

Shashi Deshpande's Craft as a Novelist - A Study with Special Reference to *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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*A girl is the young plant that
gets neither light nor water.
She is the flower that would
have blossomed but cannot.
Half fed and half heartedly educated
She gets only half wage for her labour.
The country got its freedom
but she continues to be bonded.*

[Kamla Bhasian]

The plight of the Indian women is aptly captured by Kamla Bhasian in the above mentioned poem. The existing disparities in the demographic, economic, and social indicators between males and females are a testimony to the consequences of gender inequality faced by the Indian women of the region. Being influenced by western feminist writers, the post independence Indian women writers have engaged themselves in devising verbal strategy for rejecting 'male cold' literary conventions historically accepted as 'standards'. Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India writing in English. She has created ripples in the society of male domination by taking women as women seriously in her novels. She takes us inside the consciousness of her women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions.

Shashi Deshpande is a well known name in the field of Indian literature. She was born in 1938 in Dharwad in Karnataka as the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist as well as a great Sanskrit scholar Sriranga. She pursued her education in Dharwad, Bombay and Bangalore. She presently lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband.

Shashi Deshpande emerged on the Indian fictional scene in the 1970s. She has nevertheless created a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle class educated woman who, although financially independent, is still facing the problems of adjustment between idealism and pragmatism. She is almost incomparable for her portrayal of Indian middle class women with their turmoils, convulsions, frustrations, endurance and 'that long silence' which has been their lot for many centuries. Her novels are mainly based on the lives of women and their problems particularly in the Indian context. For this reason she has been labelled a 'feminist'. She explored the realities behind the silence of women. She raised her voice against torment on women and also created mass awareness in the matter through her writings. Her books are translated into

several Indian languages. Her novels are deeply rooted in India; the character settings and the conflicts are inherently Indian.

Shashi Deshpande is a leading woman novelist in the Indian Literary Horizon with eight novels, four books for children, over eighty short stories and a screen play to her credit. She has won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her fifth novel, *That Long Silence* in 1989, she was awarded Padma Shri in 2009. In the context of the contemporary Indian writing in English, Shashi Deshpande is the confident voice, who explores individual and universal female psyche. She has gained reputation as a serious writer with tremendous potential. Most of her protagonists are women who are educated and exposed to western ideas. Women of the present day society stand on the threshold of social change in an enviable position. They are intensely aware of the injustice heaped on them unlike their counterparts a generation ago. However, Shashi Deshpande does not believe that women are inferior beings who must remain passive and submissive. This awakening of the woman's consciousness as portrayed by Shashi Deshpande in her novels deserves the extent of articulation of a woman's point of view which needs to be assessed from a new perspective.

Shashi Deshpande uses *first person narrative* to register women's protest against the male dominated society in the novel *That Long Silence*. She uses *double narratives* in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to give a realistic portrayal of Saru's inner self. *Roots and shadows*, her first novel, depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, her second novel, is all about male ego wherein the male refuses to play a second fiddle role in marriage.

The next novel, *If I Die Today*, contains elements of detective fiction. The narrator, a young college lecturer, is married to a doctor, and they live on the campus of a big medical college and hospital. The arrival of Guru, a terminal cancer patient, disturbs the lives of the doctors and their families. Old secrets are revealed, two people murdered, but the tensions in the families is resolved after the culprit is unmasked. One of the memorable characters is Mriga, a 14-year-old girl. Her father, Dr. Kulkarni, appears modern and westernized, yet he is seized by the Hindu desire for a son and heir, and never forgives Mriga for not being a son; her mother, too, is a sad, suppressed creature. Her novel *Come Up and Be Dead* exposes the evil of sexual exploitation in an educational institution that exists to empower girls to seek and offer justice.

That Long Silence, is about self doubts and fears which Jaya undergoes till she affirms herself. *The Binding Vine*, deals with 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. In *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande for the first time enters into the world of metaphysical philosophy. It is about three women from three generations of the same family and the way they cope with the tragedy that overwhelms them. *Small Remedies*, is about Savitribai Indorekar, the aging doyenne of Hindustani music, who avoids marriage and home to pursue her genius.

Her writings hold a *universal appeal* that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India. Her major concern emerge from our own

environment, from our immediate world, holding up mirror to our lives. In this era of verbal acrobatics and pretty packaging, Shashi Deshpande's clear lucid prose is real and refreshing. Superfluous words are not found. This aesthetics in her writing can be understood by the depth of the content; articulating her thoughts and ideas, transforming the very act of reading into a sharing experience. Readers encounter an intimacy, a kind of secret bonding with her as if she were speaking to them alone.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are stronger than her contemporary writers. They refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional role models laid down by society for women. But they attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita returns to parental home to escape from her husband Manohar's sadism. This temporary withdrawal helps her to view her situation objective. Besides, being merely a daughter, sister, wife or mother, she evolves into an individual with her own legitimate expectations of life.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya undergoes great mental trauma because she has refused to go into hiding with her husband as an enquiry against his financial irregularities is on. Like the mythological character Gandhari, she kept her eyes shut to her husband's illegal earning at office. Even her journalistic writings are circumscribed by her husband's likes and dislikes. Finally she is able to evaluate her expectations of life. After having rejected traditional role models, Deshpande's protagonists display great strength and courage in evolving, as their own role models as per the requirement of their social milieu. Her characters go through a process of self-examination before they reach self-actualization. Thus, Shashi Deshpande has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who refuse to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies, and face life with great courage and strength. Comparatively, they appear to more life-like and more akin to the educated, middle class, urban Indian woman of today.

Speaking of the *narrative technique* in *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straight forward narration in the novel. She employs the flash back method instead to draw her readers attention. The first chapter deals with the present, but the later chapters are more anachronistic with the final chapter ending in the present. Critic Shama Futehally writes: "It is a device which is useful either when some element of suspense is needed. For this novel chronologically clarity is essential as the reader already has to cope with an abundance of characters and their complex interactions" (Sharma 77).

That Long Silence is very close to real life experience and achieves its credibility from the fact that the protagonist Jaya is a well educated person possessing a literary sensitivity corresponding with her fictional role. The Sahitya Academy Award winning novel is about Jaya's hopes, fears, aspirations, frustrations and later triumph in life. Critic Y.S. Sunita Reddy observes: "The narrative with its slow unknitting of memories and unravelling of the soul is like an interior monologue quite similar to the stream of consciousness technique employed by Virginia Woolf" (Sharma 81)

Perhaps Deshpande's best work is, *That Long Silence*. The narrator Jaya, an upper-middle-class housewife with two teenage children, is forced to take stock of her life when her husband is suspected of fraud. They move into a small flat in a poorer locality of Bombay, giving up their luxurious house. The novel reveals the hollowness of modern Indian life, where success is seen as a convenient arranged marriage to an upwardly mobile husband with the children studying in "good" schools. The repetitiveness and sheer drabness of the life of a woman with material comforts is vividly represented, "the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curious that had to be kept spotless and dust-free, and those clothes, God, all those never-ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again" (*That Long Silence* 57). Though she is a writer, Jaya has not achieved true self expression. There is something almost suffocating about the narrowness of the narrator's life.

The novel contains nothing outside the narrator's narrow ambit. India's tradition and philosophy (which occupy an important place in the work of novelists like Raja Rao) have no place here. We get a glimpse of Hinduism in the numerous fasts observed by women for the well being of husbands, sons or brothers. Jaya's irritation at such sexist rituals is palpable; it is clear that she feels strongly about the ill-treatment of the girl child in India. The only reference to India's "glorious" past is in Jaya's comment, that in Sanskrit drama, the women did not speak Sanskrit—they were confined to Prakrit, a less polished language, imposing a kind of silence on them. In spite of her English education, Jaya is like the other women in the novel, such as the half-crazed Kusum, a distant relative, or Jeeja, their poor maid-servant. They are all trapped in their own self-created silence, and are incapable of breaking away from the supportive yet stifling extended family.

In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande raises the *strong voice of protest* against the male-dominated Indian society and against man made rules and conventions *That long Silence* is a first person narrative; the story is unfolded by Jaya, ironically again symbolizing victory, while in the actual life situation, she is supposed to lead a traditional, passive life like; "Sita following her husband into exile, Savithri, dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails....." (*That Long Silence* 11).

She refuses these role models because in modern life these references are simply allusions of the past with no relevance to the present. While these legendary women followed their husbands willingly, Jaya is accompanying Mohan everywhere because of compulsion. There is a frank, even brutal, realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life. "Two bullocks yoked together.....it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful: and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?" (*That Long Silence* 12).

Jaya, the *protagonist* in the very early life, realizes that 'girl child' is her first problem. The preference shown to the male children is because they are permanent members of the family, and are inheritors of the family name. The novel also interrogates the nature of the relationship between the narrator and her husband and the disposition of their married life. Their relationship is affected adversely by their incapability to understand each

other. Due to lack of communication the growing 'silence' between them, their marital life grows unsteady and dismal. For the first time, Jaya feels a strange emotion of anger in the unjustified accusation by Mohan that he has taken bribe for her and her children. The very idea of "being a partner in the crime and ally, when she has no role to play in the whole affair is revolting." (That Long Silence 31) But this anger transformed into a 'long silence' because for Jaya 'silence and surrender' is the real strength of an Indian woman.

Shashi Deshpande has not portrayed Jaya as a feminist character. Jaya hovers between submission and assertion, the former rather a more dominant note in her character. But the repeated allegations and accusations of her husband compel her to react sharply. She (Jaya) once tells kamat (her neighbour) ".....no women can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?.....A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (That Long Silence 147).

There are *three distinct phases of feminism*. The early means imitation of role models, Jaya has already crossed that limit. The first phase of imitation is followed by anger and protest, the major thrust of the novel is the depiction of this second phase in the life of Jaya. Whenever she looks back on her life, there is hardly any sense of nostalgia or yearning for the past; it is much more a feeling of suppressed anger which can burst out any time. The last phase of feminism that of articulation and assertion are only hinted in this novel as one of the future possibilities for Jaya.

The whole novel is a preparation for that articulation which will break her long silence. The reader is given sufficient hint that she is going to break her passivity; even Jaya asserts " will have to erase the silence between us, but the actual drama is postponed to the future" (That Long Silence 192). Having realized her position, Jaya would not accept the earlier image of a pair of bullocks yoked together, signaling a loveless couple. She comes to realize that life can always be made possible. The earlier impulsive Jaya becomes a mature woman, and with her realization, shadow that befall between wife and husband tends to disappear.

The novelist tries to establish that it is not only the patriarchal set up which is responsible for the women's condition in the Indian society. The responsibility also lies within the victim to refuse, to raise a voice and to achieve the goal. The novel also traces the growth of the protagonist from a state of weakness, feeling of failure to that of relaxation. She accomplishes this through self-assessment and self criticism. Shashi Deshpande told Joel Kuortti in an interview:

That Long Silence is a hysterical novel in the sense that inside of me I was kind of screaming, but when it came out - as you said, one steps back from that screaming self - and one says, look Jaya is very analytical. There is no point at which she gives way to her emotions or self pity or anything. Throughout she is analyzing herself, her life, her relationships, and I think that is how it has been for me. I think it was really the culmination of the anger and all the repression; everything came out in *That Long Silence* (Sharma 55).

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian wife. Although many women writers tried their hand at

expressing this long silence that had turned woman into non entities, they could only provide psychological depths to their characters. They neither created unreal sentimental romances or finally succumbed to the temptation of mouthing feminist ideology. But Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self or identity. Jaya represents half the humanity. The novel sustains its credibility from the fact that Jaya is a convent-educated English-speaking lady with a literary taste. It portrays the conflict raging between the narrator's split self; the writer and the housewife. About *That Long Silence* she says:

And then I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a woman's novel nevertheless , a book about the silencing of the one half of the humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own (Prasad 58).

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande shifts the narrative from the first person to the third person narrative in every alternative chapter. The double narrative helps to lend great authenticity to the portrayal of Sarita's inner self. Deshpande has commendably accomplished the task of giving a realistic portrayal of the mental trauma Sarita undergoes. In an interview, she tells how she hit upon the idea of using double narrative :

The present is in the third person and the past is in the first person. I was doing it, throughout in the first. But that's often a perspective I use in short stories – I wanted to be more objective. So, then I did it in the third. But it wouldn't work at all, yet I really need not distance myself from the narrative in the present, otherwise it was going to be far too intense. And then I read an American novel by Lisa Alther where she uses this method. And the minute I came across her novel I thought let me admit it freely – Oh god, this is how I am going to do my novel (Prasad 111).

Thus, Deshpande succeeds in the portrayal of Sarita's mental state with remarkable objectivity. Besides, her art lies amalgamating the past with the present seamlessly through dreams, nightmares, flashback, reminiscences and the simple third person narration.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, Shashi Deshpande's second novel, is about Saru, *the protagonist* an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing 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 relations with her husband become unbearably strained and she returns for some solace. And she gets a chance to think over her relationship with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother Dhruva.

Saru is ignored in favour of her brother, Dhruva. No parental love is showered on her and she is not given any importance. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much fanfare and performance of religious rites, whereas her birthdays are not even acknowledged. Her mother constantly reminds her that she should not go out in the sun as it would

worsen her already dark complexion. Saru recalls her conversion with her mother.

Mother: Don't go out in the sun, you will get darker.

Saru: Who cares?

Mother: We have to get you married. Will you live with us, your whole life?

Saru: Why not?

Mother: You can't.

Saru: And Dhruva?

Mother: He's different. He's a boy.

(The Dark Holds No Terrors 45) .

Blatant discrimination between Saru and brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents, especially mother and her resultant rebellious nature. Saru's mother's discriminatory behaviour makes Saru feel unloved and unwanted leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement. She is in the grips of insecurity. Irrespective of the geographical or chronological space, any Indian girl is a victim of gender discrimination in the Indian social setup. Saru's mother blames Saru for Dhruva's death. Her 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).

The hatred drives her to leave home for Bombay to seek medicine as a career. She falls in love with her college mate and marries him against her parents' wishes. Had her mother not been so against Manu, she would probably have not married him and brought herself to such a miserable condition. She later recollects: "If you hadn't fought me so bitterly if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps, I would never have married him. And I would not have been here, cringing from the sight of his hand, hating him and yet pitying him too" (The Dark Holds No Terrors 96).

Shashi Deshpande has portrayed Saru's character as someone who remains at home as a house-wife despite being a qualified doctor gradually people in Saru's neighbourhood recognise her as a doctor. Her success as a well-known and reputed doctor becomes the cause of her strained marital relations with Manu. In a retrospective mood she says much later: "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (The Dark Holds No Terrors 180). Manu is uncomfortable with Saru's steady rise in status, as he feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to Saru. Besides she is unable to spare time enough for Manu and children. Manu and Saru want to move out to some other place for their own reasons. While Manu feels humiliated and embarrassed, Saru is no longer happy in that cramped and stinking apartment and wants to move to somewhere decent. Earlier she was happy and contented to live on Manu's salary, but in her new role as a career woman she becomes discontented. She resents: "For me, things now began to hurt.... A frayed saree I could not replace, a movie I could not see, an outing I could not join in. I knew now that without money life became petty and dreary. The thought of going on this way became unbearable" (The Dark Holds No Terrors 92).

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.

Shashi Deshpande has presented a realistic picture of the gross-gender inequality prevailing in our society. On one occasion Saru presents a perfect recipe for a successful marriage. She says:

A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA, you should be a BA; if he is 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety, if you want a happy marriage; don't ever try to reverse the doctor, nurse, executive, secretary, principal, teacher role. It can be traumatic, disastrous; and I assure you, it is not worth it. He'll suffer . You'll suffer and so will the children. Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage must be an equal partnership. That's nonsense, rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal, it will always be unequal, but take care that it is unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you. (The Dark Holds No Terrors 137).

Shashi Deshpande contrasts Saru's life with the lives of her two school friends- Sunita and Nalu; and shows that wife, a mother and a spinster had their own share of joys and sorrows and it is almost difficult to conclude as to who is the more happier or the more fulfilled. Shashi Deshpande does not let herself get overwhelmed by the western feminism or its militant concept of emancipation. A mature Saru shuns extremes and takes a practical view of the circumstances. She is neither the typical western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. In the quest for the wholeness of identity, she does not advocate separation from the spouse but a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage.

A close study of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian women who feel smothered and fettered in a tradition-bound, male dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and limitations; but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mindset.

She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a male-dominated society. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination first as daughter and later as wives. Although she has a small volume of literary works to her credit, her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women. Shashi Deshpande's sincere concern for women and her craft as a novelist is reflected strongly in all her novels. Deshpande is not against the institution of marriage, as her woman protagonists strive to make their marriages work in their endeavour to lead a meaningful existence. "A finely drawn, diaphanous portrayal of the endemic imbalance in a marriage." (New Society Magazine) .

Shashi Deshpande keep her narratives female centered and gives an intimate insight into the psyche of the middle class Indian women who feel oppressed by their patriarchal socialization. She provides new ideals for better man-women relationship, there by broadening the scope of woman existence. She prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a

working philosophy for the contemporary woman. To her tradition are the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolize the Indian way of life, and modernity is the assertion of the independent individual identity.

Deshpande feels that the woman must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression to her individuality and identity. "The novel's strength lies in its compassion, its tolerance and understanding of human relationships" (The Times Literary supplement). Shashi Deshpande's novels are realistic depiction of the anguish and the conflict of the modern educated middle class women. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore way to fulfill themselves as a human being. Shashi Deshpande's concern and sympathy are essentially for the woman. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. Besides revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self identity, the author lays bare the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression.

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 characters husbands, lovers, fathers and other relations- display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While the majority of husbands are patriarchal in their approach, the older men particularly the fathers are broad-minded. Surprisingly the male friends are 'feminist' in their approach and sympathize with the protagonists a lot. Deshpande's male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully. Shashi Deshpande states that she does not "believe in a simple opposition of bad men, I don't believe the world is like that at all" (Prasad 78). Thus she has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of the Indian Patriarchy and after initial submission resist the oppressive situation, there by reflecting the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her identity.

The protagonists in Deshpande's novels are on the road to self-discovery. Usually some domestic crisis propels them in this quest. Shashi Deshpande's novels also frequently ruminate over the condition of human alienation and the vicissitudes of time. Past resides with the present, and the novels often digress into Indian myths, fables and folktales that show the power of tradition and the society's reluctance to change. But her novels are infused with a rich inclusiveness, which in itself enhances the possibilities of the hope.

Her novels are essentially reflective of the unenviable situation of the beleaguered contemporary Indian women, which she has depicted with great artistic finesse and astounding originality. Shashi Deshpande's commendably realistic depiction of the contemporary Indian women's situation and the pragmatic solution she puts forward accord her novels, an imperishable importance for their affirmative eloquent marriage for women and the whole humanity as well.

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