



EPITOME OF CHANGE: SHASHI DESHPANDE'S PROTAGONISTS

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist. She occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women. Her work reflects the whole gamut of Indian cultural issues, the thickly populated world of her novels, the working out of relationship within families and marriages, the fine insight into human character as well as her boldness in the treatment of sex and class barriers which have been the major concern of her fiction. Her work provides a pointer to the catatonic status of woman in the tradition bound, male dominated middle class society of contemporary India, the present paper is an attempt to analyze her protagonist in a brief way.

INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English has been acclaimed around the world for its innovation, radical new approaches to the art of storytelling and reworking of language. While the older generation continues to produce literary masterworks, a newer generation of writing talent has emerged, ensuring that the fount of imagination in the country has not run dry. Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world. We see them bursting out in full bloom spreading their own individual fragrances. They are recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work. The works of women novelists in English mirror the exact realistic picture of contemporary world where innocence is suffocating in the 'blood- dimmed tide' of corruption, where women are supposed to be just a doll in the hands of men, where there is a

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prevailing sense of gender discrimination in an average house of India, where the helpless women have to bear the brunt of patriarchal domination. One evident trait among all the contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English is the revolutionary spirit with which they strive to write. Indian women English writers have quietly and confidently gone about putting to shape their literary endeavors letting the product do the talking, which it has done most eloquently, establishing Indian English Literature as an inextricable part of Indian literature. Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sahgal, Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidewa, Anjana Appachana, Sumathi Sudhakar, Suniti Namjoshi, Jhumpa Lahiri, Veena Paintal and Nargis Dalal have added new dimensions and depth to Indian fiction in English.

Women writers of Indian English fiction have significantly contributed to enrich contemporary Indian English fiction. Shashi Deshpande has played promising role among them. In her 'Quest for the human self within the women'. She lays bare their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. Shashi Deshpande's novels explore the patriarchal social set up of India and her protagonist located within this social reality. *That Long Silence* reemphasizes Deshpande's passion for these issues as she weaves a simple ingenious tale of the contradictions of male ambivalence and cruelty, female stoicism and shame and human desire and desertion.

That Long Silence is a combination of flashbacks and direct description of the present incidents. The theme of the novel is the self-realization of the protagonist. Jaya, though a modern woman is rooted in tradition, experiences an impulsive urge to be empowered, simultaneously with an instinctive urge to be traditional and conservative. Jaya as a woman writer earns name and fame as a contributor to a woman's magazine but later on chooses to change her outlook. She accepts the normal conditions of the society where women also have a share in the plight of women. The elimination of the girl child from the family tree is perhaps the most miserable one. It reveals the total negligence of women in the Indian social set up. Deshpande attempts to project the 'silence' of all sorts of women facing different types of problems in family and society. 'Silence' that is present throughout the novel reveals different kinds of feelings like objection, fear, suffering, protest, pain, shyness, endurance, a difference of opinion and indifference towards each other. Silence is an ever-present theme in the novels of Deshpande. She efficiently makes its presence felt throughout the novel.

The silence of women represents silence of one-half of the humanity, which means the protagonist Jaya represents half of the humanity. Jaya is portrayed as a convent - educated English speaking lady with literary taste. The novel is about the conflict raging between the narrator's split self of the writer and of the housewife. Her husband Mohan has married her not for love but for her English speaking quality. Jaya expects more love and concern from

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her husband but she is treated as an object at home. They are at loggerheads with each other because of their difference in opinions. Mohan is pro-modern but has a traditional opinion in treating his wife. Mohan, an authoritarian temperamentally, is insensitive towards the sufferings of women. His mother being dominated by his father's oppression dies when she tries to abort her fifth child. Mohan calls his mother 'tough' in her submission while Jaya, as a woman, understands her despair': 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 struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. Soon after the wedding, a quarrel between the two has led Mohan into silence altogether. The silence between them intensifies day after day. So she seals up her lips tightly and cocoons herself in silent fragmentation. She sacrifices all her personal wishes and desires for the sake of Mohan. Throughout her married life of seventeen years, she manages to suppress her thoughts, feelings, and emotions. In her zeal to be a loyal wife, she suppresses her desire to be an eminent writer. When she is on the threshold of getting recognition as a creative writer, Mohan expresses his displeasure at a particular story written by her. It is about a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. As the character in the story reflects his own character in real life, he could not tolerate it. So she thinks, "Looking at his stricken face I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that" (TLS, 144). She had an inner urge to continue writing, and so she starts writing under a pseudonym. But this effort does not help her, and her stories are rejected one after another. But Kamat, her neighbour encourages her to be a writer and analyses the reason for her failure. He states that her stories lack strong emotions since she has suppressed her anger and frustration. Jaya had learned to control her anger as Mohan made her realize that this trait in a woman was "unwomanly." (TLS, 83) She tells Kamat, "No woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? (147). He also warns her for indulging in self-pity as it would be destructive to her in future.

The First full length novel of Deshpande's – *Roots and Shadows* highlights the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She finds herself alienated when she refuses to conform to the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings only disillusionment when she finds her educated and ostensibly progressive-minded husband no different from the average Indian male. She is even contemptuous of herself when she realizes that she has all along been unconsciously aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. The novel gains its feminist stance from Indu's persistent exploration of herself as an individual. An extra-marital affair helps her to break free from the emotional bondage of matrimony and makes her aware of herself, and realizes that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage. *Roots and Shadows* also offers us scope to observe meaningless rituals and customs all of which help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority. Seen through the novelist's eye, insignificant everyday details take on a new dimension and highlight the gross inequalities present in



society. Deshpande's another novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* seeks to discuss the male ego which refuses to accept a secondary position in marriage. The novel narrates the harrowing experience of the protagonist, Saru, who enjoys a greater economic and social status than her husband Manohar. The trauma of being the victim of her husband's frustration which manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism is vividly portrayed. Deshpande also makes the readers aware of society's reaction to the superior status of the wife in a marriage, which leads the husband to develop an inferiority complex. The novel also seeks to discuss the blatant gender discrimination which is shown even by parents towards their daughters. Deshpande effectively conveys the craving by parents for a male child and the disastrous effect it can have on a sensitive young girl. Denied of parental love and victim of her husband's frustrations, Saru undergoes an arduous journey into herself and liberates herself from guilt, shame and humiliation to emerge in full control over her life. In the novel, *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande uses the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmi to focus attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira – victims of man's lust and woman's helplessness. The novelist makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape – a theme which perhaps has not been touched upon by any other Indian writer in English. Urmi tries to reconstruct the pathetic story of a bright and attractive girl, Mira, who wrote poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage to alleviate her suffering.

Urmi also crusades for the cause of another victim, Kalpana, who is brutally raped and is on her death bed. The novelist deftly handles the juxtaposition of the two situations—rape committed within the precincts of marriage and outside it. The novelist gives a moving account of the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence than be exposed to the humiliation involved in publicizing the event and that of married woman whose bodies are violated by their legally wedded husbands but who would never dare reveal this to anyone. They would rather stifle their voice of protest for the sake of social and moral security. Deshpande, through the voice of Urmi, also offers us a glimpse into the lives of myriad other women, who are ostensibly more liberated than their predecessors but, who, nevertheless, are victims of some form of violence or deprivation.

A comprehensive analysis of all her work leaves one in no doubt about where Deshpande's sympathies lie. It would be unfair to label her 'feminist' and categories her with several other writers who differ from her in varying degrees. She can at best be called an articulator of women who are caught at the crossroads of change in a society which is undergoing the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. It is a difficult job, indeed, to give voice to women who themselves, are not sure of their own suffering and who stand in an unenviable position today. They are acutely aware of the injustices heaped on them but are condemned to live the life of suppression which was the lot of their predecessor. In many ways, their condition is even more pitiable than that of women of earlier generations who



unquestioningly accepted their secondary position in society. All Deshpande's Protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hyper sensitive women who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life. In fact her fictional forte happens to be the exploration of the psyche of her women. Deshpande feels that women have a tremendous inner strength, but so much of that strength is used up in merely enduring. She has added a new depth, a new dimension to English Fiction.

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