

Study of Female Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande has been one of the strong supporters of women literature in the post-modern literary field. The present article is a brief study of the female protagonists in Deshpande's selected novels *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *That Long Silence*. The two protagonists of the novel, Sarita and Jaya are the forefront of the feminine protest. The problems, trials and tribulations of the middle-class Indian women, especially who are educated and have chosen a career for themselves is portrayed. The selected novels are similar to one another at the thematic level. The aim of the article is to study about the psychological trauma faced by the female protagonists and their quest for self-exploration and self-identity, which would inspire the other common Indian women to attain their own.

Keywords: Women suppression, psychological trauma, Male chauvinism, self-identity, self-realization

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande, one of the renowned women novelists in Indian English literature, is known for creating contemporary Indian women characters, especially based on feminine suffering and the fundamental reality of woman's life. Shashi Deshpande creates characters that take her readers through the spectrum of urban society, but her interest comes to center on the well-educated women who fight for their freedom in their own place and in the society. Shashi Deshpande's novels are chiefly concerned with woman's quest for self, an understanding into the female psyche and their struggle in the contemporary Indian society. Shashi Deshpande began her writing career with short stories and later on developed into novel writing and has written eight novels. In an interview with Gita Viswanath, Shashi Deshpande reiterates that she is not a feminist, enhanced in her words, "I do not write as a feminist novelist, but my ideology is going to permeate my writing; and my feelings, thoughts and ideas about

women are very important parts of my ideology.”

Shashi Deshpande's masterpiece, her second novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* published in 1980 narrates the agonizing experience of the protagonist Sarita, known as Saru, who experiences a great economic and social status than her husband Manohar. The trauma of being the victim of her husband's frustration which manifests in the form of sexual sadism is clearly portrayed. Being denied from parental love, Saru undergoes an arduous journey in liberating herself from humiliation, she finds herself.

That Long Silence published in 1988 is her most autobiographical one, which won the Sahitya Academy award in 1990, tells the story of an Indian housewife who is suffering from identity crisis, maintains silence throughout her life. The novel revolves around the protagonist Jaya, who belongs to the urban, educated middle class, acts accordingly to her husband's wishes and suppresses her own wishes. Shashi Deshpande announces that the intention of the writer is to break the long silence that has surrounded women.

Both the protagonists are merely similar in the aspect of undergoing distress, inspite of being educated. This study analyses the psychological trauma faced by them and their search for self-identity.

Psychological Trauma

The trauma of being an unloved and unwanted child is an important issue to describe the psyche of women. In the light of feminism and psychological struggles of women, the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* is a powerful portrayal of a woman's fight to survive in the world. Saru undergoes psychological trauma right from her childhood, where her mother treats her as an extra baggage in the family and shows gender discrimination, which is the most prominent issue in India, and she's been made to experience a sense of guilt that she is the one responsible for her brother's death, which is enhanced by her mother's words, "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?" (34) drives Saru to hate her mother. Marriage in the Indian society is considered as a sacred bond for women that even the educated women become submissive to their husbands, like Saru falls as a victim to her husband, Manohar. As Saru grew in social respect and becomes the main economic support of the family, Male-egoism plays a role where she suffers silently as a trapped animal in the hands of her husband and experiences disillusionment in sex and seeks freedom not only intellectually but sexually too.

The real strength of Sarita is her self evaluation and realisation of her guilt and actively engages to trace out her identity as an independent being. This self analysis purifies her mind and helps her to take clear cut decisions during times of struggle. Saru gets medical education even in the teeth of opposition, marries outside the cast and does what an educated woman can do. So, the dark holds no terror for her. The trauma faced by Saru in the novel can be ascribed to any woman in the society.

The title of the novel *That Long Silence* is allegorical and represents the silence, which has been the fate of Indian women. Shashi Deshpande got accomplished through representation of her real life experience in the novel, depicting the story of Jaya, who becomes a victim in the existing patriarchal society. Even from her childhood, Jaya had designed her life according to her family members. She is roaming between two personalities -Jaya, which means victory, name given by her father and Suhasini, a name given by her husband which means “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (16) The former symbolizes revolt and the later submission, where the male chauvinism is explicit. Women are forced to accept the patriarchal system and Jaya becomes the victim of this orthodox structure, where she had no rights to take her own decisions, instead had to wait for her husband Mohan to chart her course of life. Perhaps these could be the reasons which made Jaya affect psychologically and take silence as her only means of communication. Shashi Deshpande uses the metaphor “A pair of bullocks yoked together” (7) through the voice of Jaya, to convey the idea that marriage in India is forcible and the wife is bound to her husband. Under the provoking conditions, Jaya gets distressed and starts inquiring her inner self.

After her self-realization, Jaya breaks her seventeen years long silence and her struggle to regain her freedom, to live life on her own terms is her attempt to establish her rears self. In spite of Mohan’s disapproval, she keeps writing and is able to regain her sanity. Jaya’s life is comparable to Shashi Deshpande, which is enhanced in her own words,

There was ... the feeling that after becoming a wife and mother, my intellectual self, which had been so important a part of me until then, was being suppressed, that it was being discounted, not valued. And this dormant self was becoming restive, it wanted a release. Maybe it was out of the conflict between this 'female self' and the intellectual self that self-expression began. (Deshpande)

Conclusion

G. S. Amur praises Deshpande saying that “Women’s writings can be seen at its best in Shashi Deshpande’s fiction.” Shashi Deshpande takes up the study of the issues of the middle class Indian women. Being an Indian writer Deshpande depicts the life of Indian women from different angles and the main concerns in her novels are inner conflict and quest for their own self. The protagonists of the novels are not brave heroines but women who struggle to find their own voice. Shashi Deshpande has projected Indian women in this aspect as she belonged to this category, born, brought up and educated and as a writer in India itself. The novelist uses silence as a powerful weapon to highlight the sufferings of the characters, and also the silence maintained by Indian women speaks in many voices. The novels are written with a vision to empower the women potentialities and put forward her feminine ideologies that women shouldn’t be the victims of male dominance. The selected novels are concerned with the psyche of women and so instead of analysing the novels only in the light of feminism, it can be viewed from the psychological perspective also. Thus, Shashi Deshpande wants all the young girls and women in the society to fight for equal partnership with men and to self-identify them.

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