



Predicament of Expressing Obsession, Yearning and Gender Prejudice in Shashi Deshpande's Novel

Dr. Vikas Rana,

Assistant Professor of English,

N.S.C.B.M Govt.P.G.College

Hamirpur (H.P)

Women of all classes face the problem of articulating their passion, desire and sexuality. They are looked down upon as unwomanly if they express it. It is true in the field of literature too where women writers have to think twice before they write about female sexuality. Virginia Woolf rightly observes regarding the predicament of women writers:

She had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness (21).

This is true of all women in a male- dominated society.

Men have a high regard for chastity in women though most of them do not consider the same for themselves. In *Small Remedies*, the marriage of Som and Madhubegan to deteriorate when she narrated much later, one of her childhood incidents. She told him that she had slept with one of her father's friends in his attempt to console her when the bad news of her father's death was announced. She also confessed that it was not rape and she had been a willing participant in it. This incident adversely affected their marriage very much. Madhu recalled their first night when she saw a look of puzzle and then of regret on Som's face when she encouraged him by saying it was all right and she wanted it too. In *Roots and shadows*, Indu was quite surprised and shocked when Jayant, her husband, who was "so passionate, so ready" (83) refused when she took the initiative. When I'm like that. he turns away from me. I've learnt my lesson now. And so I pretend. I'm passive and unresponsive. I'm still and dead. And now I know.... It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. (83)

It is, perhaps, considered unwomanly when a woman expresses her passion. Ironically, even when a woman is raped against her wish, she is considered unchaste and unclean. So, in both the cases, it is woman who is made a victim. Women like Jiji in *Moving On* and Devi in *In the Country of Deceit* are called cheap and low when they have physical relationship outside and without social status. This is the predicament of women in Shashi Deshpande's Novels.

Educated women are well aware of their place in the patriarchal society and hence, they cannot freely exercise their independent mind and spirit. They are often frustrated as they seem to see wide difference between what they had been taught and trained in a traditional society and the modern outlook they acquire from their education. What Indira Nityanandam states in this regard may be noted: "Indian women face a painful choice whether to use their mind and education as they deem fit or to surrender themselves to the new family they enter with marriage (28).

Nevertheless, some of them are able to come out of their helpless situation, and ready to face problems of all kinds as they gain self-confidence after enduring much pain and suffering. Lower class women are mostly illiterate and traditional in their outlook. They have to take on all the responsibilities and bear burden of their family-bringing up their children, maintaining and marrying off their daughters, as their husbands are irresponsible and drunkards. They, unlike those educated, modern, working women, can easily submit all their sufferings and misfortunes to their fate. They hardly question the existing system even when it works against them. These women suffer more than those belonging to the higherclass. In *The Binding Vine*, Shakutai wanted the rape case to be registered as an accident to avoid scandal, which would definitely affect the marriage prospect of her two daughters. On the other hand, Urmila wanted to fight against such injustice by filing it as a rape case and punish the culprit. The victim was still in coma, lying unconscious in the hospital while the culprit was set free. Educated, modern, independent women like Urmila may easily overlook such things but for an uneducated woman like Shakutai, such small things are the basis of their life.

Having been born a woman means to accept shackles much to the disadvantage of the woman, but then being born in the lower class might mean to have double disadvantage for women. They are generally neglected by our society. If the new feminism is a matter of choice, then these underprivileged women, with all their limitations and no educational background, have practically no other choice than drudgery as rightly pointed out by Rashmi Gaur that "the drudgery and work does not liberate such women, it only reminds them of their economic and class oppression. Work does not constitute a choice in their life." Even for a small thing, they have to depend on others. Shakutai needed a Urmila to draw the medical attention to her daughter. Women like Jeeja, in *That Long Silence*, needed a Jaya to make the doctor look after her son better. She requested Jaya, "If you speak to the doctor there, they will look after him better; they will give him special care. Otherwise no one cares, no one is bothered about poor patients, they won't even tell us anything if we ask them, they bark at us as if we're dogs." (160)

The importance of marriage for such a class of women is not exaggerated thought. Bhaskar in *The Binding Vine* asked out of curiosity if getting married was so important to a woman. Urmila replied in positive, saying that it was so important for women of this class for it protects women from other men. Bhaskar still wondered why Shakutai worried so much for her daughter's marriage when she herself had nothing out of marriage, except children and an irresponsible husband. In *That Long Silence*, Jeeja sternly shut up her step daughter-in-law, Tara, when the latter wished her drunkard husband dead. Jeeja herself had enough of her suffering but still she attached much value and importance to wifehood. She said to Tara, "Don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?" (53) In *A Matter of Time*, Sumi wondered to see her mother enjoy and celebrate her wifehood, applying 'kumkum' and moving in the company of women with the pride of a wife, in spite of the fact that her husband had stopped living and communicating with her for 35 years. Sumi recalled one old woman advising her to go back to her husband, saying that woman is nothing without her husband.

It is apparent that most of these women suffer because they attach too much to the value of wifehood and motherhood. Sulu Shakutai's younger sister, had an unsuccessful marriage just because she was childless. She lived with constant fear if her husband would throw out her sister's daughter, Kalpana. He threatened her, if she failed to give Kalpana to him, he would throw her out of the house. She was not the only one who suffered this lot. Jeeja, in *That Long Silence*, too had suffered silently when her husband left her to marry another woman. She expressed her sufferings to Jaya, "How could I blame him for marrying again when I

couldn't give him any children? How could I blame that woman for marrying him? With whom shall I be angry?" (52) It seems the society considers women to be Horthless if she cannot become a mother. However, such a notion is rarely found in the middle-class educated women of our society. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* firmly declared that she would not have any child that would not be wholly welcome. Self-assertion is what women like Indu have, but among the uneducated women it is non-existent.

Under this sub-heading, individual problems faced by women are studied. Shashi Deshpande, as a novelist, is not in favour of the politicizing of women's problems and generalization of the same. In the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, there is an interesting chapter about the meeting after a long time of the old three friends- Nalu, Saru and Smita. Through their conversation, we come to know that they are three different persons with different attitudes. What Deshpande emphasizes is that they are women no doubt, but that does not necessarily mean that they have similar points of view nor do they have the same problems. Women's problems are as separate and varied as they are different individuals. Smita is a fun-loving, easy-going and financially, physically and emotionally a dependent person whose life is centred on her husband only. She is happy and satisfied with her life (being a wife and mother of three), outwardly to a limited extent, but, deep down she is not so happy as she is dependent on her husband financially. One can see her meagre existence with financial difficulties when her husband has that scissor-cutting method of giving her money irrespective of her need to meet the social demands. She implores Saru to lend her just one hundred rupees with which she would be able to buy a sari for her sister-in-law whose son would have his thread ceremony. Her insensitive husband has no understanding of this and he gives money enough to buy a small gift for the boy. It is pathetic to see the way she plans to give back the money to Saru-by saving some small portion of the money to be given by her husband every time. The whole thing speaks of the delicate situation a woman faces, when she lives at the mercy of a stingy husband without economic freedom. And here Deshpande is at her best to extricate this kind of women's lives, a typical example of Indian woman at home facing martyrdom every day. In this connection what Saru thinks is right:

Nalu would say that it was marriage and men that had degraded Smita. But Smita had done it even in those days lying at home about where she went and what she did, getting money from her mother for books and splashing it in the canteen. So perhaps, it was really Smita after all(119).

Other women on the contrary are quite different Nalu is a spinster who is serious and dedicated to her job. Saru, the protagonist, is one who manages both her career and family. Smita does not mind changing her name to "Goetanjali" or "Anju" after marriage as per her husband's wish. But Nalu takes a strong exception to this for it amounts to losing one's identity-female self-identity and she insists on her calling her as Smita still and not by any other name.

Deshpande does not believe in generalizing women's problems, as pointed out before. Smita's problems are Smita's own. Saru's marital problems are partly a creation of her own. It's true that any man would feel uncomfortable to have a wife far more successful than himself, considering the kind of society we have, and hence reflection of it in their relationship is quite possible. In the novel, Manohar does the same trying to assert his manhood by inflicting pain and raping his wife, and such cases are quite common in our society. However, the prolonging of this problem seems to arise out of their own personal behaviour. For instance, Saru, instead of facing and understanding the problem, turns a blind eye to it, pretending that it's just a nightmare. She was too occupied and eager to absorb all the attention and respect her new profession showers upon her to notice the boredom, hurt and neglected look of her husband. Her problem at home-the

brutal and jealous vengeance of her not quite successful husband for becoming a successful doctor is partly Saru's own. Nalu's unhappiness and bitterness, despite she being a spinster, are none else's but her own. What is important is that the novelist in these matters sees things not belonging to women as a class but to women as individuals. She does not generalize; she particularizes. So her feminist ideology is not guided by a common bond of women as such.

Thus women's problems of different proportions have been highlighted in different ways in Deshpande's novels. Mother-daughter hatred can be seen in the case of Saru and her mother who almost disowns her daughter whom she thinks responsible for the death of her only son. Later, Saru's marriage to Manohar, a man of her choice, turns out to be sour when she becomes professionally more successful as a doctor than her husband who was just a teacher in a college. This leads to her sexual harassment by her husband. But all this is not women's problem, but of an individual woman's problem.

Deshpande, in *A Matter of Time*, provides an account of husband-wife tussle that affects children. Gopal left his family for reasons not known to him very clearly and that had an adverse effect on the life of his wife Sumi and their daughters. While Sumi suffered silently and stoically, her teenaged daughters tried every means to bring their parents together. When all attempts failed, Aru, the eldest daughter, sought help and advice from Surekha, a woman activist and lawyer, to demand maintenance from their father. Thus one problem led to another.

Most women of Sashi Deshpande's fiction struggle in silence for a very long time but a few of them are able to come to terms with their problems. They find a kind of balance, harmony and meaning in life as they are no longer confused with themselves their approach is neither total acceptance nor rejection. It is a kind of the mixture of the two in the sense that they accept and acknowledge the value of family and the need to live within relationships and society but reject those oppressive systems and values patriarchy nurtures for the suppression of women. The stage of acceptance and rejection is Deshpande's concept of women's growth and enlightenment.

Works Cited

- Gupta, Mukta. "Girl Child: A Neglected Dimension," *Issues Related to Women*. New, Delhi: Sarup, 2000.
- Rani, Nirupa. *Woman, Society and Religion: Quest for Identity*. New Delhi : Sarup, 2000.