The Problem of Identity in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande’s novels represent the contemporary woman’s struggle to define and accomplish a sovereign selfhood. The problem of identity, the contradiction of being both oneself and fitting a traditional role as a ‘good daughter’, ‘good wife’ or ‘good mother’ occurs frequently in writing by women. Related to this theme is the propensity to define oneself in terms of others. *That Long Silence*’s Jaya’s sense of her identity is never certain. She is deplumed between Jaya, herself and specially her juvenile self, told by her father that she could accomplish something in the world. This paper is an attempt to depict the problem of identity, in the context of coeval Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, as mother and most important of all as mortal being. The feminist philosophy projects the problem of ‘self’ the quest of women’s identity is a typical motif of feminist literature and a central task of feminist literary criticism. Sashi Deshpande’s novels show how the ‘feminine mystique’ deceives women, and that the persona, a wise mother and good wife, is no more women’s desirable identity. And it is presented through a heroine who suffers from the inner dissociation and attempts to wander outside the house. In some respects, Simone de Beauvoir's trenchant observation, 'He is the Subject, she is the other,' sums up why the self is such an important issue for feminism.

Keywords: - Identity, suppression, silence. Individual, realistic

Introduction: The portraiture of women the entire world over have been all too myriad in their complexion, as they have been all too rich in their composition and all too variegated in their character. Picked up from the different times and diverse climes, even a random sample of these images soon reveals the wide spectrum of richness of their code, content and treatment, their colours and contours. There is, however, no denying the fact that the onetime idealized and idolized images of women have undergone some unprecedented metamorphosis all the world over, especially in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

According to Indian tradition, a woman must defer to her husband in every possible respect. She must make the marital home pleasant for him. She must cook the meals, wash the dishes, and take care of the children. She must never enquire about money and she must acquiesce to her husband’s every demand. But what happens when the old customs lose their power and the woman no longer believes her life should be determined in this narrow fashion? This prospect is the underlying theme of Sashi Deshpande’s novel, *That*
Long Silence, in which her lead protagonist, Jaya, undergoes profound changes against the backdrop of an India that is also evolving. There is a shift in values and women have started acknowledging themselves the co-equals of man. Though the high hopes of Feminism have been washed away in the present social milieu, the relationship between man and woman becomes one of structured interdependence. Still the woman has to work for her liberation without resigning herself to her destiny. Gender equality remains a myth.

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus; it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Sashi Deshpande has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. The finite dimension of the relationship between man and woman has been prescribed by man and not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery motive has imposed her limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons. Very often, this acceptance is not congruent with the reality that lies underneath. Modern women prefer to exercise her choice and break away from her traumatic experiences.

Women are now portrayed as more assertive, more liberated in their view, and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past. Instead of downgrading the elements of suffering at the hands of her lover or husband or man, she has started asserting her substantive identity in action, not in words. Whether it is Devi of Githa Hariharan's The Thousand Faces of Night, or Sita of Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors, or Lucy of J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace, the women have established a coherent class structure one of assertion of identity and defiance of male supremacy, and protest at being subordinated by man.

The male ego has given the woman an inferior status through the ages. Man has relegated her to a second class citizen. A group of Indian women novelists in there, hybridity of thought and multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious social dimensions have conceptualized the women problem in general and middle-class and upper-class women in particular. While the gyno critics think that too many women in too many countries speak the same language of silence, some Indian women
novelists like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, and Anita Desai have tried with sincerity and honesty to deal with the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women. Deshpande began her literary career in 1977 as a short story writer. She is a born storyteller who proved her sustained creativity with the novel form. She is one of the widely read post independence Indian English writers who write consciously of the issues that concern the educated middle class woman in Indian society. She attempts to closely analyze man woman relationship within the perimeters of family and the contemporary social set up. She primarily focuses on the captivating problems and the suffocating environs of her heroines, who struggle hard in this malicious and callous male dominated world to discover their true identity. Deshpande has thrashed women’s problems and situations in a fast changing social scenario. We cannot brand her either as typical Western liberated or an orthodox Indian one. She does not let herself be overwhelmed by the Western feminism or its militant concept of liberation. In quest for wholeness of identity, she does not advocate separation from the partner but a diplomatic assertion of one’s identity within marriage.

In spite of the advances in technology and science, society still marginalizes woman, based on gender distinction. In our society, there is a distorted notion that if somebody writes anything about women, that would be a feminist work and it is against masculine supremacy. It is also noted that many of the feminist writers worked out on the exaggerated or fabricated troubles of women and at the end of the story the protagonist quarrels with the male characters and publicly challenges the male domination. Shashi Deshpande differs from other feminist writers on this angle. She does not write as a feminist but she has a woman’s perceptive on her works. She deals with the genuine problems of contemporary Indian woman. With her works she could convey the depths of female psyche. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male dominated and tradition bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels ‘feminist texts’. She does not make her women characters stronger than they actually are in their real life. We can see the elements of ‘Deshpandean’ heroines in every woman of today’s Indian society. They hold the authenticity of flesh and blood. Deshpande has handpicked these characters from real life and readers can
Equate these characters with themselves or somebody they know. I think this might be the reason behind her popularity.

By describing women characters with a feminist awareness, she reveals her own attitude to the concept of liberation. Her writings therefore lend themselves to a feminist interpretation, which is not necessarily based on Western type feminisms. Her female protagonists redefine the Sati Savitri image. She tries to reevaluate the present Indian value system and recommends the importance of equality in man-woman relationship. On this aspect, she has portrayed the ‘bossy’ nature of men and pointed out that women are turned to be mere secretaries after their marriage. A typical Indian husband considers his wife as a machine, which speed up or smoothen his day to day work. For them marriage is a means for their social and personal betterment. After accepting dowry, they use their wives as unpaid servants; Indian husbands gain more from the ‘marriage sale’. Mohan in That Long Silence is that kind of husband because he married the protagonist for his social betterment. Though Deshpande is aware of this fact, she never suggests the female chauvinism as a solution to all the problems of Indian women. This is why her voice is different among the feminist writers in India.

Deshpande generally has the heroine as the narrator, and employs a kind of stream of consciousness technique. All the novels of Deshpande hold the power to deliver the problems of middle class women in a genuine sense. Her novels conceive the elements of personal experiences. Her psychological insight into her characters put her on par with the masters of the genre. Her women have a peculiar authenticity, as they seem to be direct offshoots of their peculiar backgrounds. They don’t speak much but we have ample opportunity to read the workings of even their inner beings. Deshpande has a rare vitality of language to make her portraits striking as well as convincing.

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 is in India of the eighties and not as she should be. Veena Sheshadri says in her review, ‘Why has the author chosen a ‘heroine’ who only succeeds in evoking waves of irritation in the reader? Perhaps it is because a competent writer like her is never satisfied unless she is tackling new challenges. Also, she believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be; and there must be thousands of self-centered women like Jaya, perennially griping about their fate, but unwilling to do anything that could
result in their being tossed out of their comfortable ruts and into the big, bad world of reality, to fend for themselves.

To make the story authentic and appealing, Deshpande has used the device of first person narrative to ensure its credibility by making the protagonist read her inner mind and thus representing the psyche of the modern middle class learned woman. Jaya is a modern woman rooted in tradition, whereas her husband, Mohan, is a traditionalist rooted in customs. The difference between their outlooks is so great that they fail, repeatedly, to understand each other. To Mohan, woman sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food is the real 'strength' of a woman, but Jaya interprets it as nothing more than despair. The difference in their attitude is the main cause of their failure to understand each other.

Due to differences in attitude, their marital life grows shaky and gloomy. It becomes more of a compromise than love, based on social fear rather than on mutual need of each other. The cause may be rooted in their choice of a partner. For example, from the very beginning, Mohan wanted a wife who was well educated and cultured and never a loving one. He made up his mind to get married to Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently, sounding so much like a girl whom he had seen speaking English fluently. He tells Jaya:

You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukaku’s house, you were talking to your brother, Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you. (90)

In her stream of thoughts, Jaya, too, looks at her marital relations where there is no conversation left between them. This unhappiness is reflected not only in her conjugal life, but also in social life. Her books, her stories lack anger and emotion. The publishers reject her writings. In addition, when, finally, Mohan angrily walks out of the house, she feels that she has failed in her duty as a wife. She recalls the tradition of act and retribution and compares herself with Kusum: "An act and retribution they followed each other naturally and inevitably.” (128) When Mohan leaves the house without informing her; she feels that her husband is neglecting her in the same manner as she had done with Kusum.

**Conclusion:** Like Virginia Woolf or Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande is a prose rhapsodist of feelings, sentiments and emotions passing through human consciousness. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande specialize in depicting
undulations of the female ego or self under the pressure of cynical human situations and emotional relationships. Their attention is also focused on feminine suffering in the complex culture stresses and strains in Indian society having strong past moorings. Shashi Deshpande explore human relationship modern Indian society particularly in husband-wife relationship, Shashi Deshpande’s women, like those of her predecessor, are tolerant, obedient and submissive. But a feminist awakening and upsurge is all along notable in their feelings and conduct the theme of the novel That Long Silence implies a belated rebellion, a postponement of aggressive behaviour for long till postponement cannot be made any more. The dam of silence and tolerance is broken and the result is flood of egotistical assertions and emotional explosion.

References