ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal

The Expression Journal

Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 8 Issue 3 June 2022

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

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(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)
www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A CREATIVE ARTIST IN EXPLORING THE IDENTITY AND POSITION OF WOMAN IN THE TRADITIONAL INDIAN SOCIETY: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande can be called one of the top Indian women writers. She has written three types of women characters in her novels: submissive, neutral and bold. That's why her novels can be divided into three phases. Deshpande's creative faculty has impressed worldwide readers. This paper examines how Indian writing in English has now entered a new phase – the phase of inimitable representation of the new Indian woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the patriarchal society and how this new woman of the Indo-Anglican novel views herself as the object of cultural, social oppressions and attempts to rebel, against them, consciously or unconsciously, within her living space, but at the same time, the reflects the inability to reject her cultural and social background totally and hence fails to transcend the horizons depicting a revolutionary spirit and analyses Shashi Deshpande's social responsibility as a creative artist in exploring the identity and position of woman in the traditional Indian society.

Keywords

Social Responsibility, Oppression, Creative Artist, Patriarchal Society, Revolutionary Spirit.

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Indian Writing in English has now entered a new phase—the phase of inimitable representation of the new Indian woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the patriarchal society. This new woman of the Indo-Anglican novel views herself as the object of cultural, social oppressions and attempts to rebel, against them, consciously or unconsciously, within her living space, but at the same time, the reflects the inability to reject her cultural and social background totally and hence fails to transcend the horizons depicting a revolutionary spirit. She, therefore, stands at cross roads, caught between tradition and modernity. In order to emerge as a new being, the individual self has to go through a continued process of reaching beyond itself, of expanding itself through varied experiences, through multiple identities and relationship.

The awakening of a woman is essentially an awakening of the human soul. Her womanly sensibility, experiences and realizations constitute to it. The emergence of a new woman calls out merely for the realization of her individuality or of what she is, but also of what she becomes. It is only when she learns to accept life and her own self in terms of the opposites, only when she realizes that she has to sink in hate and despair to love hope again, that her emergence as a new woman becomes a possibility. Following Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and other writers who documented the female resistance against a patriarchally maintained Indian culture, Shashi Deshpande has reincarnated the new Indian women and has reinforced the female dilemma in her novels. She has dealt vary minutely and delicately with the problems of middle class educated woman. Though Shashi Deshpande writes for women, presents their problems, lets the world know the problems that women of today are facing, yet she cannot be categorized among feminist writers. She makes it clear that hers is not the strident and militia kind of feminism, which has seen the male as the cause of all troubles, rather, her writing deals with the inner mind of the women.

Shashi Deshpande is not a militant feminist demanding the female supremacy over the male. Some of the feminist principles in her novels are not a conscious expression of her views. For she is against propaganda she strives for the equality between the sexes through her

novels. She is not for woman's liberation in the western sense. Such a freedom is possible as well as not acceptable for an Indian woman, as she is physically and emotionally attached to her husband and children. Her novels are the realistic portrayal of women of the middle class society. The term 'feminism' is applied to Shashi Deshpande, in the broad sense, as referring to the writer's intense awareness of her identity as a women, her interest in feminine problems are not in the sense that she makes an advocacy for women's rights in her fiction. She does not hold the torch of women's liberation beyond the requirements. She rationalizes a purely Indian predicament and experiments a typically feminist solution to it.

In the first novel, *That Long Silence*, Jaya, the protagonist, is so much confused about the whole set up and the happenings around, that she finds no other way but silence as her means of communication. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* analyse the complex relationship between a successful doctor, Sarita and her professionally frustrated and irritated husband. Just because the wife has a better job, there is a very obvious tension between them, that subsequently leads them to separate from each other. In *Roots and Shadows* Indu a young ambitious girl, working for women's magazines, is confused about her concept of love, marriage, career and her own life. All the female protagonists of Deshpande belong to middle class orthodoxy of Brahmin family which expects them to conform to their tradition. All protagonists are compelled to be themselves, to accept their 'selves' in whatever forms they are. Their refuge in their selves gives them courage to decide things for themselves. However, refuge in the self is not a solution to their predicament but only a deeper awareness of the problems. They may walk out of their home in protest against their suffering, but soon they realize the futility of their actions. Their protest ends in compromise. Though in the beginning, the protagonists question the social roles, in the end, they try their best to conform to their roles. Thus, Deshpande's vision of Indian woman tends to be optimistic, though radical Deshpande achieves a synthesis between tradition and modernity. "Modernism is not a negation of tradition; true modernism only an enrichment of tradition, an extension of its frontier" (Chand 99).

Deshpande's protagonists are victims of the unequal power structure in marriage, but in all her novels she shows how one can rise above such injustice and lead a meaningful existence. In the end, her protagonists almost always strive to make their marriages work. As J. Bhavani observes:

> "This is not a negative but a realistic end to the novels. Deshpande upholds marriage as the backbone of society, what is stifling is the person of the wife and not the institution of marriage." (23)

Some critics are of the view that Deshpande unhesitatingly admits that the novel *That Long Silence* is based on her own marriage. But Savabjit Sandhu asserts:

> "The novel is not an autobiography except for certain parts dealing with the frustrations of an unsuccessful writer. Shashi Deshpande has presented an Indian woman as she in India of the eighties but not as she should be." (142)

Women, being caught in the gender inequality and injustice in this patriarchal setup, still fight harder to prove their existence. As Sarala Palkar puts it, "they are the victims of patriarchy and also of their own silence". Undeniably Deshpande presents the suppression of women with greater self-consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage" (87). She depicts the inner chaos of the women vividly in a cool and sensitive prose.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists' quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences born of the prohibitive nature of the Indian patriarchal society. In her novels, the male husbands, lovers, father and other relations—display different aspects of

patriarchy and oppression. The female protagonists are highlighted at the backdrop of male characters. But certainly women are victimized thoroughly by male characters; they are victims of their own perceptions and self-imposed restrictions. *The Long Silence* delineates the perceptions and self-imposed restrictions of educated women struggling as the victims in the patriarchal setup and *The Binding Vine* delineates the man-woman relationship and their sexual freedom / liberation, while *Roots and Shadows* studies in depth the nature of conflict emerging nit eh life of "new woman' who makes struggle against the cross-currents of tradition and modernity, highlighting the mental crisis experiences by the protagonist, Indu and *The Dark Holds No Terror*s seeks to expose the problems of masculine ego that makes harmonious conjugal relationship impossible. Here in this novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpandepresents the trauma of being the victim of the protagonist's husband's frustration that manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism.

No doubt, Shashi Deshpande sustains integrity and clarity of vision as a creative artist. Instead of fragmentary shadows, consistency and stability can be accepted as the basic tributes of the mosaic of her fictional world. She constructs the plot of her novels to discern conclusions about the predicament of the emotional and the mental crisis of modern middle educated woman. In his preface to *The Legacy and Other Stories*, Prof. G. S. Amur appreciating central thought in her novels, remarks thus:

> "Woman's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer and this appears in all her important novels." (P 10)

he instinctive urge of Shashi Deshpande to express her sensibility as a woman motivated her to make a representation of it in her novels. The novel That *Long Silence* deals with the self-analysis of Jaya the protagonist who passes through a maze of self-doubts and fears toward the affirmation of her female self. In her preoccupation to play the role of a successful wife and mother, Jaya realizes that she has lost her hold on her own talent as a writer. Jaya represents the predicament of self-conscious educated women who in spite of having a realization of the oddity of life, finds herself helpless against the strong hold of tradition. The unfolding of the narrative in the novel *That Long Silence* has become a process to catch the conscious beyond self-imposed silence. Jaya after her marriage with Mohan follows all his decisions without any choice of her own. She delivered two children Rahul and Rati and the third child was aborted. Once when Mohan was found guilty of embezzlement and he was expecting Jaya's implied consent in the whole affair, but her inner self revolted. She was determined to break that long silence. It is not only the question of the silence of Jaya but also of the silence of entire womanhood. Vimal Rama Rao comments:

> "Jaya is one of the rare narrative voice in Indian English who possesses and displays a literary sensibility, commensurate with her fictional role as a writer telling her own story, one whose college education and reading habits are in evidence in her speaking voice. This indeed is an achievement." (Rao 11)

Through Urmi, the narrator, Shashi Deshpande in *The Binding Vine* records the agony and humiliation of woman against male passion. The novelist makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who had witnessed the trauma of marital rape a theme which perhaps has not been touched upon by any other Indian writer in English. Urmi reconstructs the pathetic story of a bright and attractive girl, Mira who wrote poems in order to release her suppressed sensibility. Urmi also tries to represents the voice of another victim. The novelist proceeds with

the vision that sexual harassment is the worst of the calamity in the life of woman. It ruins the "real self" of a woman and it is only through the narrators like Urmit that a voice of protest can be registered. In the novel *The Binding Vine*, there is an extension of her vision asserting that in order to seek her identity; woman is bound to express her rage against the irrational control of tradition. Indira Nityanandan identifies a rare dynamism in the vision and attitude of Shashi Deshpande developed in the novel *The Binding Vine* and comments:

> "*The Binding Vine* is a refreshing changing from the first three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes easily to her protagonist here and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakuntalas, we also have our Urmilas" (P 46).

Deshpande's social consciousness overwhelms her feminist concern in the novel *The Binding Vine*. The ideal of quest for individual identity in marked by the conflict between the inner and outer selves of the protagonist. Sumi, the protagonist appears as a deserted wife and despite mother of three young daughters. For Sumi, it is a challenge to face life and society in the absence of her husband. In the novel *Moving on*, Shashi Deshpande through the conflict of Manjari presents the riddle of mother and daughter relationship, father and daughter relationship, the issue of female sexuality, man's conditioning to social mages and man's Deshpande on gender stereotype.

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande's awareness about her social responsibility as a creative artist, has motivated her to contemplate the relative interdependence of social variables and internal creative compulsions interacting with her creative imagination. Therefore, she feels a need to present her own vision about her art and her literary mission.

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