

Reshaping the Selves by Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Woman in Indian society is not treated as a person but only as a possession. She is a victim not only of man's inhuman attitude but also of the Hindu Dharma which maintains that wife is her husband's property and has no individuality outside that system. In Indian English writing the woman sometimes maintains the image of a self-sacrificial woman, but sometimes she emerges as a revolutionary struggling for reshaping "self" in patriarchal set up of the Indian society. According to Shashi Deshpande, "I believe that women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings but one half of the human race. I believe that women (and men as well) should not be strait jacketed into roles that warp their personalities, but should have options available to them. I believe that Nature, when conferring its gifts on humans, did not differentiate between males and females, except for the single purpose of procreation. I believe that motherhood does not bar everything else, but is an extra bonus that women are privileged to have. (The Times of India 1992) One of the basic tenets of Hindu metaphysics is that the soul does not differentiate between man and woman and as such both are essentially the same. *The Rigveda* visualises society "as a Virat Purush and out of his limb came out man and woman in whom there is no difference". (*The Rigveda* 10.90) In *Shatapath Brahman* woman has been designated as 'the ardhangini'. (5.2. 1.10). She has been considered to be born from the left side (not part) of the atmatattva (soul). That is why, she had been called Vamananga. Thus the Virat Purush of God appeared in Ardhanarishwar form. According to *the Ramayana*, the conclusion drawn by *the Vedas* and the many Shastras is that, in essence, woman is not different from man (Kishkindhakand 24.30). In *the Mahabharata*, woman has been called the root of dharma, artha and karma. (*Adi parva* 74.40)

According to above mentioned Hindu metaphysics there is no difference between man and woman, but still Indian patriarchal society makes so many differences between man and woman and this resulted in degradation of status of woman in male dominated Indian society and they are treated as second sex and inferior to men.

However, in Shashi Deshpande's novels, there is the emergence of the new woman who assert for their selves and challenge their

victimisation. They seek a new balance of power between the sexes. They desire freedom within the bounds of their obligations and responsibilities. To them, family is not a battle ground for skirmishes and the desired results can be achieved through patience and perseverance as well. Shashi Deshpande's women are caught between tradition and modernity. She unravels the unhappy situation of the Indian women. She depicts the reaction of quiet, sensitive and intelligent Indian women married to insensitive, uncaring men. Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande overcome the social stigmas asserting their potential in the professional arena. Her women's concept of freedom is not imported from the western countries. They believe in conformity and compromise for the sake of the retention of the domestic harmony rather than revolt, which might result in the disruption of family relationship. Shashi Deshpande's woman is not for the overthrow of the patriarchy and the establishment of matriarchal system. Rather she is for a balanced relationship between man and woman. She wishes man to understand (not underestimate) that women are not just commodities to be possessed. They are not simply sexual objects rather they are as human as men are. To Deshpande, we can hope to create a balanced, harmonious society, only if there is a happy co-existence between men and women. Here Monika Verma is also correctly voicing every Indian woman crying for space in the male monopolised society :

Give me space
Space not just to exist
But to live ... (Verma 9)

The main focus of Shashi Deshpande is that women should be heard. Her women possess a profound inner strength which allows them to find freedom through realisation of their individual truth. Her women, the Indian ones do not wish to discard the social values, rather they realise their limitations and try to seek their identity within those limitations which they feel essential and vital for their survival. They feel themselves as the inseparable part of the family and society. They have a keen desire to support and nourish the family with intense care and affection. Finding it difficult to define their selves outside the family circle, they keep themselves submerged in the relations they are bound with. Their journey of life shows that if marriage / love without independence dissipates a woman's personality into nothing, independence without love also exhausts her sensitivity. Similarly, though economic independence is must for the upliftment of woman, it cannot give her complete independence, satisfaction and inner happiness. They seem to suggest that revolutionary changes are easier to carry than to sustain. Their real independence lies in

a capacity to work, and so long as a woman fulfils her duty to home and society she is truly independent in the highest sense of the term.

Women have to accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimisation instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. It is through self analysis and self understanding and through vigilance and courage that they can begin to change their lives. Nobody is going to fight a battle for them. There is no doubt, that the society of the future will have to give a new vigour and colour to family life, by reconstructing its very foundation on the basis of mutual love, and not relationship of male superiority and female inferiority.

For Indian woman from 'possession' to 'person' is the graph of a woman's journey that has given her experiences and with these experiences she explores the future possibilities. For her fruitful contribution in the Indian society and in her own life to a great extent, woman has succeeded in establishing her own identity in the male – oriented world. She always remembers that she is an Indian woman who has her own traditions, ceremonies and codes of conduct but never forgets to make her male counterpart realise her presence and hence, relocates the female space through her identity.

In *A Matter of Time*, we find three different women characters as per their individual psychology and the exigency of the plot. The novel opens with the return of Sumi with her daughters after Gopal's desertion and helps to unravel the history of the house and its three generation of masters and mistress. Through Gopal - Sumi incident the author gives a peep into the past of a whole generation of silent, suffering, tolerant women who choose to resist when life becomes too suffocating and choiceless. Gopal quits a long-standing marriage and decides to walk out – not for the proverbial 'other woman' but because of ennui and existential angst.

Sumi accepts her husband Gopal's decision mutely and seemingly without protest. Probably, Sumi was aware of Gopal's resolve. She, therefore, decided to accept his wish with dignity and strength. She does not rave and rant. Instead, she tells firmly to Aru (Sumi's daughter) that she is not interested in punishing him (Gopal), "I just want to get with my life... Let him go, Aru, just let him go". (*A Matter of Time* 61) A closer look at Sumi's refusal to react to Gopal shows not a passive acceptance of man's supremacy but a contestation, a critique of tradition. Sumi decides to resist his decision by living her own life because she understands the

impossibility of reclaiming him. She does not wish to live off her parents, instead, she makes efforts to stand on her own feet to have her identity. She accepts the job, though she does not need one, spends her free time in gardening, writing and directing a play for her school. Significantly, her play upholds woman's resistance. Through the story of Surpanakha, she takes her own decision to accept the offer of a job at Devgiri. She meets Gopal several times during the year they stay apart and there is no rancor in her talk, no acrimonious debate. They meet, they talk, and she gives him news of the daughters, speaks freely of her life and leaves Gopal wondering at her vivacity. By this process Sumi reshape her 'self' in the novel and gets her own 'self' and identity. She regains her identity where her merit as an individual is recognised.

Shashi Deshpande allows her female characters a chance to experience self-discovery. She is a votary of living within human relationships and her protagonists may not be very brave heroines, as a critic asserts, but they are strong women struggling to find their own voice. Our male oriented society use woman considering them as play toys. The mindset of the people of the upper middle class is double standard. They deliver good speeches on morality but molest women themselves.

Shashi Deshpande's novel, *The Dark Holds no Terrors* is about Saru. Saru, the main protagonist of this novel, is an educated, economically independent, middle - class wife, who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her husband leads to her agonising search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relation with her husband becomes unbearably strained and she returns for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva.

The preference for boys over girls can be openly witnessed in most Indian homes and this discrimination between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents, especially mother, and the result is her rebellious nature. Saru's hatred towards her mother is so acute that she becomes rebellious just to hurt her, "I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer." (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 142) This hatred drives her to leave home for Bombay to seek medicine as a career In the medical college she falls in love with a college mate and marries him against her parents' wishes.

Devoid of love and security, she wanted to be loved. When gets attention from Manu, she wonders, "How could I be anyone's beloved ? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage, one could do without". (66) In the initial years of her marriage, Saru considers herself the luckiest woman on the earth. For her Manu, her husband, is her saviour and the romantic hero who rescues Saru. But Manu is uncomfortable with Saru's steady rise in status, as he feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to Saru. In the beginning Saru could not realise the change that had come in Manu. Saru's rise in social and financial status in contrast to Manu's status of an underpaid lecturer sets in great discomfort in their conjugal relation. Certain incidents aggravate the already strained relation between the two to the extent that in the privacy of their room at night he doesn't behave like a husband, but a rapist.

To gain his masculinity he gives vent to his feelings through his beastly sexual assault on Saru. At this juncture she comes to know about her mother's death. She returns home. There her father like a patiently waiting analyst, pleads with her to tell him everything and he then calmly hears the minute details of his daughter's sick relationship with her husband. Her father confides that silence had become a habit between Saru and her husband. This breaking of the silence of the past and the present marks a release for Saru. Saru's strength lies in her decision to come out of her silence and speak. Saru sees the truth about her mother and her husband after voicing her inner traumas. A mature Saru now shuns extremes and takes a practical view of the circumstances. In the quest for her 'self' she does not advocate separation from the spouse but a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage. Thus Saru successfully reshaped her 'self' at the end of novel.

In the novel *That Long Silence* the epigraph "You are your own refuge" is illuminating as Jaya like Saru, realises that the onus of creating a self resides only in her self. She quotes Krishna's advice to Arjuna at the end of *the Bhagvad Gita*, "Do as you desire. I have given you knowledge. None of you make the choice. The choice is yours". (*That Long Silence* 192) Jaya after reflection has to make possible their conception of her self, the discovery and knowledge that comes to her after telling and after erasing that long silence, "I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us".(192)

That Long Silence is the story of self reshaping of Jaya, the main protagonist of the novel. It starts at point of crisis when Jaya and her

husband Mohan move to the Dadar flat. For this novel Shashi Deshpande won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. In this novel the protagonist achieves “personhood”, yet does not negate the family or the society. She goes beyond what Elaine Showalter calls the “Female Phase” which is a phase of self-discovery, self-reshaping to turning inward, freed from the dependence of opposition, a search for identity. It is the story of an Indian housewife, who maintains silence throughout her life. The novel ends with her resolve to speak, to break her long silence. The allusion in the novel’s title is to a British feminist manifesto quoted in the epigraph (American actress Elizabeth Robin’s speech to WWSL in 1907), “If I were a man and cared to know the world. I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one half the world”. Against that backdrop the novel is a protest against the limitation of women’s lives.

That Long Silence could be read as crystallisation of memory and catharsis. It is an autobiographical narrative of Jaya. Her husband Mohan, suspected of business malpractice, has withdrawn with her to small suburban flat in Bombay. This limbo of waiting allows Jaya to reflect on her own life and come to terms with her protean roles – daughter, sister, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, friend, mistress and writer of genteel “feminine” newspaper pieces.

Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she was lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings as a result of which she was torn from within. She describes her marriage as, “a pair of bullocks yoked together [...]. A man and woman married for seventeen years”.(8) Jaya was deeply distressed to know that the writer in her could not come to light because of her husband. So she quits writing.

The novel which is an admixture of memory and current happenings, allows her to break out of “the long silence”, “I’m not afraid any more. The panic has gone”.(191) She now re-evaluates her life. She chooses to operate within the self-imposed limits of the family, resolving to change her life by renegotiating the power-relations and improving their interpersonal relationship within it rather than through the instrumentality of her writing.

Through the novel Shashi Deshpande defines woman as a subject in her own right. Jaya strives for and obtains a certain autonomy. She has realised her immense potentialities for action and self-actualisation. Her

perception is best expressed in the words of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, "There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind". (76) Knowing that she thus achieved personhood, achieved self-realisation and reshaped her 'self'.

Jaya is caught in the midst of a domestic storm. Her husband is accused of corrupt practices at office and the couple leaves their flat at Bombay's Church Gate and shifts to an old Dadar flat of theirs. The children go out for a holiday. That gives space to Jaya for self-interrogation. Now she tries to correct the situation, "Plug the 'hole' in the heart. I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to ease that long silence between us." (*That Long Silence* 192)

The movement is from passive existence to rebellion against the silence imposed by the society around. She cautions against bringing overnight changes, "We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope [...] life has always to be made possible". (193) The goal is of reshaping 'self' from her womanhood. Jaya's womanly self is embedded in her family, which is suffocating. The family is a cage where the 'wild self' inextricably is trapped and unnaturally reared.

The process of 'self' reshaping is illuminating and it is a cathartic experiment. It is a rebirth and a resurrection of self. A new Jaya is born from out of an 'agonising' and despairing Jaya'. 'Self' cannot be cut into pieces, a Jaya of Mohan, or a Jaya of her own. She pledges to live a "whole" life retaining all that did not fit in the straitjacket of "wifehood". She decides to give her own answers to Mohan, not the answers expected by him. The ending of the narrative with "life has always to be made possible", is a note of hope and affirmation.

Shashi Deshpande holds great worth as an Indian English woman novelist. She is the only Indian author to have made attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women. *Roots and Shadows*, her first novel, depicts the agony and suffocation, experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She undergoes great mental trauma when she refuses to play the straitjacketed role of a wife imposed upon her by society. The man she marries after her heart, to her great disappointment, is no different from the less educated and conservative Indian men. She is even more pained to realise that she herself has all along been unconsciously aping the role of the ideal Indian wife. In her quest for identity, she even develops an

extra-marital affair to finally realise that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage. Shashi Deshpande, thus exposes the hardship of a woman to establish her identity and reshaping her 'self'.

Indu, a middle class young girl is brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka (the mother surrogate in the novel). The novel begins with the heroine's return to her ancestral house. The parental home initiates her into an understanding of the meaning of human life. It is here that she discovers what her roots are – as an independent woman and a writer, and what her shadows are – a daughter, a mother and commercial writer. She rebels against Akka, her conventional world, her rigid values and marries Jayant.

In order to attain freedom she seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage inevitable in the parental family. She looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that casting herself in a new role will help her in winning her freedom. But marriage, the promised end in a traditional society, in feminist fiction becomes only another enclosure that restricts the movement towards a perception of herself as an independent human being and not buffeted by the circumstances or the social prescriptions. She arrives at a realistic understanding of love as a physical instinct :

Love, That's a word I don't really understand. It seems to me an over worked word. She realised, "The sexual instinct...That is true the material instinct ...That is true, too. Self-interest, self-love...They are the basic truth." (*Roots and Shadows* 97)

Indu experiences disillusionment in sex and suffers a silent sexual humiliation. She suffers no guilt in her extra-marital relationship with Naren and decides not to tell Jayant about it, "That had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together"(205) At the end of the novel Indu successfully reshaped her 'self' by asserting her autonomy and her awareness that she exists as a person and not a dependent on Jayant. Indu has self-knowledge and turns to free herself of guilt, shame and humiliation. She takes firm decision, "That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing. That I would not, could not enrich myself with Akka's money". (205) Indu has learnt to see not only her life full of possibilities for growth and grace but the very meaning of life itself, "I felt as if I was watching life itself...endless, limitless, formless and full of grace". (202)

Shashi Deshpande's *Moving on*, is a story of a woman who from starting to concluding of the novel spent her life on her own term and thus she successfully succeeded in reshaping her 'self' in patriarchal and male-dominated Indian society. The novel begins with Manjari's Baba's diary, and in the following chapter she is introduced, remembering her old home, her dead parents. A young woman, not yet forty, she is left alone. Her parents are dead and children are away. All these are to make sense of the world and her own sexuality. Manjari is not only a narrator, but also a reader herself and she reads father's diary, revisits her parents' past and discovers the hiding curves of their lives.

Manjari displays enormous courage and steadfastness in her decision to give up studying medicine to marry Shyam and again during such trying moments when it is revealed that her sister, Malu is made pregnant by her husband. When Malu dies after giving birth to Sachi, followed by Shyam's suicide, Manjari faces a painful period of struggle and strain. Estranged from family, living among strangers, she grapples with innumerable difficulties to support herself, to survive with her baby son :

I had no time to brood or grieve. It was
down to the basics, work, eat, sleep, wake
up, go back to work. (*Moving on* 213)

Manjari prefers to live on her own and refuses financial assistance from her father. Later when she is back with him after her mother's death, she drinks uninhibitedly in father's presence and in the company of her cousin Raja. She turns down Raja's repeated proposal to marry him and to make the two establishment one, because marriage without the foundation of love and only as a means of social security for a single woman is not acceptable to her. Besides, she is too familiar with the curves of his body to feel erotically aroused, as they grew up together. Since she decides not to get into marriage again, neither persuasion nor other consideration – physical, financial, emotional can prevail on her.

She shocks Raja, the upholder of patriarchal norms, by learning to drive her car and even trying to run it as a taxi, by installing and operating a computer at home and typing out manuscripts for others as a means of self employment when she fails to find out a satisfying job. What Manjari fails to control is her sexuality – the betrayal of her body and its relentless demands to be fed. She negotiates with it by sleeping with her tenant, a much younger man, but again on her own terms at her whim and desire, not his :

Only the body, his body, only my body,
and my starved body. No thoughts, no
feelings, only sensations. (257)

The call of her body that Manjari guiltily responds to stands revealed to Raja and gets reflected in his obvious ambivalence towards her, but she is not to look back. She has to move on and live her own life without being dictated by Raja or anyone. The novel ends symbolically, when both of them part ways at the end of a long journey and she starts her car and is back on the road again to be free.

Shashi Deshpande thus acknowledges that her women stand alone at their movement of realisation, but stand fulfilled. They established their personal identity by reshaping their own 'selves'.

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