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REVOLTING AGAINST THE TYPECAST: WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

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Abstract:

*In this paper an attempt has been made to critically examine and analyze the issues that the protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Binding Vine* face and the solutions which Deshpande provides to deal with these issues. Deshpande has a profound understanding of social as well as physical problems of women. Shashi Deshpande has tried to establish the feelings of women sandwiched between the traditional and newly-acquired values and feel deserted in both the worlds. Deshpande, in her writings, has given voice to the mute miseries and helplessness of women tormented by existential problems. She explores the emotional world of women by bringing to surface the female psychology. She writes in a manner that depicts an unequalled representation of a transformed Indian Woman who is unhappy with the typecast roles given to her since long times unknown. Hence, her regard for the social, physical as well as psychological problems of the middle class women is evident.*

Keywords: *Stereotype, Miseries, Traditional, Protagonist, Psyche, Dilemma, etc.*

Both *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows* begin with the identical journeys on the part of the protagonists - a journey to the parental home - which earlier they had defied as the symbol of tradition. *The Binding Vine*, on the other hand, begins with Urmila's enhanced sensitivity as a result of loss of her infant daughter Anu. Urmi too is presented in her parental home as her husband, being in Merchant Navy, stays away from her. The protagonists have returned to their parental home after feeling alienated in the houses that they had taken refuge in after leaving their parental homes initially. The distrust of love, marriage and familial ties is what we are acquainted with in the lives of all these protagonists. They feel lonely, physically uprooted and emotionally tormented. By challenging the stereotypes and analyzing their past, they are able to reconcile with their present. It is after a lot of introspection that their dilemmas and problems get resolved.

The plots of Deshpande's novels do not have a simple sequential order, but rather a contrast of action in the present and the memories of the past. Time seems to move in circles rather than in straight lines. The conclusions are, therefore tentative; there is no end to a circular pattern. Such a plot necessitates the use of a kind of stream- of-consciousness technique enabling the protagonists to journey back in time and recapitulate childhood experiences, in order to give voice to silent terrors and secret feelings of guilt. It is therefore, through the memories of the past that the protagonists recapitulate how and why they challenged the stereotypes. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* leaves her mother and parental home to be a doctor. She does so because she feels that her mother wronged her: "It is because she cursed me that I am like this" (Deshpande, *TDHNT*, 179). Her radical thinking afterwards is a result of the modern education that she got. Likewise, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*



leaves her parental home, gets married to a boy of her own choice and challenges the stereotypes that her family adheres to because she perceives the inferior position given to the women in her family and revolts against their illogical and meek acceptance of the traditional norms which oppress them. Urmi in *The Binding Vine* becomes sensitive to other women's problems due to the loss of her infant daughter Anu. So it is the thing of past which makes her rebel against injustice meted out to Kaplana. Even Mira is her long-dead mother-in-law whose tragic tale has been reconstructed by Urmi in the present.

There is a progression in the novelist's vision as she shifts her ingenuity from *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to *The Binding Vine*. In the former, she appears to be a kind of feminist by making her heroine leave her husband and children to adopt her career as a doctor. In *Roots and Shadows* she is able to justify herself as not being interested in being labelled a feminist. Here she makes her heroine go back to the traditional home in order to come to reconciliation with her present situation. *The Binding Vine* favours Deshpande's assertion that she wants to reach a stage where she can "write about human But/in beings and not about women or men" (Viswanatha, 10). But in all the three novels, Deshpande's vision remains focussed on questioning hierarchy, superstition, regressive tradition and assertion of individuality in a milieu that allows little or no room to a woman's personal aspirations and through the protagonists she has tried to depict the plight of women in a male-dominated society. In the process she has shown how the protagonists who challenge the stereotypes evolve as individuals whereas the conformist women in the novels remain mute sufferers. There is a reference to a woman in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, who ill-treated by her in-laws, drowns herself in a well and Saru becomes a mouthpiece of the author when she calls women like Vidya and Smita idiotic heroines.

The operative sensibility in Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Binding Vine* is distinctly feminine and modern. Her heroines are educated, career-oriented middle class women who view themselves as the object of cultural or social oppression and attempt to rebel against them. They have been brought up in a traditional family atmosphere but the education that they receive makes them look at life from a different perspective. No longer content to accept meekly subjugation in the name of family or relationships, Deshpande's heroines constantly seek to analyse their situations and look for validating their aspirations. The inability to reject their background put them in a tricky situation resulting in failure of depiction of their revolutionary spirit and find them standing at cross roads between the traditional family values and the modern logical thinking, which is the part and parcel of their education. Deshpande is considered to be best in depiction of intimate human relationships within the family. Her work is particularly effective due to her analysis of the varied emotions, rationalizations and miscomprehensions that make up the relationship between two individuals yoked together in matrimony. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* seeks an escape from her husband as he takes his revenge on her by making her a victim of marital rape. During her stay at her parental home she analyses her relationship with Manu. She recalls how he envies her growth and how he feels uncomfortable with the fact that she earns more than him. At the same time she feels that she herself is responsible for her husband's wild attitude. "My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood" (Deshpande, *TDHNT*, 198). These are some of the complexities of married life which Deshpande deals with. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* face a similar paradox in her marriage. She plays with the idea of leaving Jayant who dominates her but at the same time, feels incomplete without him. Similarly Urmi in *The Binding Vine* boasts of having managed her home and her children in her husband's absence but at the same time, she feels like telling him that every time he leaves her the parting is like death.

Motherhood, the most eulogized and revered position in a woman's life, which is often used as a reason to keep her within the confines of a well-defined and stereotypical role, is probed in Deshpande's novels. There is no mother who could serve as a model for her daughter because they are



all confined to narrow, regressive approach towards their daughters. Saru's mother sets a bad model for her. She rebukes her for one thing or the other. Rather than encouraging her to stand against the oppressions of the patriarchal society, she becomes instrumental in filling her with hatred for her family. By taking her brother's side and by favouring him for everything. Saru's mother has a big hand in alienating Saru from her brother Dhruva and also turning her defiant against the established norms of the family and society. Indu's mother is already dead even before she grows up, but Akka, her surrogate mother is domineering and Indu rebels against Akka's suffocating authority. It is much later in the novel that she learns the reason, for Akka's nature who herself was a victim of child marriage. Urmi's mother could not take a stand against her husband's decision to send Urmi away to her grandparents and Urmi never wanted to be like her mother. Even Mandira, Vanaa's daughter did not want to follow the ways of her mother because the young girl's mind is being affected and shaped by the influence of the maid who looks after her and who expectedly would frown upon an independent working mother like Vanaa. Whereas daughters reject their mothers and their mothers' way of doing things, the mothers in *The Binding Vine* dream so much for their daughters that they want their daughters to have the world that they dreamt of for themselves. Ironically these mothers, in spite of desiring to better the situation of their daughters, eventually fail them because they do not endeavour to support their daughters in their search for selfhood. There is a gradual change in thinking as one undergoes a metamorphosis from being a daughter to becoming a mother. The attitude of the mothers of the protagonists in all the three novels becomes instrumental in their rebelling against and challenging the stereotypes.

Another reason which propels the protagonists of the novels to question the stereotypes is the institution of marriage. Saru takes a refuge in marriage with Manu as an escape from her mother. "I had come away from my parents in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast, the decisions taken, my boats burnt. There could be no turning back. Then, this ridiculous anti-climax" (Deshpande, *TDHNT*, 32). Saru's marriage becomes an anti-climax for her. It is her failure in married life that sets her to introspect and emerge as an individual who would not remain merely as an object for Manu to use. Indu too gets married to Jayant to escape and later returns to her paternal home to overcome the problems that she faces in her marriage. She says, "Behind the façade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all but two people brought together after cold blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?" (Deshpande, *RAS*, 3) *The Binding Vine* is full of instances of unhappiness of and incompatibility in the institution of marriage. Shakutai's own married life had been a disaster but she still she kept longing for her daughters' marriages. Her sister Sulu's marriage is the greatest cause of her agony and she hangs herself to pay the penalty. Vanaa accepts patriarchy at the cost of individuality whereas Urmi feels a void in her marriage. At one point Urmi wonders if there is anything like love between her and her husband. Mira was a victim of marital rape. Akka's marriage was a compromise to give her husband's son a mother. Bhaskar becomes the mouthpiece of the author when he asks, "Is getting married so important for women?" Deshpande leaves this question unanswered. But her heroines clearly define the answer for the reader. Marriages that are sought as a means of escape do not provide solace or individual growth. Protagonists take their ultimate refuge in marriage but only after evolving as individuals having their own identities and after questioning stereotypes.

Love also comes as disillusionment to the protagonists of Deshpande's novels. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* thinks that love will fill her void of being cared for but Manu equated love with sex. Saru says, "I was insatiable not for sex but for love. Each act of sex was triumphant assertion of our love, of my being wanted. If ever I had any doubts, I had only to turn to him and ask him to prove his love for me" (Deshpande, *TDHNT*, 35). But one must bear in mind that sex or physical relationship, does not mean love, togetherness or bonding. Therefore Saru's marital life becomes a



nightmare for her. Love gets lost in the sexual assaults that Manu make at night. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* faces a loveless marriage and the incompatibility in their relationship makes her wonder if Jayant really loves her as much as she loves him. She even feels ashamed of loving her husband so much. Urmi in *The Binding Vine* marries Kishore for love but even she wonders if her love for Kishore is really her blade of grass which would protect her from indulging in an extra marital affair with Bhaskar. So, at its initial stage, love comes as a fancy and an escape route to Deshpande's protagonists but soon they realize the folly of their illusion to face the practicality of life and the truth of negative and destructive love.

Deshpande employs withdrawal as an essential tool for her heroines in order to enable them to analyse how far they are correct in challenging the stereotypes. In a society which has so many defined, ritualized ties among members of the family, Deshpande's narrators react by taking a cold and rational view of families. They seek an escape from any kind of link from others. Saru, for instance, hates "being touched. May be that's why I am comfortable here with Baba and Madhav. There is no touching, either physically or emotionally" (Deshpande, *TDHNT*, 108). The writer allows her heroines to drive away their present lives where their individuality is threatened. These heroines suffer from the existential problems and start questing for ultimate meaning in life. They are emotionally starved and their basic psychic needs remain unfulfilled. They attempt to run away from the sordid and stark realities of life to escape the emotional suffering and seek refuge in a self-imposed exile. The act of escape on the part of these protagonists is not a reflection of their cowardly disposition. They do not seek escape as a solution. Rather escape is essential for their re-integration into the society. It is through seeking refuge in escape that they learn to confront the reality.

Deshpande's women are in no mood of accepting the old traditions that are the traces of the past. Both Saru and Indu are not ready to perform ritual like circling the Tulsi plant to increase the life span of their husbands. Such rejection points to their autonomy and is an indication of their capacity to live their life independently of the shadows of their mothers who stand as a symbol of tradition. These heroines tend to associate their mother figure with the stereotypes created by males in a patriarchal society. Indu laughs at the notion of not calling one's husband by his name as it lessens his age. She refutes all such notions which are illogical and completely tradition-oriented. She is not able to come to terms with the fact that women change their names after marriage just to please their husbands and in-laws. Urmi rejects the stereotypical psyche attached with rape. While Kalpana's own mother Shakutai holds her all responsible for her sad plight, Urmi enables her to accept the stark reality. While Shakutai keeps lamenting about the girls' honour and the family name, it is Urmi who takes an initiative to bring the case to media and the culprit to justice so that justice is meted out to Kalpana. Urmi refutes all the notions which hold Kalpana responsible for her misery and raises her voice against those voices of the society which oppress a rape-victim.

Deshpande's heroines challenge the meaningless and obsolete traditions that the middle class women are supposed to follow. Middle class woman is required to be a devout and loyal wife who should not rebel against her husband's atrocities or irresponsible behaviour and who should not try to excel him in any way. Saru rebels against the cruelty of her husband Manu who makes her a victim of marital rape and seeks answers to her dilemma on her own. Similarly, Indu finds a way out from the dominance of her husband Jayant by analyzing her self-created subjugation to her husband Jayant and by finally paying no heed to Jayant's decision of using Akka's money for themselves. She takes her own decision to spend it on Mini's wedding. Urmi's relationship with her husband is not discussed at length in *The Binding Vine*, but she too does not appear as a loyal and devout wife as at one point she wonders if her love for Kishore is really the means and escape route she has adopted to avoid the vagaries of life - her blade of grass to protect her from the Ravana of this life. Whereas Urmi does not take a refuge in extra - marital affairs, Saru and Indu defy the stereotype of being a loyal wife by



getting a temporary refuge in the extra- marital affairs. But extra marital love is not a permanent solution for the emotional void in these women's problems. Both Saru and Indu experience guilt and emotional trauma in their involvement with men outside their marriage and finally have to search for answers on their own. This indicates the dilemma of the modern Indian woman who challenges the stereotypes but is unable to break from her past completely.

Deshpande's heroines are career oriented women who do not make a compromise with the career in the name of their children's upbringing. Saru prefers her career to the upbringing of her children. No doubt, she is a loving mother who is constantly reminded of her children Renu and Abhi but she leaves them when she comes to her parental home and all that concerns her is to re-assume her career as a doctor. Indu develops an aversion to bearing a child. She does not approve of the thinking of the women of her family according to which the only thing that they have to do is to be a mother and then a grandmother. For Indu, her career is important. At last she decides to do the kind of writing she likes. Urmi on the other hand, is possessive for her son Kartik. She strikes a balance between her career and her child's upbringing. So never does a protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's novel make a compromise with her career for her children's sake.

At the back of mind of an Indian mother is the fear that a girl can destroy the family honour. One of the reasons for Saru's mother's preference of her son over her daughter could be this fear. Indu bitterly recollects how the idea of her womanhood was thrust upon her. The women of the family had fed her mind with the notion that she could have babies now and that is why she must protect herself against men. Shakutai cries over the lost honour in *The Binding Vine* and is willing to let go her daughter's rapist to save the family name and for the sake of the marriage of her second daughter. Urmi plays a great role in making her realize that Kalpana has not done anything which would destroy her family name and that she is a victim.

The theme of preference of a male child over a female child finds expression in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and also in *Roots and Shadows*. Saru's mother had a priority for her son. She even blames Saru for his death. Here she gives a concrete form to the traditional belief that if a sister survives her brother(s), she is supposed to be a killer other brothers. The theme of gender discrimination occurs in *Roots and Shadows* as the women of Indu's family boast of being the mothers of sons but kept "blaming themselves for having only girls" (Deshpande, *RAS*, 62). Women of the family could not bloom in different walks of life. Akka did not allow Saroja to learn music from a stranger. "Akka kept all her softness for boys. They say even Madhav's Sunil got something out of her the last time he came here" (Deshpande, *RAS*, 62). In *The Binding Vine* there is a passing reference to the theme as Urmi's father sent her away to live with her grandparents while kept his son Amrut with himself..Saru has been told to see her body unclean from the time of first menstruation. She was not allowed to touch anything or anybody. As a result she started hating her womanhood. It was only when she joined a medical college and studied anatomy that she realized that those were the things that had to happen to her. It was then that she was released of all kinds of fear attached with her being a female. Indu too develops an aversion to her being a female. The idea of her womanhood had been thrust upon her and Kaki went on telling her how she could have babies. Consequently she develops apathy towards bearing a child even though acknowledging the maternal instinct. Urmi is a bit different in the sense that though she does not feel anything of the sorts but she gets alienated from her husband as he always sought solution in physical relationship whenever she demanded love. Urmi started hating the approach of her husband towards her body when she needed emotional security.

Therefore, Deshpande's protagonists challenge the stereotypes and evolve as individuals capable of leading an independent life. But her heroines fail to completely defy the established institutions of life like marriage, family structures and value systems. It is a great contradiction that in these women oriented novels which result in their seeking of individuality; it is often a man who gives



the best advice. For instance, Saru's father encourages her to confront the reality. The mother is often reviewed as ruthless Deshpande's protagonists have both a tendency to blame others and need to feel guilty about matters of responsibility for someone's life or death. They are dependent upon the opinion of their friends and relatives. If they are not the heroines upon whom a male projects his desires or fears, neither are they the 'female heroes' of some contemporary western feminist fiction. Saru, Indu and Urmi are able to cope with their problems only by challenging the stereotypes to whatever extent they do so, being a part of the transitional society. The floodgates of anxiety that had suddenly been thrown open at them make them analyse their problems. As they gather enough inner strength to return to a stage of normalcy their suffering brings a cathartic effect upon them. It initiates the process of self-discovery in them and enables them to have fresh perceptions of life. They emerge at the end of the ordeal with a certain willingness to deal with life's problems, while earlier they showed a conspicuous lack of accommodation, adjustment and expansiveness. They have undoubtedly gained the moral courage and necessary resourcefulness required for the purpose. They learn to put up with the realities of life.

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