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Shashi Deshpande's Female Protagonists

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande wrote in an Indian society which has been highly tradition-oriented, but in the last eight-decade Indian society has experienced several changes including the process of Industrialization and Urbanization. In the beginning of her career, Shashi Deshpande followed in the footsteps of Anita Desai. Shashi Deshpande's heroine is not like the women of Anita Desai, neurotic and historical. But there are many points of comparison between Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. Both the novelists are concerned with their protagonists 'sense of loss' of their inner beings. Shashi Deshpande's heroines are mostly middle class women closer to the poorest women in the Indian society. All of Deshpande's heroines try to be honest to themselves inspite of the various social pressures. Deshpande tries to trace the reasons for the loss of her heroines inner being like from the childhood. Her heroine yearns for her personal advancements and feels that her mother is the first formidable hordile blocking her growth. After years of their marriage Deshpande's heroines realize that there is literally no change in their situation as they expected. They therefore, get disappear oriented and frustrated. On the whole,

Deshpande depicts the state and condition of the present day-middle-class Indian women who is educated and intelligent and her female protagonists are subtly drawn from inside.

Keywords:- Indian women's marital condition, Unconscious of psychic turmoil of female, Comparison between Deshpande and Anita Desai, Loss of women's inner being right.

The tradition –oriented Indian society has experienced various changes in the last seven or eight decades. The processes of industrialization , urbanization and secularisation have brought about politico-economic,cultural and socio-psychological changes in the life patterns and attitudes of the people of this country , especially among the urban population . One of the most fundamental and far-reaching social changes brought about after India's independence has been the emancipation of women from their tradition –ridden ethos. The socio-economic emancipation of women in India has brought in its train changes in their status and outlook. The vitally affected area of this change has been the vital relationship between man and woman.Thus , woman , who was dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural and sexual roles assigned to her from the unconscious dawn of the patriarchal India , is now gaining strength to rebel against the cultural , social oppressions.

Modern women writers of India tend to depict the oppression of women with greater self – consciousness , a deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage . Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal , Anita Desai and other female writers have clearly shown the changing thematic concerns. These women writers have registered the resistance of 'New Indian Woman' against the patriarchal set-up in India. Upstaging other Indian English women writers, Anita Desai tries to assert and ascertain a woman's rights as a human being in this

universe. She made a break-through in the conventional themes by writing novels about women and for women. In fact Maya's (the woman protagonist in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*) situation illustrates many points made by Simone de Beauvoir concerning woman's plight in a man-dominated society.[1]

In the 1990s, Shashi Deshpande is following in the footsteps of Anita Desai. She too, is obsessed with the portrayal of 'inner – landscape' of her women characters. In her novels, the Indian middle class woman is engaged in an unconscious struggle to release herself from the stranglehold of a tradition-bound society. She raises her voice against social taboos and norms, but it ends up in a stifled whisper. Her novels deal with the psychic turmoil of woman within the limiting and restricting confines of domesticity. Deshpande's heroine is not like the women of Anita Desai, neurotic and hysterical. She is not a Maya or a Monisha ever ready to face the 'ferocious assaults of existence' [2]

In Jane Austen's fiction, the husband – hunting fills an important and dominant place; in Ruth Praver Jhabwala, there is stress on the wife – hunting as much as on the husband – hunting. But Deshpande tells the story after the marriage and a woman's condition in it. 'And then they lived happily ever after' is not the conclusion of a marriage, as Deshpande suggests. Most of Deshpande's heroines are middle-aged and mature women, having grown-up children. Though like Ruth Praver Jhabwala's heroines, who get married in the conventional manner or settle down to the existing life with complacency, their erstwhile rebellions having nothing been more than firecracker fizzles, Deshpande's heroines strike a difference. Their temporary streak of self – assertion gives them the courage to be true to their feminine 'I'. The whole drama purges them off their emotional dependence on men and they emerge out strong enough to face the hostile world around.

There are many points of comparison between Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. Both the novelists are concerned with their protagonists' sense of 'loss' of their inner beings. In Anita Desai novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1982), the heroine Sita feels suffocated by 'vegetarian complacency', 'insularity' and unimaginative way of life of her husband and his people. She often feels confounded "Which of her selves was true, which false?"[3]

Similarly, Monisha, in the *Voices In The City* (1965) feels a loss of her identity in her husband's home due to the lack of proper understanding between the husband and the wife. Monisha thinking about her life says: "Is it what is then, my life;" and "only a conundrum that I shall brood over forever with passion and pain; never to arrive at a solution?"[4]

In the same manner, Shashi Deshpande's heroines are very sensitive and talented, and they lament the 'loss' of their inner beings. Urmila, the heroine of *The Binding Vine* (1993), depicts the disturbed harmony of her inner being in the following manner: "Between the girl who lived in that room and the woman who has lost her child, there is a chasm so deep it seems to me it can never be bridged."[5]

A common factor that is responsible for the disharmony in the 'inner being' of the heroines of Deshpande and Desai is the marital discontent. Whereas these 'matrimonial silences' are supposed to break towards the end in Mrs. Deshpande's novels, those in Anita Desai take the heroines to the verge of annihilation. Desai's women become highly sensitive and get emotionally disturbed due to their malcontent marriage. Deshpande's women are more tolerant and use reason when confronted with marital disharmony. Indu, Saru, Jaya all rake up their minds to find out the reason behind their conjugal disharmony and search for its possible solution.

In Ruth Praver Jhabwala's work, social background is more important than the characters; in Kamala Markandaya the stress is as much on the principal characters

as on social, economic, political, cultural backgrounds; in Anita Desai the 'inner climate' of psychologically unfit women is depicted; in Shashi Deshpande the seminal concern is the 'plight of the modern Indian woman who is seeking to understand herself.' [6]

Deshpande's introspection and psychological probe make her second to none in revealing the subconscious and unconscious psyche of her female characters. Therefore, Shashi Deshpande's thematic range is far wider than that of her predecessor, Anita Desai. H.M. Williams commenting on Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock* writes that "the book is written almost too intensely, and the use of a neurotic stream-of-consciousness prevents us from getting a more balanced, normal view of the heroine's character-----the total effect, however, is one of despair." [7]

But the total effect at the end of the novels in Shashi Deshpande is not of 'despair' but of 'hope'. The reader along with the heroines becomes optimistic towards a better future for the female protagonist. Life's "shapelessness, its meaninglessness and lack of design that drives one to despair." [8] in Desai's novels can suffocate the heroines only temporarily in Deshpande and they soon impose on it some order or some design at the end of the novel. Indu, the heroine of *Roots and Shadows* striking a note of hope says that "the darkness inside me was banished, replaced instead by a gentle, kindly dawn." [9] Nothing the difference between the female protagonists of Desai and Deshpande, S. Indra comments as follows:

Unlike the woman protagonists of Anita Desai's novels who in their quest for selfhood lose their ability to live in the community and maintain human relationship, limiting themselves to the individual freedom which damages their ultimate understanding of life, Shashi Deshpande's women characters seek their selfhood within the orbit of family and relationships. [10]

Deshpande's forte lies in the portrayal of the middle-class women in her novels, and she has touched a chord in every woman's heart while her predecessors could not do so. Anita Desai's women characters mostly belong to the upper middle class. They live in big houses having large lawns.

Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Praver Jhabwala have written their novels without having the first-hand experience of Indian woman's life since they had their education and experience in foreign countries. But Deshpande writes with the first-hand experience of the Indian woman, since she herself belongs to a middle class firmly. She knows that an average Indian woman suffers, submits and adjusts herself to the circumstances. Deshpande herself has admitted that she has presented women as they really are in the Indian society.[11]

Another advantage that Shashi Deshpande has over her predecessors is that her themes are universally applicable. Although she is painfully aware of the peculiarities of female experience in this world, her work is not limited to the themes of relationship between the two sexes. The psychological terrors, of which she speaks in her novels like *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Come Up And BE Dead* and *If I Die Today*, are not specific to women alone." Most of her main themes are similar to those found in the European and American women fiction when she depicts woman in her childhood, adolescence, and married life. But she differs from her Western counterparts when she propagates that a woman can seek her individuation within the bounds of human (family) relationships. She tells her interviewer Vanamala Viswanatha:

"It's needed. It is necessary for women to live within family relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I've tried to convey in my writing".[12]

Another significant difference between Deshpande and her Indian as well as Western counterparts is that her middle class heroines are closer to the poorest

women in the Indian society. Jaya in that long silence helps her maidservant, Jeeja when her son is hospitalized: Urmila in *The Binding Vine* almost forgetting her personal grief reaches out to help a poor woman, Shakutai, whose teenage- daughter falls a victim of rape and the police, the government and the victim's relations all try to hush up the case. Deshpande's heroines assist the toiling women and try to save them from their daily drudgery.

This, Shashi Deshpande has created a separate and unique place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English.

Shashi Deshpande, in her novels, has tried to delineate the situation of the 'New woman', who (due to her age-old roots in tradition) cannot sever her bonds with the society and who (as a result of education and financial independence) cannot live docilely in this orthodox Indian society that expects her to serve the man as her master. Deshpande, who belongs to a middle-class family, has the first hand experience of the conditions of middle-class woman and her dilemmas. She herself declares that "inner most feelings come out in my writings. The kind of emotions we know women have but never come out." [13]

Deshpande's novels are concerned basically with a woman's inner world of sensibility. All of her protagonists try to be honest to themselves, despite the pulls and pressures the society exercises on them. In moving on, Manjari is the new woman. An affectionate daughter, a loving sister, a caring mother and a good friend, she is hardly imposing or demanding, is not dependent on anyone.

Deshpande traces the reasons for the loss of her protagonist woman's inner being right from the childhood. To project it, she uses subtle technique of flashback with competence. Moreover, Deshpande shows that the psychological scars suffered

during one's childhood continue to haunt one externally, moulding his/her lived a disturbed childhood. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* can never forget for a minute that her mother held her responsible for the death of her brother, Dhruva, who being a male child was favoured more by the parents. Not only in India but also in the western countries there is a preference for boys, as Susan Palmer, suggests, because of the parents' traditional desires to carry on the family name.

Similarly, Urmila in *The Binding Vine* nurtures a deep grudge against her parents, who sent her away to Raindurg to live with her grand parents in her childhood. John Gottman, the psychologist in the university of Washington in an interview published in *The Times of India* (Feb 25, 1997), says that the parents must become emotional coaches to their children and then only the children can succeed in all walks of an adult life.

Far from becoming 'emotional coaches', the parents of the protagonist heroines are seldom supportive. Especially, the mother of mother-surrogate turns into "mother-villain" (Adele King borrows the terms from Judith Kegan Gardiner).

They trust their orthodox views on their daughters mercilessly and want them to adhere to customs. With Manu (the celebrated writer of *Manusmriti*), they seem to opine that in childhood a girl should be under the will of her father; in her youth, of her husband; in old age, of her sons, In other words, a woman should never enjoy her own will, whereas the modern daughters want to overthrow these age-old stagnating traditions (as they are newly educated) in order to achieve world success. They shudder at the thought of becoming like their mothers who have lived life through their husbands and children only and have no say of their own, moreover when these heroines are cast in the roles of mothers of their daughters, their relations with their daughters, in turn, become strained. Thus, the cycle goes on, as Deshpande suggests. Deshpande has portrayed that sometimes woman becomes the greatest enemy of another woman.

Deshpande's women feel disgust over the natural biological functions of females. Right from their childhood, they abhor their female form. When they become adolescents, they are told brutally that they can have babies then. They are made to regard themselves as 'unclean' during the period of menstruation. They hate the idea of breast-feeding a child. This, due to their senior's rude and crude behavior towards a girl child (which is common in many Indian households), these heroines start hating and degrading their natural biological functions.

Deshpande's heroines feel a sense of relief when she leaves her parental home with its smothering and stifling atmosphere. She yearns for her personal advancement and continually thinks that their mothers are the first formidable hurdle blocking their growth. Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* escapes her parental house twice-once when she opts for medical profession and lives in women's hostel and again when she decides to marry Manohar, an outcast. Most of Deshpande's heroines elope from their respective houses to marry the men of their choice. Thus, in *Roots and Shadows*, Indu leaves her parental house to marry Jayant and to avoid the ever-domineering Akka (her mother-surrogate). Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, is an exception, as she marries the man of her brother's choice. But all the heroines regard marriage as an 'open sesame' to all the enjoyments in this world.

When the heroines get married, they lose their ability to live alone and feel incomplete without their men. They reject their role as daughters and accept that of wives in the hope that this new role will help them to win their freedom. They cut down their ego to the minimum and mould their wants according to their husband's whims. In their endeavour to become good housewives, they start failing as human beings.

After some years of their marriage they realize that new bonds have replaced the old ones. Earlier they were put in the slots of daughters and sisters, now the institution of marriage has put them in the new slots of wives and mothers. The happiness which they pined for in their parental home was missing in their husband's

house too. Their husbands expect the wives to submit their freedom at their feet and even deny them enjoyment in sexual life too. The husbands wish their wives to remain passive partners in the sexual act because ‘passion in a woman makes her unwomanly’. After years of their marriage, the heroines realize that there is literally no change in their situation as they expected. Hence their chimera of a married life starts cracking up.

J.Bhavani, using Jung’s vocabulary, calls this strange situation ‘the middle life crisis’, which leads one on the path of individuation. According to Jung, the middle life crisis confronts “the intelligent people----- in afternoon of their lives, ie around thirty- five years of age.”[14]

All of Deshpande’s heroines are of that age group since the crisis in their life starts after ten to fifteen years of their married life. Passing through this critical phase of their lives ,Deshpande places her heroines in some placid surroundings, where they can brood over their past and discontented married life and search for the reason behind ‘the the middle life crisis’. Saru and Indu return to their parental homes on one pretext or the other. The mothers, whom the heroines have regarded as pedagogues in their way to freedom and happiness, are dead by then. Jaya in *That Long Silence*, shifts from her Churchgate house to her little dingy Dadar flat, where devoid of her absorbing, stereotyped routine she nostalgically reviews her married life and her stagnation in it.

Freud has observed thus: “As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul”[15]

The heroines of Deshpande stand aghast to discover that they have achieved nothing after so many years of their marriage. They have not gained the freedom for which they have left their parental homes. The institution of marriage and their motherhood have enhanced their feeling of claustrophobia further. Love, after which they were

hankering in their parental home, is missing in their husband's houses too. Instead, love has taken the shape of cold and unrefreshing sex. Like Raja Rao and Anita Desai, Deshpande also "finds sexual play an inadequate..... expression of feelings"[16] Thus love, sex, happiness, freedom all seem to the heroines as chimera at best.

Shashi Deshpande has a remarkable insight into the working of a women's mind. As a writer, she highlights the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation, which is inevitable in an oppressively male-dominated society. Deshpande gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present day middle class woman who is educated, intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male from inside. Her novels depict the inner perception of her female protagonists, sometimes at the level of the silent and the unconscious. Her women are a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensues out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings.

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