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Patriarchal Society and the Female Self in the Major Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

The search for self for a woman, both inside and outside literature has had at one time or the other to confront the patriarchal system of society. Human society, in general, throughout the world has mainly been dominated by the male, giving birth to the patriarchal system in which woman has been given a secondary role. The female identity finds no place of its own but the one in relation to man. The notion of male superiority has taken many forms – paternal tyranny against female child in the family, male supremacy in the state and summary dismissal of the intellectual capability of the female in intellectual fields. Because of this vulnerable state of giving birth to children which incapacitated her physically for a length of time and made her dependent on the male for food and shelter, she had to accept the male dominance in the family and consequently in society and state. The fiction of Shashi Deshpande not only takes note of the exploitation of women in the patriarchal system but also records the change that is taking place. Woman's search for self is one of her major fictional themes.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Female self, Male dominance, Exploitation, Male supremacy.

In the patriarchal system the life of woman has practically been manmade. Women have done what men have either permitted or compelled them to do. This allowed them to develop no identity of their own, whether individual or social. They have always been the passive victims of male oppression. A woman had to marry the person chosen for her by her parents, and after marriage the husband was her lord and master. More than the financial subjugation,it was the mental subjugation that left woman with no self of her own. To complete the mental subjugation, man created an ideal image of woman that suited to his own needs – the image of a caring, loving, sacrificing creature who put the good of others before her own good and who conformed to the moral codes of society fully.

The position of women in India has not been different from that of women elsewhere. Like most of the societies in the world, Indian society also has been

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patriarchal. The Indian culture and tradition are based on the Hindu view of life. It rests on the foundations of religious beliefs such as rebirth, immortality of soul, sin, virtue, action and morality. The idea of pollution and purity is equally important. The concept of purity is related to birth and not cleanliness. Hierarchy is based on '*varnas*' and caste, birth being the determining factor. The Hindu philosophy believes in the continuity of the past in the present in which the actions of the previous birth play a determining role in the present birth.

It is through these beliefs that the patriarchal system of the Indian society has been subjugating its feminine population. Traditionally, women have been given a secondary position in society. Barring a few exceptions, women as a class had been strictly confined to the boundaries of the household. They were denied formal education and were taught since their childhood to obey the males in the family. Sacrifice, forbearance, obedience, silence etc. have been the hallmark of their lives. The greater their adherence to these so called virtues the more they were lauded by the male dominated society.

Woman in India has been caught in a paradox. She has been lauded as a 'devi' – a goddess, who is a symbol of virtue and goodness. Fertility, prosperity and learning are associated with goddesses – Laxmi and Sarasvati, and strength and righteousness with Durga. There are innumerable manifestations of these goddesses. The cultural models have been derived from the religious scriptures. The dominant ones are that of Sita, Savitri and Parvati. All these images of women reinforce the concept of '*pativrata*' – the devoted wife, who is single minded in her concern for the welfare of her husband and is willing to make any sacrifice for him. Thus our scriptures give a very high position to the female. This, however, does not tally with the actual position of women in Indian society. From early times of history women in India have been given a lower position. The desire for a son which has been deep rooted in the Indian psyche eflects the superiority of the male in society. The killing of the girl child just after birth or, if detected medically, even before birth is another instance of the prejudice against women. It is through a male child that a father is supposed to obtain '*moksha*' – release from the cycle of rebirth. Patriarchal authority has been sanctified in India by religious texts.

Saru in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* rightly, though bitterly, sums up a happy married life in India:

> If you want to be happily married there's one thing you have to remember. Have you girls seen old fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That is important because it is symbolic of the truth. A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. Ifhe is an M.A. you should be a B.A. If he is 5'4" tall you should be no more than 5'3" tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should not be earning more than four hundred ninety nine rupees. That's the only route to follow. No partnership can ever be equal ... but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you. You must pretend that you are not so smart as you really are, not as competent

as you are, not as rational as you are and not so strong either. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 137)

Saru's bitterness and sarcasm is born out of her frustration at the reality of a woman's life in India. Traditionally, man is at the centre and woman is always on the periphery, trapped in secondary roles of someone's daughter, wife or mother. Girl's movements, her activities, dress and even speech are regulated by injunctions regarding shame and honour of her family. In Indian society dual morality is the norm. The obsession with conjugal fidelity is never applied to the husband.

The condition for women in India has also undergone a change though there is still much to be desired. Indian women had to face stiffer challenge from the patriarchal values. The desire for son in India, particularly Hindu society, has had not only cultural but religious sanction as well. Shashi Deshpande quotes lines from the *Brihdaranyak Upanishad* (1.5.17) as an epigraph to the second part of her novel, *A Matter of Time*:

Whatever wrong has been done by him,
His son frees him from it all;
Therefore he is called a son. By his son
A father stands firm in this world. (91)

So deep rooted has been this desire in the Indian psyche that not only the father but also the mother yearns for a son. Manorama, in *A Matter of Time*, is a typical product of the patriarchal value system. She desires for a son and resents the birth of her daughter, Kalyani. She always feels insecure and the fear of her husband's remarriage to beget an heir looms large over her psyche. Women who give birth to a son were, and still are, respected in family. Often the failure to beget a son by his first wife leads to the remarriage of the husband. Manorama is never happy with Kalyani except once when she gives birth to a son. Unfortunately the son is lost at the railway platform. Kalyani is deserted by her husband for this. Sripati hunts for his son tirelessly leaving his wife and daughter at the railway station. In the second generation, Kalyani's daughter, Sumi, has three daughters and no son. When her husband, Gopal goes away from her, though for an altogether different reason, she also has the same fear. The thought crosses her mind that perhaps Gopal has left her because she failed to give him a son. Though she is a modem and educated woman of the present India, the fact that this doubt crossed her mind is in itself an indicator of a deep rooted mental set up. The preference for a son is also visible in a modern educated and economically independent Indian woman. Vanna in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, wants to bear a son after giving birth to daughters. In *The Dark Holds No Terror* Saru's mother could not reconcile herself to the death of her son, Dhruva, and held her daughter responsible for this death. Such is her attachment to her male child that she makes her daughter feel unwanted and unloved. Nayana, who is a working woman from the lower class in *That Long Silence*, goes on giving birth to children in the hope of begetting a male child. This happens to be a typical case in most of the families even today.

Motherhood of a male child is considered to be the ultimate glory for a woman in Indian society. In any case, a woman who fails to be a mother, even of a female child, is looked upon as a cursed one. Barren women live in a constant fear of being abandoned. Jeeja, a lower class woman in *That Long Silence*, feels guilty of not be getting her husband children and is beaten up by him. She tolerates his second wife and later looks after the family of her useless and drunkard step son, Raja Ram. Sulu, in *The Binding Vine*, lives in constant fear of being abandoned by her husband, Prabhakar. She surrenders her self-respect in begging Kalpana, her niece, to become her husband's second wife as desired by him.

Barren women suffer loss of face. Vanitamami in *That Long Silence* refuses to get her uterus removed even after suffering from uterine cancer because this will deny her any hope of having a child. Eventoday woman in India is bound to her biological functions and it is an important aspect of her identity and respect in social life.

Because of the patriarchal values the institution of marriage in India is heavily tilted in favour of the male partner. In a typical marriage, a woman has to surrender her personality and try to merge herself in the personality of her husband. This is largely true even in the case of working women. Shashi Deshpande criticizes this institution for not allowing women to grow and sacrifice herself outside home. Husband resents any individuality of his wife apart from her image as his wife. This becomes all the more unbearable if she outgrows her husband's social status. In a typical marriage, the likings and desires of women are not taken into account. Girls are often treated as objects to be picked up at will, In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi gets shocked when Bhaskar tells her that his mother has made a list of eligible girls from his community and collected their photographs. She finds it "so coldblooded, as if those girls are objects in a catalogue" (*The Binding Vine* 160), and would meekly accept any man their parents choose for them. There is no scope for a girl's likes and dislikes. The deciding factors for marriage are caste, class and family background.

Once a girl gets married, the husband takes complete control over her. Marriage becomes an institutionalized form of domination of women by men. A woman is treated as the property of her husband. She loses her own self. Once she becomes a widow she loses the remaining vestiges of her personality. In *Roots and Shadows* Indu remembers that there has always been a nameless old woman, invariably called Kaku, helping in the kitchen or looking after the small children of the family. She says: "These women ... they are called Kaku and Kaki; Atya and Vahini Aji and Mais. As if they have to be recognized by a relationship because they have no identity of their own." (*Roots and Shadows* 117) After marriage a woman sheds all the shades of her own personality. Thus marriage does not enrich her individual self but forces her to adapt herself to predetermined roles.

Patriarchal values have fixed gender roles, and as such it is the woman who is supposed to look after the home, and the man is supposed to work outside and take care of the worldly affairs. These roles have been so internalized that even when she starts working outside, she is not supposed to shed any of her domestic responsibilities. Jaya's cousin Sujata in *That Long Silence* is irritated by the fact that

cooking and cleaning up have always been exclusively the task of a woman: "Why can't the boys do it? Why does it have to be me or Veena?" (*That Long Silence* 81). They all laugh at it. Similarly, when Jaya asks Mohan why he does not do the cooking that day, he is surprised; he does not say anything but his very smile seems to reject the idea summarily.

Strict confinement inside homes may have been relaxed to some extent, particularly in urban India with the opportunities for women's education and job, but the freedom is still negligible if we look at it in totality of the scene. Because of the social pressure women are unable to pursue their own ambitions. Men's will is imposed on them and they start treating it as their own will. Vidhya, in *That Long Silence*, is made to give her passion for theatre owing to her husband's disapproval. Narendra's mother Saroja, in *Roots and Shadow*, could not pursue her passion for singing because of Akka's objection. Bhaskar's mother in *The Binding Vine*, when she could not carry on her love for music turned it on her children. Though Savitribai succeeds in the pursuit of music and reaches great heights she has to leave her home behind her. Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, wants to resign from her job and take up writing but Jayant persuades her to continue with it on the pretext of the need for money and of having to go a long way in life.

For realizing herself a woman will have to go against the patriarchal codes that bind her and deny her any opportunity of taking an individual decision. This requires an extraordinary courage on the part of the woman because going against the accepted and crystallized norms is not an easy task. Savitribai and Leela in *Small Remedies* are the women who have the courage to realize their dreams. They succeed in that but they have to pay a very heavy price for that. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are generally educated females and they struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Her fiction is shorn of undue romantic embellishments and portrays women who after a long and bitter struggle are able to overcome this syndrome and free themselves from the stultifying traditional constraints. Saru, Indu, Sumi, Aru, Jaya and Madhu are some such women from the novels of Shashi Deshpande. They embody the belief that women should have an assertive and definite role in their lives, yet their economic and intellectual emancipation does not negate their responsibility of nurturing various relationships which society imposes upon them. They are wife, mother, sister and several other social personas that life imposes on them but they still succeed in retaining an inner self that helps them in tiding over the hardships of life. They learn to be themselves without requiring a sheltering service of male presence behind them. Deshpande shows how modern woman, after getting sufficient education, financial independence and other legal and political rights, struggles hard to preserve her identity as a woman and as a human being.

The search for self-identity is the main motivating force of the female characters of Deshpande's novels. She holds that this search for selfhood is an evolving process that takes these characters through a series of situations and tests. This is not easy for them. The sense of acceptance and submission is inculcated in a woman since her childhood, as Indu in *Roots and Shadows says*:

> As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning, as a girl they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why?, I had asked, 'because you are a female, you must accept everything, even defeat with grace because you are a girl', they had said. It is the only way to survive (*Roots and Shadows* 158).

In Indu's ancestral home there are two separate sections of residence for men and women. Women are supposed to remain confined to their side of the house. There is a rigorous code of dos and don'ts for women living there. Acceptance and submission are the two virtues expected from them. Insuch a background search for selfhood seems to be a far cry. What happens to Indu in the novel is true to much extent elsewhere in India as well. Jaya, the central character of *That Long Silence*, has a similar experience as Indu at her home. Her mother keeps reminding her that a girl should not cross the limit set for her. She should never fail in her duties as daughter, sister and, what is more, as wife. Thus the search for an independent self by woman has to face obstacles not only in the outside world but also inside her home. What is the most difficult part of it is the fact that often elder women of a family, particularly the mother proves the greatest hindrance in the path of her independence. They force her to conform to the traditional way of living, continuously asking her to learn the suppression of her own desires and surrender herself for the sake of the name and prestige of the family. In nearly all the novels of Shashi Deshpande, it is the mother who stands for tradition whereas the daughter represents a modern, self-aware and independent woman. For example, in Jaya's parental home it is her mother and Vanita Mami who keep reminding her of her feminine duties. In *The Dark Holds No Terror* Saru's mother exercises a great influence on her life, always controlling her decisions and hardly leaving any scope for her independent thinking. In other novels also mothers do not encourage their daughters to leave the traditional and so called secure path of life. On the other hand, the younger generation of women, a product of the modern age who have education, economic independence and self-confidence,try to come out of this combination. So they are not willing to submit to the patriarchal codes of society that deny them their personal freedom. They refuse to accept a secondary position in life simply because they are women. This rebellious spirit of the modem woman is best exemplified in the character of Sarita. She is a typical middle class Indian girl, brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family, under the strict domination of her mother. The archetypal mother sees Sarita as a responsibility to be dispensed with. For her, the girl has no right to any choice in life. She does not even give her the permission to take admission into the medical college, on the pretext that they cannot spare money both on her higher education and marriage. It is against this archetypal woman that Sarita has to assert her identity and her right of living according to her desire. She, however, decides to shape her own life. She decides to take admission in a medical college. In the search for individual identity the conflict between the mother and the daughter is a very significant feature. It may be regarded as a conflict between the old generation and the new generation. Saru, Jaya and Indu refuse to accept theirmothers as their role models. Sarita says: "To get married and end up doing just what your mother did seemed to me not only terrible but damnable" (*The Dark Holds No Terror* 140). Defying her mother, she decides to go to Bombay, live in a hostel and study medicine. This is her first step towards liberation.

Some heroines of Deshpande, like Indu and Vanna, seek fulfillment in marriage – marriage with someone of their own choices. Indu's craving for independence and her desire for freedom from the orthodox and conventional ways of the parental home give her the feeling that marriage would be the solution of all her problems and shall give her an opportunity of living life in her own way. Despite severe criticism by her family and by Akka in particular, she does not change her mind to marry Jayant, who is not only a man of another caste but also speaks a different language. Vanna also searches fulfillment of her personal self in marriage. Sarita is another heroine of Deshpande who marries Manohar, the man she loves against the wishes of her family, her mother in particular. These marriages are not the traditional ones where the family decides the husband for the girl, but marriages of choice. Even then they fail to bring both happiness and personal fulfillment in the lives of these women. One major reason for the failure of these marriages from a feministic point of view is the patriarchal mindset of the male partners. They cannot think of an identity of their wives separate from them. In some cases, as in the case of Manohar, the male ego is hurt if wife succeeds in getting a higher achievement level in life. As a doctor, Sarita not only earns more than Manohar but also gets more respect from society. She feels exhilarated with a dignity and importance that her status as a doctor seems to have given her.

Marriage, thus in Deshpande's novels, is generally seen as a hindrance rather than a means of fulfillment for women. Failing to get genuine companionship in marriage, women stop opening out to their husbands. Thus they start living a dual life. At the social level they try to conform to avoid confrontation with their husbands, but at the personal level they stop sharing with them their dreams and aspirations. They hide their selves from them. Indu says:

> I was so proud of my logical and rational thinking. But there my trap was waiting for me after all …, my marriage had taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to hear. I hid my response and emotions as if they were bits of garbage (*That Long Silence* 38).

This is what happens in the married life of Jaya also. Like Indu, she too is a victim of self-denial. She too is denied the right of giving expression to her genuine feelings and emotions. She is married to a government official who in his male arrogance does not even give a thought to her individual self. When she wrote a story which dealt with honest emotions, he was shocked. He asked her not to write such stories again. Since then she had to remain satisfied with writing silly stories about so called womanly virtues. It brought praise to her from her husband.

The women characters in Shashi Deshpande's novels can be divided into three categories. The first category comprises those women who blindly follow the age old customs and traditions imposed upon them, the second category consists of those who can make a distinction between good and bad but are not able to raise voice against the patriarchal set up. To the third category belong those characters who are educated and in most cases capable of maintaining themselves economically. They are not willing to accept a life of social, emotional and economic dependence, and are

ready to make their own meaning of their lives. To the first group belong the uneducated. They bank upon age old beliefs and superstitions, and it is very difficult for them to change themselves. To this category belong the older characters in almost all the novels of Deshpande. They are the perpetuators of the patriarchal values. To the second category belong women like Mini of *Roots and Shadows*. They are educated and capable of rationalizing their situation in life. They feel stifled by the restrictions of the patriarchal society that are unjust to women, but they do not have the courage to break free from these restrictions. The heroines of Deshpande who belong to the third category they are the products of modem India. They are educated and capable of taking care of themselves. Though they do not deny the social institutions of family and marriage, they do demand a respectable position for themselves in these institutions. These women are not satisfied with the roles thrust upon them by the society, but want to realize their individual selves. They represent the new Indian woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting male culture of India that forces them to adopt culturally determined roles for them, and is ready to rebel against it. But mere desire to rebel is not enough. They have to copewith the institutions without which they cannot succeed. Marriage is one such institution. Deshpande's heroine finds herself torn between two contradictory demands – the demand of herself and the pressures and pulls of tradition. One part of her meekly accepts the traditional norms while the other part tries to create space for her individual self. What frustrates her is the fact that even love through which she has sought liberation from the parental tyranny, gradually falls into the authority of the husband. Her position in her own home is no better than what it was in her parental home. In such a condition she is faced with the question, like Indu: "What choice do I have? Millions of girls have asked this question millions of times in this country" (*That Long Silence* 124).

Despite all her access to education, various professions and modem ideas, her position in the family remains the same subordinate one to the male in the family. In the parental home it is her father or brother or some other male member who takes the decisions of her life and in the new house that she enters it is her husband who asserts his authority to decide on her behalf what she should or should not do. Gradually, the rebellious woman learns to do what is expected of her. The heroines of Deshpande represent the dilemma of modem women in India. De Beauvoir sums it up very aptly: "The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all creatures. Nevertheless, she finds herself living in a worried where men compel her to assume the status of the other" (*The Second Sex* 173).

Unlike many of the Western countries, marriage in India, particularly in Hindu society, is regarded as sacrosanct. Once wedded, it is a union for the whole life, even if not for the seven lives as Hindus believe in. So there is no escape from a mismatch. Unfortunately, this mismatch is heavily loaded against the wife as she is the main sufferer in these cases.

Widowhood brings worse suffering for them. A century or so ago they were supposed toimmolate themselves on the burning pyre of their husbands. Such an act was glorified. Fortunately, that inhuman practice is banned by law, though one keeps hearing about occasional incidents. Once a woman becomes a widow her entire social

status and the world crumbles around her. Widowhood circumscribes a woman's life and is considered inauspicious. That is why a woman values her marriage even though it is painful for her.

There is no doubt that patriarchal values are crumbling slowly but surely in India. With growing number of women acquiring education, not only basic education but also professional education, they are joining jobs. This has not only brought financial security for them but has also enhanced their self-confidence and added to their social stature. They are now growing conscious of their individual selves and getdue respect. The fiction of Shashi Deshpande not only takes note of the exploitation of women in the patriarchal system but also records the change that is taking place. Woman's search for selfis one of her major fictional themes.

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