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Shashi Deshpande's Female Characters: The Rebels of Patriarchy

Abstract: Shashi Deshpande (1938) is a feminist writer with a strong zeal to uproot the patriarchal norms and values prevalent in the contemporary Indian society. So in her novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1989), and *The Binding Vine* (2002), she has demonstrated issues and problems faced by the middle class and the lower class women in the contemporary society. Through her novels and characters Deshpande has created a strong inspiration for women to raise voice against the violence on them. Her female characters are nonconformist ones who do not mutely accept the traditional practices of patriarchy. They are seen to rebel in different ways against gender violence that often deprives them of their freedom and self identity in the society.

Key Words: Gender, Violence, Discrimination, Women Empowerment, Self-identity.

In Indian patriarchal set up, a woman's duty and identity are defined and fixed by the patriarchal norms and values. This phenomenon is very deep-rooted in the middle and the lower

stratum of the society .Women's needs and importance are still largely neglected here. A girl child faces discrimination from her birth. In most cases, girl children are not given equal importance as the male ones, and are provided with little opportunities in every sphere of life. The middle class and the lower class family are still plagued by the inequalities in education, malnutrition, medical care, honour, and premature marriage. More than sixty years have passed since independence, but women are still seen to sacrifice their happiness due to the biased beliefs of the patriarchy. It is only because Indian society is still prejudiced with the deep rooted, age old gender discrimination.

Girls are trained to perform household works and have to help their mother. Their dream of higher education is a day dream to them. Their parents think it is more important for girls to master the traditional duties like washing, cooking, serving, and decorating house; their happiness lies in serving husbands, in-laws, and nurturing children. Therefore, it is not necessary for the middle class girls to go for higher education and professions. In many cases, grown up girls have to nurture their younger siblings. The reason behind this discrimination is the preference of male child. Parents think that son will carry on family lineage. Moreover, he brings dowry in marriage. In the Hindu family, it is believed that a son is qualified to give *agni* to his dead parents, without which the soul of the dead person will wander in ferment. On the other hand a girl is considered to be a liability in the family. For, her marriage demands a handsome dowry. Thus she is a burden in the family. So her parents do not show much interest in her higher education because she is a *paraya dhan* (someone else's wealth) to them. So, often a girl has to remain content with her school education only.

Most of the parents in the middle class and the lower class family, marry their daughters off just after or even before they are eighteen. Because more the girl grows older, more the

higher becomes the dowry demand from the groom side. Besides, when a girl becomes mature, the parents are always concerned about her security. So they prefer to marry her off as soon as she becomes mature. But the early marriage becomes a barrier to girls' education. When a girl is married at eighteen, development of her mind and body remains incomplete. Most of the middle class housewives education is limited to the higher secondary level only. Their dream of higher education comes to an end at marriage. But the early motherhood and the burden of housework shatter their dreams. It is seen that majority of the married women are compelled to have first child within two years of marriage. In some cases, early motherhood often brings complications and maternal death. Lack of higher education deprives them of the productive employment opportunities. So they have to remain content with the unpaid household works. In many cases, girls are made to perform heavy domestic works and they maintain both study and other domestic responsibilities. As a result, their scholastic performance becomes very poor. Thus the girls in the middle class family are deprived of their right to proper and higher education.

In most cases, girls are advised to follow the ideals of the mythological women like Sita, Savitri, and Parvati who are held in high esteem as the complete feminine virtues for their loyalty and devotion to their husbands, as seen in the Indian mythologies. Sita mutely followed her husband (Ram) in exile as she thought she was his shadow and her identity and security depended on him. Savitri was very obedient and dutiful towards her husband and father-in-law. She willingly followed her husband (Satyavan) to the forest where he was to die. And Parvati, the wife of the Hindu god Shiva, was known for fertility, love and devotion. These women were also known for their beauties. Moreover, a girl in Hindu family is treated as Laxmi (the Hindu goddess of wealth and fertility) in the family, like a Victorian woman who was treated as the angel in the house.

Shashi Deshpande touches upon all these issues in her novels. She has severely criticized the set dogmas and traditions of patriarchy, through her protagonists. To establish their own identity, women are to rebel against the patriarchy. In the middle class family, fathers, brothers, husbands, and sometimes even mothers and other dominating women themselves apply the principles of patriarchy. Women in our society are still the victims of the deep rooted dogma of gender bias. They suffer the social inequality and injustice as daughter and wife. Deshpande's characters are typical Indian women in search of their long lost identity. They realize the importance of their individuality and resolve to break the age old patriarchal tradition of male domination. So they rebel against the patriarchal set up.

Saru, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, struggled against the patriarchal set up to create her self-identity as a doctor. But though she ultimately achieved her goal, she was compelled to give up her medical profession to save her wifhood. She suffered gender discrimination within her family and outside it since her childhood. Deshpande begins the novel with Saru's return to her paternal home after a gap of fifteen years. There she took shelter as a refugee as she was unable to bear with husband's sadistic behavior towards her. At her father's home, she recollected and reviewed her relationship with her mother, brother, her friends, her husband, her children and her neighbors. She remembered how she and her brother, Dhruva, were treated differently in the family, especially by their mother (Kamala):

[T]here was always a puja on Dhruva's birthday. A festive lunch in the afternoon and an *arati* in the evening during which Dhruva, as an infant, sat solemnly on Baba's lap, and as a child, by his side, cap on his head, fatuous smile on face, while I helped my mother to do *arati*. (168)

Though Saru's birthdays were almost the same, but there was no puja on the occasion. After Dhruva's demise, there was no more birthday celebration for Saru. As she remembers, "My birthday was passed over in silence, both at home and at school"(169). Due to her parents' discriminatory attitude to her, Saru sometimes felt like an unwanted and unloved child. Once, her mother informed her that Saru's birthday was an inauspicious occasion: "It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible"(169). On the other hand, Saru's father used to take out Dhruva on bike with him, but never Saru. She laments, "[He] took him out on the bike with him, Dhruva perched in front of him on the small seat specially fixed there on the bar. The reserved was perhaps of an old-fashioned attitude that daughters are mother's business. But my mother had nothing for me, either. Whose business was I then?" (105).The only occasion on which she became important was during *haldi-kumkum* ceremony held in every year at home. On those days she could apply *attar* with tiny attar-drenched swabs of cotton to the backs of women's hand.

Saru spent her school days in restriction. Her parents did not allow her to bring friends to their home: "I rarely brought my friends home, rarely went out with them after school. Whenever I did so, there was always a scene. I felt full of sullen hatred I could not find words to express adequately. I kept silent and that enraged her even more" (170). Even she could not accept gifts from her friends as her mother was against accepting them from others. She remembers that once her friend Smita gave her a pair of earrings as a present on her birthday, but she could not wear them because of her mother's restriction. As she said, "I wore them[earrings] secretly, and only when I was away from home, knowing, somehow, the earrings would not be approved of. All gifts were suspect and frowned upon" (169).

Like Saru, Madhav's sister Mrinal, too was the victim of gender bias. Madhav was allowed to pursue the higher education, but his sister got the opportunity of school education only. She got water, looked after the kids and helped her mother. She had developed a romantic idea that she could get freedom only through marriage. So she was prepared to marry anyone who would take her away from her family. Mrinal loved to read stories in magazines and books and she dreamt of love. She often thought that it would happen to her too, and thus she would get rid of the parents. But her father was looking out for a bridegroom for her and never thought of consulting or asking her what she really wanted. Madhav was free to take his own decisions about his future. Though his father wanted him to become a priest like him, he had resolved to take accountancy. This is the typical scenario of the Indian middle class family where boys can take their own decisions whereas girls never have these kinds of freedom.

Shashi Deshpande criticises the preference of male child in the contemporary society, which is the main factor in establishing gender discrimination in the society. Siddhartha Sharma in his book *Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Feminist Study* writes, "The preference for boys over girls can be openly witnessed in most Indian homes, and is inextricably linked to the Indian psyche. Sons bring in dowry could be one reason, but the Indian society steeped in tradition and superstition considers the birth of a son as auspicious as he carries on the family lineage" (28). When Saru, learned about her mother's death, she was concerned with the thought of her mother's cremation as her brother, Dhruva, died in his childhood. As she comments, "Who lit the pyre? She had no son to do that for her. Dhruva had been seven when died" (17). As Sarbjit Sandhu comments,

The mother is very attached to her son. Her attitude is a typical one---after all he is male child and therefore one who will propagate the family lineage. In another

sense, also, the male child is considered more important than a girl because he is qualified to give *agni* to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would otherwise wonder in ferment. (19-20)

In *That Long Silence*, Nayana's husband threatened her to throw out if she gave birth to another daughter. Nayana had four children of whom two girls lived and two boys who died soon after their birth. She herself too was craving for a son because she had to suffer much as a woman and did not want the daughter to suffer like her. So when Jaya asked her why she preferred a son, Nayana replied,

Why give birth to a girl, *behnji*, who'll 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. (28)

Sometimes, the preference of a male child creates a sense of despair and depression in the parents and the father begins to neglect the existing female child. Nayana's husband did not help his wife and the daughters. Instead, he was planning to marry another woman to get a son. Nayana could not protest against her husband's plan because she was tired of frequent child bearing. To get rid of the burden of child bearing she surrendered to him. She said, "Take yourself another if you want, roll in the gutters, I can't prevent you . . ." (28). Vanitamami wanted Jaya to take Kusum who already had three daughters, to a lady doctor so that Kusum could have a son.

Moreover, a married woman without a child has no value in the society. Her existence at her in-laws' home is in question and in crisis. Such a woman is ready to follow all means however difficult they may be. Jaya remembered that Vanitamami had developed a habit of fasting in the hope of having children. Jaya described her fasting 'discipline', "[S]he had gone on with her fasts, her rituals circumambulations of the *tulsi* plant, of the *peepul* tree, even when her aim had gone beyond her reach, when her uterus had shriveled and her ovaries atrophied" (67). Vimala, Mohan's sister, was not taken to the hospital by her in-laws when she got sick during her period simply because she could not produce children. Vimala's mother-in-law told Jaya and Mohan,

'God knows what's wrong with her [Vimala]. She's been lying there on her bed for over a month now. Yes, take her away if you want to. I never heard of woman going to hospital and doctors and such a thing. As if other women don't have heavy periods! What a fast! But these women who've never had children are like that'. (39)

Women in Deshpande's novels have exhibited courage to negate the prejudice of an ideal daughter, sister, wife, and mother. They defy the social and familial injustices, patriarchal taboos and the biased beliefs of the contemporary society. They feel a revolutionary zeal to shatter the deep rooted social dogma. A woman is often expected to beget her first child at her parents' home. Deshpande has also brought into this patriarchal tradition of Hindu society. When Manu and Saru started their conjugal life at Shridhar's house, Manu informed her that Shridhar's wife was pregnant and going to her father's home to give birth her first child. Manu stated, "His wife is pregnant, and she's going home to her parents' for her confinement" (37). Saru herself defied this tradition by marrying Manu and resolving never to return her parents.

Women in the middle class are still found to struggle to get permission for higher education and professions. In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Saru's parents' traditional patriarchal notion of women's education and profession became the main barrier for the protagonist's higher education. She laments, "He [Baba] never took any interest in my school or college. He left it on to her [Ai]. And she never really cared" (32). After completing her school education, Saru had to struggle to get permission from her parents to study medicine. But though Baba allowed her full freedom, Ai did not give consent as she thought that a girl of the middle class should not opt for a higher education. As she says, "But she [Saru] is a girl" (144). That is why Saru's mother did not show interest in Saru's higher education and reminded Baba,

"And don't forget, medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? Make yourself a pauper, and will she look after you in your old age? Medicine. Five, six, seven.... God knows how many years. Let her go for a B. Sc...you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over". (144)

Saru criticises the biased notion of patriarchy that everything in a girl's life is shaped to serve that single purpose of pleasing male. The trauma begins when a woman fails to please men. She remembers how her mother forbade her to go out in the sun lest she might become darker:

[Ai] Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.

[Saru] Who cares?

[Ai] We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.

[Saru] I don't want to get married.

[Ai] Will you live with us whole life?

[Saru] Why not?

[Ai] You can't.

[Saru] And Dhruva?

[Ai] He is different. He is a boy. (45)

In her novels, Deshpande conveys the message that the principles of gender discrimination shape the character of men and women and categorize them as masculine and feminine. In the middle class family, women play the major role to perpetuate the notion of discrimination. Most of the mothers, instead of protesting against the gender bias, follow the patriarchal rules to bring up their children. Saru's mother's discriminatory attitude created in Saru a sense of alienation and insecurity in Saru. "Oppressed and submerged, she becomes a stranger to herself because she is a stranger to the rest of the world" (353). She began to nurture hatred for her mother. Her jealousy towards her mother grew so strong that she could not but express it: "I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer" (142). In fact, she defied the traditional codes of patriarchy and expressed her rebellious motive by going to Bombay to study medicine and marrying a man outside to her caste. She married Manu (Manohar) to hurt her mother who was dead against it. Later, she justified herself, "If you hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps I would never have married him" (96).

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande criticises the economic dependency of women. Smita, one of Saru's college friends, has been portrayed as a traditional Indian

women who are economically dependent on their husband. She was seemingly a happy wife and mother economically dependent on her husband. This was clear when she borrowed money to buy gift for her sister-in-law. She told Saru that the former's husband had given her a little money to purchase a gift only for her nephew on his thread ceremony. But Smita never questioned her identity and was happy to live on her husband's income. Smita's economic dependency on her husband is a typical Indian phenomenon. Smita told Saru that she remained busy with housework and the three children the whole day. Even she hardly got a chance to read books. If she tried to read at night, her insatiable husband would not let her to read.

In India, women's surnames, in most cases, are changed after marriage. The wife has to discard the paternal surname and accept that of her husband. Saru questioned and criticized this gender bias which has been a dominating trend in the society. The note of feminism is obvious in her remark: "...this [is the] drastic change of identity changing both the names that identified you so many years...how then do you know yourself, and who you are" (118). In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Smita's name was changed to "Geetanjali" by her husband after marriage. Saru and her college friend Nalu criticized Smita for so easily surrendering to her husband.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya, the narrator protagonist, was dominated throughout by her husband, Mohan. He changed Jaya's name to "Suhasini". Jaya resisted vainly. She stated that her father had given her the name Jaya meaning "victory". So she was not "Suhasini" (15) but only Jaya to herself. In *The Binding Vine*, Mira's name was changed to "Nirmala" by her in-laws with rituals. Urmi, the protagonist, told the tragic story of her long deceased mother-in-law Mira. She narrated how a ceremony was held on the occasion of Mira's name changing. But Mira could never accept the new name. She had always been Mira to herself:

A glittering ring gliding on the rice

Carefully traced a name 'Nirmala'.

Who is this? None but I,

My name hence, bestowed upon.

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. (101)

By presenting this issue of changing Smita's name, Deshpande tries to indicate the fact that a woman's surname is changed after marriage in order to make her subordinate being to her husband. This practice appears quite absurd because wives are not given place in the family tree. So why should they identify themselves with their husbands' surnames? Moreover, they bear children in their wombs, give birth to them and nurture to their youth, but the man who has only a short relation to the child through his sexual relation with his wife, has a greater claim over the child by endowing the surname.

In some cases, women are still excluded from their paternal family trees with regard to the paternal estate. Thus a woman becomes a refuge under the protection of her husband. Jaya is the representative of Indian women protesting against this unfair system of patriarchy. Once, when Jaya visited her father's home, Ramukaka showed her the paternal "family tree" (142) he had prepared. The family tree consisted of all the male members of the family, ranging from

grandfathers to the grandsons. But there was no place for the married women of the family in it, including mothers, daughters, wives, and the daughter-in laws. The hypocrisy of the patriarchy is expressed by Ramukaka when Jaya asked him the reason of being excluded from the family tree. Ramukaka excitedly told her that a married woman did not have any place in her paternal family tree, and also told her that Jaya was a part of Mohan's family and therefore she belonged to there. But Ramukaka himself had excluded the *Kakis* and Ai from his family tree. So Jaya too would not get any place in Mohan's family tree. Like Jaya, Indian women suffer from the identity crisis.

Urmi, the protagonist of *The Binding Vine*, is an image of the rebellious women of the contemporary society. She was a college teacher by profession, and, therefore, naturally achieved her economic freedom, self-reliance, and self-confidence. She lived on her own income and had been successful to establish her identity. She was married to Kishore who worked in navy and most of the time stayed away from her. She was fully aware of the unequal treatment of women in the contemporary society. So, Urmi stirred a zeal in Shakutai (Shakuntala), a working class woman whose daughter Kalpana was raped, to protest against the rapist. It was by Urmi's efforts that the culprit was ultimately found out. Urmi also published the poems of her dead mother-in-law, Mira. Apart from their personal struggles and dilemmas, Deshpande's female protagonists carry within their consciousness the burden of other women's sufferings and a sense of responsibility for them.

Often the women in Deshpande's novels are found to protest against the patriarchal injustices through their writings. They might have realized that writing is one of the means to protest and achieve freedom in the society. Jaya in *That Long Silence* tries to express her long suppressed feelings by writing short stories. One of the short stories bagged her a prize when

published in the magazine. But when Mohan came to know that Jaya's stories were autobiographical, he became angry with her because he was anxious that people would come to know about their personal life. So he complained, "How can you reveal us...our lives to the world in this way" (144)? In fact, as a husband Mohan had not treated well Jaya. So he was afraid of being published as the man of Jaya's story, who could not reach out his wife except through her body. Jaya was compelled to give up her writing as she realized that her writing might pile misery on their family. She stopped writing and receded back to the silence once again. Here Mohan came out to be jealous of his wife's success like Manu in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Jaya tried to establish her self-identity as a writer. But Mohan, instead of encouraging her to carry on writing and appreciating it, killed the promised writer in Jaya.

Women's protest through writing is also seen in *The Binding Vine*. Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law, belonged to a generation before Urmi. She was aware of her identity and realized that her potential went beyond her assigned roles of mother and wife. She was against all social norms negating women's individuality. Mira had been writing poetry since her college days. She dreamt of becoming a poet. But after marriage her dream was shattered like those of the other married women of in the society. She took to creative writing as a means to express the experience of her burdened conjugal life. She used to get up at night stealthily and write poems in a diary, about her sufferings. Thus, through writing she expressed her sufferings and established an individuality and self-identity of her own. But her voice remained silent during her lifetime as her writings could not be published then. It was Urmi who decided to publish her poems posthumously and voiced Mira's poems.

Thus, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Jaya in *That Long Silence*, and Urmi in *The Binding Vine* are the images non-conformist women in the contemporary society who are

conscious of the violence against the female members of the society. All of these characters have, more or less, questioned the patriarchal norms and values that hindered them to establish their recognition and identity. By focusing the contemporary issues and problems of the middle class and the lower class women, Deshpande has echoed the voice of women empowerment in the society. Her characters, caught in the psychological conflict between tradition and modernity, are the rebels of the gender discrimination which is the main obstacle for women to create their identity and space for their self-expression.

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