

## Women's Relational Identity In Shashi Deshpande's Novels



\* Dr. Deepa Rani

\* Govt. Polytechnic Colony, Nilokheri

Many Indian women writers like Kamala Markandya, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala, Shobha De and Anita who documented female resistance against a patriarchal maintained Indian culture but have not discussed at length the attempts of women to gain financial independence since their focus is entirely different. A few career women figure among the minor characters in their novels but their professional life is not discussed in detail. More than any of these women novelists, it is Shashi Deshpande who tries to project modern women who endeavour to give importance to their professional as well as personal lives. Shashi Deshpande's women characters belong to middle class society, are brought up in a traditional environment and struggling to liberate themselves and trying to seek their self identity and independence under the influence of modernity. Shashi Deshpande depicts the anguish and conflict of modern Indian women caught between traditional patriarchy and tradition on one hand and self expression, individuality and independence associated with modernity on the other. As Maria Mies, after doing the sociological survey, points out:

The career woman has not only to face the opposition of her surroundings and to struggle against many objective obstacles, but she is often divided in herself because she also often subscribes to the Indian idea of womanhood. Her problems arise, firstly from the contradictions between this image and the demand of a new social situation and then from the discrepancy between new aspirations and lack of opportunity (Mies 130).

However in Shashi Deshpande's works we have women who are professional, married most often outside their community yet unable to break free from the traditional bonds during moment of choice and crises. All the heroines of Shashi Deshpande try to negotiate between tradition and modernity with the desire to lead a new life that

education has enabled them to imbibe. Tradition and modernity are two major factors that determine the role and status of Indian woman. The word tradition in English means the body of customs, thought, practices belonging to a particular country, people, family or institution (physical structures of society / culture ) which has been handed down from generation to generation without much change over a relatively long period of time. Here the sense of continuity and changelessness is implied. Traditionalism also stands for a system of philosophy in which all knowledge is thought to originate in divine revelation and to be perpetuated by tradition that is transmission of the same from generation to generation where modernity has been defined by sociologists in terms of change in society. Dr. Jasbir Jain makes quite a few sensible points as follow:

We... (mistakenly) treat (modernity and tradition) as opposites categories primarily because modernity is perceived as a natural (step in ) borrowing from the west and not as a natural (step in) evolution (that is) necessary for survival. (Further,) it is seen as related (only) to the body and the externals, and not as an engagement with new ideas....(what is worse), it is ... often delinked from the process of individuation. ( Jain 20)

Indian women, unlike their Western counterparts have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually enslaved and biologically subjugated against a male dominated social set-up. Any attempt by a woman to rise above the oppressive forces rooted in the middle class margins has either been curbed mercilessly, or ignored in the name of social dignity, Shashi Deshpande all through the gamut of her ever-expanding creative horizon, makes it a point to constantly provide a separate space for her characters.

The present research paper proposes to present the Indian middle class women, who are

brought in a traditional environment and struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self identity and independence through their career, try to balance their domestic as well as professional roles in the novels of Shashi Deshpande.

Deshpande's women find their marriage painful and tormenting. Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Jaya in *That Long Silence*, and Savitribai and Leela Bai in *Small Remedies* - are all career women. Deshpande tries to address particularly the problems of middle class women. Her modern, career-oriented women try to redefine human relationships in the view of the newly acquired professional status.

Indu in *Roots and Shadows* is an educated and determined girl who always wanted to be free and independent. As a journalist, Indu finds her job very unsatisfactory. The editor wants her to write what is acceptable to the public and so, she can not really write what she wants to. She is unhappy with her career which forces her to be false to herself. When she is sour about the way she is forced to paint false journalism, Jayant her husband, takes it easy and advises her to compromise. She finds it difficult to compromise with her honesty and decides to resign her job. Jayant firmly disapproves of any such move and Indu helplessly continues in the same job, hating it at the same time.

Akka's choice of Indu as her heiress gives her new courage and strength. She introspects her married life and realizes the need to seek freedom within the bounds of obligations and responsibilities. She decides to resign her job at once and devote herself to the kind of writing she has always dreamed of. Indu, thus, finally asserts herself as a writer: "She realizes that her roots are to be an independent woman and writer while her shadows are to be daughter, a mother and commercial writer (Deshpande 34).

Indu suffers no guilt in her extra-marital relationship with Naren and decides not to tell Jayant about it. She takes firm decision: "I would put all this behind me and go back to Jayant. What kind of a life can you build on a foundation of dishonesty, I had asked myself once. What kind of home have I built? Now I would go back and see that home could stand the scorching

touch of honest. Nevertheless I knew I would not tell about Naren and me (Deshpande 205).

Indu's predicament is representative of large predicament of women in contemporary India where the new socio-economic forces have shaken old cultural modes. When the Indian woman was uneducated, illiterate and ignorant, she was hailed as a pativrata, a sati, an honorable woman and so on. Now she has started becoming aware of stirrings of her conscience, her quest, her individuality, her place and role in the family and society. This woman is Indu.

Saru, the heroine of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* experiences undefeatable trauma when her professional success has cast a shadow on her married life. She tries all her efforts to make her marital life smooth. Although Saru is economically and ideologically independent, sadly economic independence of women in Indian context has not automatically resulted in full fledged autonomy. They are caught in a conflict between individual aspiration and social demands. The financial ascendance of Sarita renders Manu impotent. The only way he can gain potency and masculinity is through sexual assault upon Sarita. To escape from this torture, she even prepares to resign from the job. But he is not prepared to lose her income and comforts it brings.

Saru searches for a refuge and wonders whether her parental home can be one. On introspection she realizes that she is her own refuge. Her success as a doctor reinforces her feeling of self-esteem. In the end, she realizes that her profession is her own and she will decide what to do with it. She is conscious, "my life is my own." She is fully aware that career is an essential part of her life and that she can not sacrifice it in order to salvage her marriage. She succeeds in realizing her selfhood through her profession. So she goes out to attend a patient. Saru proves that economically independent woman like her can bring change in the society and that women as individuals can have some significant control over their relationship and professions. Thus Sumita Kukreti says in her article:

"Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depict the journey of modern towards financial independence, emotional balance and social recognition.

(Deshpande 195)

Jaya of *That Long Silence* has been a promising writer and had even won a prize for one of her short stories. Mohan, her husband, encourages her to write and even introduces her to editors of magazines. However, he finds her themes autobiographical in nature and therefore, he objected her writing. In order to fulfill her roles as wife and mother, she is even prepared to sacrifice her career. Jaya begins to write light, humorous pieces in newspapers, where she need not present her views and ideas.

Jaya on introspection realizes that she has failed as a writer and that is because she has made enormous sacrifice on her profession and her aspirations to see that her marriage is not jeopardized. She knows that she does not speak in her true voice. She now realizes that she cannot be a complete woman if she remains a wife or a mother and ignores the other equally important self, namely, a writer what she really wants to write. Thus, at the end, Jaya succeeds in creating a complete self balancing her domestic and professional roles. Bhatnagar comments on her heroines as:

"Thus, Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory, of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposing ideas and conflicting themselves. That is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude (Bhatnagar 5)."

Deshpande's *Small Remedies* discusses the life of two women—one obsessed with the classical music and another devoted to the communist party. Both these women desert their family lives in order to make an identity in public identity, outside the family life. Talking to an interviewer Deshpande. "having a life outside the family is very important of women." Accordingly all her women protagonists Indu, Saru, Jaya, Savitribai and Leelabai succeed in constructing a self through individual professional achievement. They also come to terms with themselves by redefining their relationship, accepting at the same time social constraints and emerge as fully developed individuals doing justice in their domestic as well as professional fields.

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