

Quest for Self-Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Firdous Hussain Parra

Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

The theme of quest for self-identity of women, when dealt by women writers, is pondered upon and reflected acutely in terms of the inner conflicts that rage in the psyche of women in a society steeped in patriarchal values. Shashi Deshpande's novels appeal to the readers for their rootedness in everyday Indian lives. Family relationships have always fascinated the novelist and she draws her brush to present these domestic ties on her canvas to bring about characters that leave a lasting impact, by sketching their suppressed desires and the havoc within them. It requires no plenitude of imagination to find a parallel between these architectural constructs and the conscious force which subdues and controls a cluster of people within the limits of certain expected norms and patterns of culture. The present paper is an endeavor to highlight this inner turmoil and quest for self in the women characters of **Shashi Deshpande** in her two remarkable novels, ***That Long Silence*** and ***The Dark Holds No Terrors***. It will discuss how the images of 'ancestral homes' and the characters residing in them define themselves within its archives. The paper will also discuss the realization of women characters to break their silences – articulate their predicament and establish their identities.

Keywords: Home, Conflict, Identity, Architectural Constructs, Women Psyche

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande writes in clear, lucid prose about a society and a culture to which she belongs. In the Indian context, ancestral homes and family relationships have always had their importance. The 'ancestral home' is the stage where different family members come together, be it a festive occasion or the death of a family member. In the novels of Deshpande the characters come to life when they are set against the background of these structures, which are places associated with nostalgic memories.

That Long Silence is a story of an Indian house wife, Jaya who maintained silence all her life in the face of hardships that threatened to break her. The novel is a recollection of Jaya's marriage with Mohan. The work is an attempt to come to terms with herself and her family by writing and breaking a 'long silence' portraying the conflict raging between the narrator's split self: the writer and the housewife. About *That Long Silence* Deshpande 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 (qtd in Prasad 58).

The Dark Holds No Terrors, is about Saru, the protagonist an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife who is made conscious of her gender as a child. Saru has a loveless relationship with her parents and later a strained relation with her husband that lead to her agonizing and angst ridden search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents house fifteen years after the resolution that she had made i.e; never to return to them. However her relation with her husband became unbearably strained and she was forced to return for some solace. 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. Saru recalls her conversation 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)

Behind the story of *That Long Silence* there lies the huge disappointment and frustration on part of Jaya, who even after repeated attempts failed to come close to her husband emotionally. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* remarks:

It [the mind] can think back through its fathers or through its mothers, as I have said a woman writing thinks back through her mother. Again if one is a woman, one is often surprised by a splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary outside of it, alien and critical. (101)

Woolf here hints at the deep unarticulated complexities between the processes in the creation of female and feminine identity. The discussion is about the changing roles as a woman between being an inheritor and a critic, marking it as a movement between strong identification with dominant values. In relation to this oscillation of hegemonic process, Woolf undertakes a reassessment of the mechanics of social insertion for women through the homestead, the private sphere and patriarchal hierarchies, inventing narratives that offer, in the multiple individual and the collective protagonist as also alternatives to individual quests of identity. Deshpande embarks upon a journey into the feminine consciousness, depicting the inner world of women. The author seems to be drawn into the exploration of the forces which shape women's experiences. She uses the consciousness of the protagonist to question the repressive forces dominating women in contemporary India. Gender stereotyping is again a strategy used by the male-dominated society, confining women to certain assigned roles and it is highlighted in her novels. The protagonist of *The Dark Holds no Terrors* becomes balanced in her personality only when she redefines her identity by an interaction with the past. Meenakshi Mukhejee speaks of the novel:

No summary will do justice to the intricate web the author has woven through the superimposition of the past over the present, through dreams, nightmares, flash back, introspection and simple straight forward, third person narration (31)

Jaya finds her routine life so monotonous that she wishes for something bad to happen, a catastrophe that would provide her a relief from the hum drum of boring life; something that would shake them out of their slumber and take them to the path of excitement and adventure. She often imagines some war between the countries or something eventful to happen. She reflects: I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony. I remember now how often I had sighed for a catastrophe, a disaster, no, not a personal one, but anything to shake us out of our dull grooves. (That Long Silence 04)

Jaya never wants a personal disaster but it is what befalls them. Mohan works as an engineer in the purchase section of the company and one day is caught accepting bribe. Mohan has been prompted to accept commission under the influence of Mr. Aggarwal. He thus is involved in the business fraud and he has to go on hiding as some investigation regarding the shenanigans that Mohan is charged with are going on. He takes refuge in Jaya's humble Dadar flat located on the Bombay and leaving his posh Churchgate bungalow. The time for both Jaya and Mohan hangs heavy as they do not have anything to keep them busy. Jaya during this time falls into reflection; lost into pondering over her own past which unfolds the whole story before the readers. She reflects on the last seventeen years of her life, which she has spent with her husband in marriage, and also on her very family life before marriage. Even the most confidential and personal issues of her life are taken into review which provides the novel slightly a confessional mode novel. Flashback technique is used in the novel. Ample use of dreams in the novel is used through which Shashi Deshpande successfully puts forward Jaya's mental state. Y.S Sunita Reddy observes:

The narrative with its slow unknitting of memories and unraveling of the soul reads like an interior monologue quite similar to the stream of conscious technique

employed by the like of Virginia Woolf. (qtd in Sharma 81)

Saru found the unwanted identity thrust upon her by none other than her mother itself resulting in hatred and confusion. She wanted to be different from her mother in every possible way. Saru marries Manu who works at a cycle repair shop and belongs to a lower caste in order to embarrass her mother. Saru, a doctor by profession, married a lower caste. Manu becomes more and more withdrawn when everyone starts asking him how it feels to have a wife "who earned not only the butter, but the bread as well." Saru felt frustrated and helpless against such social taboos which forced woman to always stay a few steps behind her husband. Deshpande has foregrounded the mental repression created through a male supremacist ideology which plays a vital role in the destruction of a woman's selfhood and identity.

Self is the centre of the whole personality of an individual, embracing both the conscious and the unconscious. As children grow, they develop ego as they become more and more aware of the role they has to play in a society. Thus the ego is far removed from the self. This is more so in women because women are expected to play the role of the submissive wife and mother in society. Thus it becomes difficult for women to be their real selves. This results in a lot of disappointment and suppressed anger. The desire to attain a wholesome personality with the integration of the conscious and the unconscious remains an unrealized dream. Sarita who was bent on proving her worth to her family by achieving material prosperity could not in reality remain happy because she was trying to don the mask of respectability in society. In order to overcome the fears and conflicts, she had to turn inward and recognize them. Focusing on her inner conflict, she experienced the pain and anxiety that originally caused her to flee from it. While re-living her childhood experiences in her ancestral house, Madhav reminded her of Dhruva, and it is through him that she once again goes through a traumatic experience. It is worth noting that just as the sibling rivalry she had, she feels jealous of Madhav as her father was at ease with him and had also occupied the house. When Madhav comes home one day with high fever, guilt and self-blame involved in the death of Dhruva, we see the anger reversed the way she helps Madhav regain health. When she kneels by

him to examine the feverish boy, the rain pours down as it did when Dhruva was drowned. It results in a healing process; the confrontation with the guilt-ridden fears, helping her in getting rid of the terrors of the darkness. Finally Sarita decides to go back to her husband and children and at the same to be at service to humanity as a doctor. Here Deshpande points out the fact that the women need to think for themselves yet be attached to traditional values and attitudes; the way out often lies in a conscious voluntary accommodation and adjustment.

Jaya makes a powerful statement on the unfair system prevailing in the society on the subjugation of women. She realizes that it is unfair on the part of a woman that has allowed the dominance and repression to continue. Women should not succumb to their situations and assume roles thrust upon them, "...in this life itself there are so many cross roads, so many choices" (That Long Silence 192). She opines that women have allowed their victimization instead of bargaining for equal partnership. The apt remark of Sarala Parker:

The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. (Parker 169)

Deshpande's protagonists' quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences born out of the prohibitive nature of the Indian patriarchal societies. The writer reaffirms that she does not "believe in a simple opposition of bad men, I don't believe the world is like that at all" (qtd in Prasad 78). She has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of patriarchy and after initial submission resist the oppressive situation, there by reflecting the author's viewpoint that women must assert themselves within marriage to preserve their identity. Her characters finally understand that it is them who have contributed to their victimization and that they have to fight their own battles. Jaya feels the necessity to break the silence, articulate her predicament and establish her identity as she realizes that it is not only the fault of men alone that has resulted in feminine discontent but a patriarchal order can be subverted only if women take ranks in order of their intelligence and

individuality. Jaya decides that she will from now onwards without sacrificing her self-identity or individuality. Her giving up writing for the newspaper column is symbolic of her giving up the role of a traditional wife; instead she will write now what she wants to write and will not look up at Mohan's face for answers she wants. This makes her voyage of self-discovery complete.

II. REFERENCES

- [1]. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2008. Print.
- [2]. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2000. Print.
- [3]. Parkar, Sarala "Breaking the Silence: Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*", *Commonwealth Quarterly*. Vol. 18, No. 46, Dec-March, 1993. Print
- [5]. Prasad, Amar Nath and S. Joseph Peter. *Indian Writing In English: Critical Ruminations*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005. Print.
- [6]. Sharma, Siddharth. *Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Feminist Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2005. Print.
- [7]. Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. United Kingdom: Penguin, 2002. Print.