context, Disturbed, Expose, Tradition, Subservient, Concerted.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, her debut novel published in the year 1980, analyzes the complex relationship between a successful doctor Sarita (Saru) and her professionally frustrated and irritated husband Manohar (Manu). A simple storyline but with a complex theme brings out the strong emotions of Saru. The patriarchal belief in claiming the male child as a precious one is enforced in the novel. The accidental death of her brother by drowning makes her develop a sense of guilt throughout her life. Her mother puts the blame on her as though she is responsible for her brother's death. Saru's choice of education and life partner Manu shows her revolt against her mother. Her success as a famous lady doctor instills a sense of pride in her husband initially but causes a sense of humiliation in him later. Saru is subjected to marital rape as an outlet for her husband's hurt ego. Manohar uses rape as a weapon to rein in his wife and show her, her rightful place within marriage.

She says that “He attacked me like an animal at night I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this man..... this man hurting me with his hands, his teeth, and his whole body (Dark, 201).” Now love and romance were only illusions, she feels that the code of the present age is sex. Fulfillment and happiness come out through love alone but sex and for me sex was a dirty word.

Manohar thinks very little about the consequence of his actions as he is gravely affected by his hurt male ego and as a result, he jeopardizes his marriage and his life. The funny thing is that Manu does not mind enjoying the luxurious lifestyle bought with Saru's money. But he minds Saru's professional success. So Saru is put in a dilemma. Her advice to the young unmarried girls to be cautious in choosing a husband is a testimony to her frustrated, disappointed married life. She warns:

“A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage (Dark, 137).”

Deshpande has brought to the fore the issue of marital rape which is often not discussed in public and which does not necessarily amount to violence under the law because it is the husband who the perpetrator. Women have been living in pain and silence for ages as victims of male dominance and sexual violence. Male sexuality is regarded as a symbol of power and strength whereas female sexuality is considered passive and something to be ashamed of.

The novel focuses on the trauma faced by a modern woman who has a traditional upbringing. She shows herself as an independent and a modern woman in her outward appearances but in her psyche she is timid and does not know how to solve her domestic problems. She understands that she cannot run away from her responsibilities both at domestic and societal levels and so decides to reunite with her husband and to re-establish her relationship with him.

The Binding Vine (1993) is about surviving amidst odds and ends. Urmila in *The Binding Vine* calls arranged marriage an absolutely cold-blooded affair because in such a marriage the girl's feelings are ignored and she suffers and remains vanquished throughout her life. Here Kalyani's marital life is also a miserable one and she is neglected by Shripati. A woman pines for love and understanding in marriage. Instead, she is made to suffer of fear. For a woman the worst kind of a trauma is rape under the shelter of marriage. The novel touches upon many other issues that simmer below the surface – dynamics in marriage, filial relations, marital bond etc. The novel questions the role of the chauvinistic husband in a male dominated society. It deals with the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmi and focuses attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira. Urmi narrates the pathetic tale of her mother-in-law Mira, who is a victim of marital rape. Mira's poems in her solitude were posthumously

translated and published by Urmi. It is through the narration of Urmi that the tale of Shakutai, a woman deserted by her husband for another woman gets its impact. A mother's paranoiac anxiety in protecting her daughters from sexual assault is the significant theme in the novel.

THAT LONG SILENCE

"I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence" (143).

These lines reveal the oppressive, debilitating life situation of a house wife, who journeys from ignorance to knowledge, through suffering.

Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* has received the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1990. The theme of marriage holds a great fascination for Deshpande. In most of the cases, marriage culminates in a travesty of faith man and women seek in each other, leading to suffering and the conflict between traditional limitations and modern aspirations. In the present novel, Deshpande critically analyses the institution of marriage in the modern context.

The author has portrayed the explicit gender discrimination in a man-woman relationship that is socially constructed and further worsened by our own people like parents, in-laws, relatives and neighbors. The author has dealt with the female psychic frustrations in the novel and the silence rooted in the complicated web of relationships between a man and a woman.

Set in a typical Indian background, *That Long Silence* brings forth an eerie tale of the protagonist Jaya an educated middle class girl, Jaya, who finds herself restricted in her married life.

She is presented in relation to tradition and the different relationships she enters into, with a family. She has depicted the experience of Jaya in different roles-as a dutiful wife (of Mohan), as an affectionate mother (of Rahul and Rati) or even as a professional writer (who has given up on genuine writings). She is shattered and feels subjugated with her marriage and life yet she remains silent because a girl is always trained to be silent since her young years in an Indian social set up. The silence between Jaya 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. Through this simple story of Jaya, Deshpande has raised many issues related to matrimony, and questioned the concepts of love and marriage. This is what S.P. Swain means when he says: "A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it [*That Long Silence*] portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years."¹⁰

Deshpande depicts two different pictures of Indian women at two parallel levels in the novel –the lower class women engaged in menial domestic chores to earn their living; and middle class women of some financial independence. She further divides middle class women into two categories: those who never question their marriage and submit to insult, injuries and humiliation without any complaint; and those who, refusing to become the victim of trends, raise voice against their oppression. Jaya, the protagonist, belongs to the second category of middle class women. In the beginning, she is not different from other women of her class, but towards the end, we notice a great change in her personality. Deshpande brings out the similarities and differences among Jaya and other female characters in the novel –among women of different generations (Jaya, her mother and her grandmother), among women of the different classes (Jaya, Nayana and Jeeja), among women of the same class and generation (Jaya, her cousin, Kusum and her neighbour, Mukta).

The condition of women from lower class, as presented by Deshpande, is really pitiable. Their suffering starts much before their marriage. They start adding to the family income at a tender age, the way Jeeja's granddaughter, Manda, does. They continue working and earning all their life. They are married off at the age considered suitable by their parents, to any boy who has one head, two eyes, two ears, two hands and two legs like any man. Marriage does not bring any positive change in their lives, but it brings with it endless pain, suffering and burden. They have to work to earn bread for the family, as in most cases husbands fail to earn, and become targets of their husband's ill-treatment.

The lives of Jeeja and Nayana, housemaids of Jaya, are like a hell. Their life is a continuous drudgery. They both receive very bad treatment at the hands of their husbands. Nayana has an apathetic attitude to life. She wants a son not because she expects any help from him in her old age, but because she does not want her child, her daughter, to suffer at some drunkard's hands as she herself has suffered. Nayana says to Jaya, "Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me ... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets ... and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son (p.28)."

Jeeja's husband is also a drunkard like Nayana's and often beats her. The burden of the whole household is on her shoulders, yet she never complains. She accepts his second marriage as perfectly justified because she fails to give him any child. She has only one question: "With whom shall I be angry" (p. 52). Tara's life is another example of the suffering and the marital problems of the lower class woman. Her husband, Rajaram, is a drunkard and he treats her very badly. He even beats up Tara when she refuses to give him her earning. Frustrated by such a miserable married life, she curses her husband and says: "So many drunkards die ... but this one won't. He'll torture us all to death instead" (p. 53) Jeeja shuts her up

saying that husband is a symbol of social prestige because he “keeps the Kumkum” on her forehead, and “what is a woman without that” (p. 53)?

The situation of women belonging to middle class is different. Work outside the house, for them, in most of the cases, is not a compulsion but a matter of choice. They receive much better treatment as compared to lower class women. But the idea that marriages is the only career and husband the only destiny for a woman does not lose ground here also. They also become victims of trends, but their suffering is more mental than physical.

Middle class girls get good education and caring atmosphere in family, but they are also conditioned to mould themselves to suit the requirements of their future life partner. From early girlhood, a girl is conditioned in a certain way by the society so that she can be a good wife in future. She is taught to merge her identity in that of her husband. In childhood, Jaya used to be of witty and inquisitive nature which made her grandmother say, “Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that” (p. 27)? Jaya is thus conditioned towards the comforts of her future life-partner. At the time of Jaya's marriage, Ramukaka tells her that the happiness of her husband and home depends on her. Dada advised her to be good to Mohan. And Vanitamami tells her about the importance of being with a husband: “Remember, Jaya ... a husband is like a sheltering tree Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable” (p. 32). These words keep on echoing in the ears of Jaya and she realizes that since a husband is like “a sheltering tree,” he must be nourished and nurtured adequately even if the wife has to suffer to give it nourishment.

After her marriage, Jaya, who used to consider herself independent and intelligent, shapes herself to suit her husband's model of a wife. She gets transformed into “stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (p. 76). Apparently she has all the material comforts and is almost satisfied. But she has to compromise and suppress many aspects of her individuality for this. In order to become an ideal wife and mother, she devotes herself to the comforts of her husband and to the maintenance of the house. In this process, she feels that she has no identity, no status of her own. When the editor of a magazine asks her to give them her bio-data, she feels that she has nothing meaningful in her life. She thinks of only irrelevant facts: “I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third one live” (p. 2).

In fact, Jaya keeps on changing herself according to her husband's likes and dislikes. As a result of this, her individuality gets annihilated. Now whatever she practices or whatever she follows is dictated by only one consideration and that is, what her husband will think of it. In order to please her husband, she even transforms her appearance. She gets her hair cut and wears dark glasses. After marriage, Mohan renames Jaya as Suhasini. The name „Jaya“

means „Victory“ and „Suhasini“ means “a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped” (p. 15-16). Slowly and painfully, she learns what is expected of her. She learns how sharply defined a woman’s role is. A wife should not be angry with her husband because that undoes his position of authority. She knows very well that to survive within marriage, one has to learn many tricks, and silence is one of these tricks. Therefore, she silences her emotions as well as her physical desires.

A woman is often given no right to express her physical desires. She has to submit to the desires of her husband. Jaya also follows the same tradition which results in frustration in her marital life. She pines for emotional communication between her and her husband. But she finds in her relationship with Mohan nothing except emptiness and the suppressed silence as she tells Mukta: “... nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us” (p. 185). She realizes that despite seventeen years of married life, they have not become one, only their bodies occasionally meet, not their souls. Jaya, like Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, subdues her independent spirit to the expectations of her husband. She describes her relationship with Mohan as a mechanical and forced relationship: “A pair of bullocks yoked together A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children.

A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman” (p. 8). But this image of the animals performing their duties mechanically undermines the husband-wife relationship. Marriage is expected to bring joy, glory and fulfilment to both man and woman. But in most cases, as we see in the novel, marriage fails to give the promised happiness to the individuals, especially to the woman.

According to Indian tradition, a wife is expected to stay at home, look after the babies and keep out the rest of the world. She is expected to have the qualities prescribed in Indian tradition:

Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi,
Rupeeha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitrii,
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayanetu Rambha,
Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni.

(Like a slave while serving; a minister while counseling; Goddess Lakshmi in her looks; the earth in forbearance; a mother while feeding; as wife like Rambha, the celestial prostitute; these six are the true characteristics of an ideal wife.)¹¹ But Jaya resents the role assigned to a wife in our country. To Jaya, married life becomes unbearable and monotonous. She gets frustrated and says: “Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging

pattern, the unending monotony” (p. 4). Marriage stifles the growth and right to free expression of a wife. A woman’s role and contribution to the society is defined in terms of her role as a wife, daughter, sister or mother. Commenting on her married life, Jaya says that waiting is a part of her existence: “But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws” home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait” (p. 30).

Because of the emptiness in her marriage, Jaya is drawn towards Kamat, a middle-aged intellectual. He treats Jaya as an equal and Jaya gives expression to her real self in Kamat’s Company. But there is no physical relation between the two. In society, a married woman cannot be seen as a friend of another. The friendship between Jaya and Kamat suffers due to this reason. People, including her friends and neighbors like Mukta, do not approve their relationship. One day when Jaya finds Kamat lying dead on the floor, she silently leaves the place because of the fear of social disgrace.

Moreover, Jaya has to stifle her creative urges to save her career as a wife. Mohan objects to her creative writing because he finds that her themes reflected the autobiographical details. In order to avoid conflict in her marriage, Jaya gives up creative writing. Then she starts writing middles in newspapers which cause no trouble to her husband, which do not hurt him as Jaya says: “I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared –scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage”(p. 144)

Mohan is a traditionalist who wants Jaya to conform to his expectations. He wishes his wife to be modern and educated, but also expects her to have traditional qualities like submissiveness and flexibility. As a husband, Mohan never tries to understand his wife, her emotions and her psychological needs. On the other hand, Jaya annihilates the creative aspect of her personality to keep Mohan happy. She devotes herself to the care and fulfillment of her husband’s and her children’s needs. Thus, obedience and loyalty, which are considered to be the virtues of Hindu womanhood, degenerates into silent bearing of oppression. A woman is even expected not to be angry or revolting as stated in the novel: “A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There’s ... no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine” (pp. 147-148).

Marriage not only hinders Jaya’s intellectual growth, but also undermines her sense of self. Mohan gives meaning to her existence. Her status as a wife, as mother, as a housewife owes itself to Mohan. She is aware that Mohan is her profession, her career and her means of livelihood. But this also denies her place as an individual. This realization that she has no existence as Jaya but only as a complement of Mohan becomes more acute when Dr. S.K.

Vyas, her brother's classmate, invites her to his house with Mohan: "And drop in some time— with your husband, of course. „With your husband, of course“ –what did he mean by that? Was it impossible for me to relate to the world without Mohan? A husband is like a sheltering tree ... Vanitamami, did you, without knowing it, speak the most profound truth I'm destined to heart in my life" (p. 167)?

A woman is subordinated in a number of ways and this result in disharmony between the two sexes. A husband denies his wife the right of her individuality. He wants her to see the world around her only in the way he would like her to see. He expects complete devotion, complete allegiance to his vision of life from his wife. This is what Mohan wants from Jaya when he is charged with corrupt activities. He seeks emotional support from Jaya. Having failed to get any sympathy from Jaya, Mohan leaves the house. This proves to be a traumatic experience for Jaya. Like any other traditional Indian wife, Jaya cannot bear Mohan's absence. Even the thought of his death horrifies her: "The thought of living without him had twisted my insides. His death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks" (pp. 96-97).

After Mohan's departure, she feels that she is secure only with Mohan and has no face to show, no identity without him. It awakens her to her real place in life. Under these frustrating circumstances, Jaya gets terribly disturbed and starts questioning herself. She rethinks over her marital relationship. She realizes that she is not only Mohan's wife, rather she is an individual having her own distinct identity as she states: "I'm not afraid any more. 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 a fragmentation is not possible" (p. 191). She hopes to be on equal terms with Mohan, and at the same time, accepts the established norms and values.

Now Jaya comes to know that the reason of her depressing condition is not the society alone, but she has to take the responsibility of her own state and work according to it. The idea of marriage as "two bullocks yoked together" is rejected by her. Understanding that life cannot be lived in vacuum, she no longer looks at Mohan and herself as two bullocks, rather as two individual with independent minds. She realizes that meaningful co-existence can be achieved only through understanding and compassion, not through domination, subjugation or rejection. Sarala Parker beautifully sums up the idea when she says: "The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves."¹²

Jaya makes her choice by refusing to become a victim of trends and is determined to break her long silence which has plagued her family since long. But there are other women who,

like Jaya, belong to the middle class, but unlike her, suffer silently without protest taking the suffering to be their fate. The figures of Vanitamami, Kusum, Mukta, Mohan's Mother and Mohan's sister, Vimala can be quoted as examples.

Vanitamami, "who had never known what it was to choose" (p. 45), represents another facet of the traditionally suppressed woman. After her marriage, her life was ruled by her mother-in-law. As a daughter-in-law, her role has remained submissive and she is allowed no participation in decision making. The interest she takes in Kusum is the only protest she can register successfully. Kusum is also a victim figure. Passive surrender and insecurity which have been her lot in her mother's home pursue her in the new family after marriage. Kusum becomes insane as she has internalized all her anger. She becomes a burden on her family. Finally, she commits suicide. Mukta, Jaya's neighbor, works under financial compulsions. She is a widow caring for her old mother-in-law and teenage daughter, Neelima. She is independent and capable of holding against strange situations, yet she is unable to overcome superstitions. But she wants her daughter to be free from them. She has accepted ill-treatment at the hands of her husband, as she could not have a son. In is the height of irony that if a woman fails to give a male inheritor to her husband, all the blame is put on her.

Women are the victims of generations of conditioning in which a woman is unchangeably suppressed. The husband is traditionally given the role of mentor and guide. To serve one's husband is considered to serve God. The slightest sign of independence on her part is not acceptable to him. Mohan's father, for example, is shown as dominant and authoritative figure embodying the patriarchal attitudes. He wants fresh food to be served when he returns home. Mohan's mother's failure to provide fresh chutney late one night drives him to wild fury. He picks up the plate and throws it. Mohan's mother picks up the plate, cleans the wall and sends her son next door to borrow some chilies. Patiently, she prepares fresh chutney, lights the fire, cooks the meal again and sits down to wait which is an important part of a woman's life, not of man's. Talking about women being treated cruelly by their husbands, Mohan says that this tolerance of violence is the strength of women. But Jaya thinks differently as she says: "He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (p. 36).

The chains of traditional marriage are heavy. In the absence of any other alternative, wives often seek consolation in obsession or mental slavery leading to physical decay, disease and death. This unacknowledged martyrdom becomes an essential part of a housewife's existence. She is expected to subordinate her own needs to those of her family. She is supposed to bear her exploitation and suffering silently as her fate. Mohan's mother and his sister, Vimala, both suffer throughout their lives. But they never utter a single word of protest. Finally, they die in silent agony without getting any help from their in-laws.

No doubt, some generation-wise changes are seen in the attitude of man towards marriage and towards woman also, but basically man remains a patriarchal figure, exercising his authority. These generation-wise changes are not limited to man only, but are also seen in the case of women. In the novel, women belonging to the older generation like Aiji, Mohan's mother and Vanitamani endure the tyranny and injustice of male-dominated society as a natural way of life. They are depicted as docile and subdued figures following the tradition as a virtue. These uneducated women, though victim of male chauvinism, adapt themselves to the tradition completely. But the protagonist, being educated and awakened, fails to conform to the views of the women belonging to the older generation. She feels angry when these women ask her to conform to tradition. The main reasons of difference in the attitudes of these women are the generation gap and education.

Deshpande shows the influence of mother on daughter and of father on son in spite of the generation gap between them. Vimala, Mohan's sister, follows her mother in suffering silently as Jaya says: "I can see something in common between them, something that links the destinies of the two ... the silence in which they died" (p. 39). Mohan, like her father, holds that a wife is a docile animal who can never be angry. When Jaya talks to him in a daring tone, he retorts, "How could you? I never thought my wife could say such things to me. You're my wife.... My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her" (pp.82-83).

In fact, Mohan had seen his mother obeying his father and bearing the insults silently. But Jaya is brought up somewhat differently by his father, we can say, in an unconventional manner. This disparity in background is also a reason of lack of understanding and clash of expectations between them. But Jaya has to adapt herself to the expectations of Mohan. In India, a girl is married not only to a man, but also to his family traditions. She has to adapt herself according to his husband's family rituals and traditions without any complaint. Jeeja's husband and her son, Rajaram, represent the male domination in lower class. The son follows the father in drinking and beating his wife. They demonstrate their manhood by being violent to their wives.

She finds herself trapped in the roles assigned by the male-dominated society and wants to liberate herself from a life where everyone considers her worthless. She wants to unfetter the bonds of unsuccessful marriage in which she has lost everything and become miserable. She is very much disappointed with the suffocating happenings for these many years and finds no other way but silence as her means of communication. But now, she revolts against the stifling traditions of the Indian society and attempts to break the seventeen year long silence. She leaves behind the frightening feeling of suppression and oppression.

Shashi Deshpande has presented a drastic transformation in the protagonist's personality where she realizes that she herself is responsible for her victimization. Initially a nervous and dutiful wife, Jaya emerges as an individual full of confidence and learns to live for herself. She refuses to dance on her husband's tunes and eventually feels emancipated.

In a nut shell, the author has beautifully presented the subtle nuances of the struggles of women trapped in married relationships. Feeling liberated and composed, Jaya moves ahead in her married life with a new zeal.

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