

Of Silence and Struggle: The Portrayal of the Marginalized Women in the Selected Fiction of Shashi Deshpande

Randeep Kaur¹, Prof. Mahesh Arora¹

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Management and Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering & Technology, (Deemed University), Sangrur (Punjab), India.

²Department of Management and Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering & Technology, (Deemed University, Sangrur (Punjab), India.

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Abstract

*Marginalization refers to the process through which a particular stratum of society is deprived of its rights and pushed to the edge of society by those in power. The act of ostracization is not an isolated one; rather, it is the amalgamation of various factors like race, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, religion and so on. Women are often treated miserably in a patriarchal society. Their woeful condition has a significant stamp on their psyche that has hindered their growth as independent individuals in society. They are often placed in subordinate positions and deemed inferior to their male counterparts. This article will evaluate the situation of Shashi Deshpande's women characters in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), and *The Binding Vine* (1992) by focusing on their hardships in contemporary Indian society. Though her protagonists are educated and come from the middle class, they are struggling to strike a balance between individual inclinations and the social constraints of a patriarchal society.*

Shashi Deshpande's literary oeuvre is deeply concerned with women's lives in contemporary India, particularly how social, cultural, and familial expectations shape their identities. Her writings offer a sophisticated perspective on how these factors support women's oppression in Indian society. Her subtle portrayal of societal differences and the silence of women makes her fiction a valuable resource for examining subaltern voices. In order to examine how the marginalized lady negotiates the intricate webs of gender roles and how her silence is a product of her subjugation and a strategy for negotiating power. Maureen Perry Jenkins states, "Gender is not a given, it is not fixed, static phenomenon

that all individuals of one biological sex experience in the same way. Gender is constructed and re-constructed continually through daily interaction." (Jenkins 4)

Through her literary canon, Shashi Deshpande reverberates the realistic picture of Indian society where women are still treated miserably. Being born as a woman automatically leads her to follow preconceived regulations and conventions of society where males always get triumph over females. They treat them as if they are devoid of any identity of their own. Shashi Deshpande has meticulously addressed this issue in almost all her novels. Her works of

fiction showcase the life-like hardships of its female characters who are pathetically treated and feel deserted in a male-dominated society. Her female characters strive to seek freedom and try to establish their identity without refuting their domestic responsibilities. No matter which sect of society they belong to, whether they are from the middle class or plebeian, literate or illiterate, one thing which is common to all her female characters is that they are continuously swinging back and forth in a futile process to establish their worth by confining themselves in familial liabilities. They become puppets and domestic slaves to their male counterparts. The sole purpose of their monotonous life is to get married, give birth, and take care of their children and household. These preordained gender liabilities are so much infused in their psyche from a tender age, which leaves no room for their inclinations. They tend to sacrifice their happiness for the sake of their family, which is a common phenomenon in Indian society. If we take a look at our religious scriptures, like in the Hindu religion, it also glorifies how women must act according to the will of their male counterparts if they want to lead a blissful matrimonial life. As a maiden, she must obey her father, after marriage, her husband, and later on her son. Throughout her life, she has needed male support, which validates her identity as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Keeping all these views in focus, Sathupati Prasanna Sree, a female critic, aptly reflects on how Deshpande's novels describe a vivid and realistic picture of Indian women by saying:

"In her novels, she has tried to project a realistic picture of middle-class educated women who are financially independent and represent a large part of contemporary Indian society. Her novels deal with the problems of the adjustments and conflicts in the minds of female protagonists who ultimately submit to the traditional rules, in the transitional society." (Sree 15)

Deshpande's writings, which mostly centre on middle-class women's lives, have frequently come under fire for failing to specifically address the problems lower-caste women experience. Nonetheless, it is possible to see Deshpande's examination of women's marginalization and silence as an implicit response to the larger subaltern situation. For instance, Jaya, the main

character in *That Long Silence*, is unable to express her internal conflict and discontent in her marriage, signifying how social norms frequently mute women. *The Dark Hold No Terror's* title "dark hold" also alludes to the oppression and quiet that Saru, the female lead, experiences while she is continuously confined by social conventions and her own trauma. Commenting on Shashi Deshpande's novels, Geetanjali Singh Chandra opines that "In Shashi Deshpande's novels, womanly silence is often seen as a silencing of women by patriarchy. In *That Long Silence*, particularly Jaya's silence and her writing are linked. In the biography she has to submit to a newspaper, she pares herself down to the bare bones of "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 live". In literary terms, this would be the plot of her life. The sum total of the actions that happen. It does not at all reveal who she is." (Chandra 45). Even though Deshpande's main characters are frequently middle-class urbanites, their hardships are representative of how women from all social levels and castes suffer from silence and oppression.

Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists perfectly fit the postmodern phenomenon where they are continuously making efforts to get themselves heard, but somehow their familial inclinations hinder their growth. They are the amalgamation of modern and traditional codes of living, like most of them are financially independent and taught, but still they follow the instructions of their husbands. They are widely aware of the consequences and feel frustrated at some point in time but somehow try to make ends meet just for the sake of family and society. The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) narrates the story of Sarita (Saru), who is a taught and self-made doctor by profession. It also sheds light on the fact that how Sarita becomes rebellious to attain self-identity. Amitav Roy asserts that:

"The heroines of Shashi Deshpande strive for self-realization and self-assertion, and they succeed in it. Equality between the sexes is the dream they cherish. But they seek their solution always within the range of family. This phenomenon seems to be rooted in the very

nature of feminism in India which respects the institution of family.” (Roy 29)

Like other heroines of Deshpande’s fiction, Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* finally tries to break the shackles of her dark childhood days and marital discords when she pays a visit to her father’s house after many years. The flashbacks from her past indicate how her bitter-sweet relationship with her mother shapes the entire course of her life. Her childhood was devoid of love because her parents never paid attention to her. Her mother used to choose her younger sibling, Dhruva, over her. His birthday was celebrated every year with gusto, and her was devoid of celebrations. These gender biases left a bitter imprint on her childhood memories. The worst part of that relationship comes when her mother blames her for the untimely death of her younger brother, Dhruva, by saying, “...why didn’t you die? Why are you alive, when he’s dead...” (Deshpande 191).

This incident has an adverse effect on her personality, and she decides to marry Manohar against her mother’s will. Due to paternal constraints, every girl desires an amiable, supportive, and congenial spouse who understands her without any prior judgment and who shares her dreams. Shashi Deshpande has beautifully depicted the tussle between relationships through her works of fiction, especially the relationship between husband and wife. “Most of the husbands are passive, yet aggressive- They neither attack their wives nor say even a single angry word to them”. But their “actions, words and sly comments make them (wives) feel guilt-ridden and censured”. (Deshpande, *If I Die Today*). Sarita also has the same expectations when she ties the knot with Manohar. Initially, it was going smoothly but after some time, she felt a drastic change in Manohar’s behaviour. It all started when people in Manohar’s neighbourhood got to know that Sarita was a doctor by profession. One day, Sarita came back home late at night after treating a badly injured person. Her clothes were fully covered with blood stains and from there, people came to know about her profession and praised her. Manohar, who was a teacher by profession, started getting offended whenever he heard that people were praising her wife.

The theme of darkness persists to loom over the character of Sarita throughout the novel but her ambitious, anxious, and self-esteemed personality urges her to become independent by taking up the profession of a doctor. She sees this profession as an escape from the brutality that she had to endure as a child when her parents chose Dhruva over her. Not only this, but she is well aware of the fact that her financial security would help her even after marriage. She seems to be quite passionate about her profession but gradually this professional esteem starts poisoning her wedded life with her husband Manohar. Her professional life does not allow her to get even hours in which she can focus on her work and family side by side. Manohar starts getting offended by the fact that his wife earns more and this brings professional jealousy between Manu and Saru. Sarita gets badly trapped and becomes the victim of Manohar’s male ego. She is a “two-in-one woman” who is a doctor in the daytime and a caged, helpless bird at night who meekly bears the sexual brutality of her husband.

That Long Silence (1988) by Shashi Deshpande explores the oppressed condition of Indian women in their domestic world. The title of the novel has its origin in the speech delivered by Elizabeth Robins to the WWSL in 1907: “If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost would think it would make me shade uneasy- the weight of that long silence of one-half of the world.” The novel exhibits the story of Jaya Kulkarni, who, like other female protagonists of Deshpande’s fiction, tries to strike an equilibrium between her individual self and the roles that are pre-defined by society on the basis of gender. From a tender age, she is continuously advised by her mother not to disobey her husband. She must act according to the wishes of her husband, which she does by playing the position of an affectionate mother, dutiful to her in-laws, her spouse, and her children. But on the other hand, the novel also depicts how the male counterparts in a patriarchal society do not consider the feelings and emotions of their other halves. Mohan, the husband of Jaya, expects his wife to compromise the way his mother does. He lectures Jaya by giving the example of his mother and how she

never raised her voice against the bad behaviour of his father.

It seems “Between two of them the relationship was a noiseless flow of judgement, lack of communication and opinions. Mohan was having the prime position and Jaya the inferior one” (Siddiqui 60). As a result, Jaya succumbs to Mohan without revolting and chooses the mode of silence to show her frustration. Deshpande also raises her voice against the institution of marriage through her works which contribute to the subjugation and subaltern status of women.

Simone de Beauvoir says that “Marriage subjugates and enslaves women and leads her to aimless days indefinitely repeated, a life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose” (Beauvoir 500). As we can see in the novel, that is how Jaya has to suppress her desires and aspirations after her marriage to Mohan. She wants to be a writer but ultimately gives up when Mohan asks her to do so. She feels quite helpless when she questions herself, “Who am I? Mohan’s wife, Rahul’s and Rati’s mother, she is everyone else but not myself.”

The Binding Vine (1992) depicts the agony of female characters through its narrator and protagonist, Urmila. The novel showcases the demonic crime of rape which is committed within and outside marriage. Urmila shares a unique bond with the rest of the female characters which makes her personality quite sensitive towards the suffering of others. She is also in a state of mourning due to the death of her one-year-old daughter which makes her much more sensitive. Like *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the present novel also brings forth the hideous crime of marital rape through the character of Meera, Urmi’s mother-in-law. It also depicts the agony of a lower-class character named Kalpana, who is brutally raped by her uncle, Prabhakar. Kalpana’s mother, Shakutai, still blames her daughter for the mishap. It showcases the reality of a patriarchal society where women are always at fault. From an early age, they are advised not to raise their voice, as in the novel *The Binding Vine*; instead of lodging a complaint, Shakutai badmouths her daughter by saying that she is the one who stirs up the animalistic desires of her abuser. Shakutai’s own story is quite

moving, where her husband deserted her for another woman. The novel also tells the story of Vanna, Urmila’s sister-in-law, who is a working woman. Her lot is not so different from the other female characters. She is consistently pressured to leave her job and to look after her kids and home. Thus, the novel aptly describes the marginalized condition of its female characters, who are oppressed and have their voices muted to the sufferings that are inflicted upon them by the male-dominated society.

CONCLUSION

Through literature, feminist writers try to depict the pathetic lot of women figures as they cope with the suppression, discrimination, and harassment in a male-dominated society. She is treated like a puppet, being moulded throughout her life to get her fit into the parameters of an ideal woman. Gender roles are established by patriarchal society and exercised by parents for the successful manipulation of social perceptions. She has to adhere to these rules, which she does for the sake of her familial and social inclinations. In this process, she has to mute her inner desires and turn a deaf ear to her likings. Deshpande’s writings exhibit a strong feminist sensibility by raising her voice against the atrocities of a patriarchal society. Her female characters represent a sense of dignity as they try to learn from their sufferings, coming to a compromise and finding a balance in the end. Without negating their identity, they adjust and accommodate by facing the turmoil of life boldly and resolutely.

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