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QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELF- CONCEPT: SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Identity crisis or search of identity has received a thrust in the Post- Colonial literature. The quest for identity, which involves self-definition, which is often central theme of contemporary women's fiction. This process is both ecological and psychological that breaks upon the path toward female individuation and an understanding of the individual self. Rites of passage are depicted as the woman's awakening to reality of her social and cultural role as a woman and her subsequent attempts to re-examine her life and shape it in accordance with her new feminist consciousness. It is significant that it is not solely a search for identity crises that engages women writers in general, but rather an exploration and articulation of the process leading to a purposeful awakening of the female protagonist. This is evidently seen in Deshpande's novels.

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The female protagonist, Jaya in that long silence, like any other educated middle-class woman, conforms to the rules and constraints of the society. She is unable to find out whether she lives for herself or for her family. She is taken for granted by everyone in the family. That is why she feels like searching for her identity. She is a typical wife with love and affection for children, respect and sense of duty for husband and her in-laws. Nobody in her family understands her feelings and emotions. Being husband and wife, she shares intimate relations with Mohan, yet, she is unable to relate herself with him in terms of feelings. Her silence is symbolic of most of the women of the world who are unable to express themselves as individual. Her introspection and memories are a part of every woman's life like every other woman she is not encouraged to take up profession. Though she tries her hands at writing, but she is not appreciated by her husband. Not only husband, her children also disappoint her. Grown up, they ignore her, as they remain engaged in themselves. They have no time for her. She is not satisfied with her life and lacks courage to revolt. Moreover, she loses her

identity when her name is changed from Suhasini to Jaya after marriage. She feels a kind of stagnation when she recalls that her life, which seemed so busy, was nothing, but a worthless pursuit. She is taken for granted by everyone in the family. That is why she feels like searching for her identity.

Shashi Deshpande uses first person narrative to unfold the mute tale of Jaya. Jaya, in the very beginning confesses that she is going to reveal her real self. In order to do so, she alienates herself from her real self that is veiled under the taciturn attitude of Jaya. She moves back and forth in time to recall her submissive and passive self. Jaya was born in liberal family. Her father had named her Jaya, which means Victory. He expected her to be bold and courageous, but she can recall how her desires and feelings were suppressed by her own liberal father. Jaya loved film music, but, her father wanted her to enjoy the classical music of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan. To him, film music was poor and cheap Jaya as a child did not revolt but kept quiet. It was the first blow to her identity. Deflated, she experienced a loss of self and began to keep her feelings and emotions confined to her. After marriage, Jaya encountered the similar expectations from her husband, Mohan. She sacrificed her taste for the sake of male family member. She failed to enjoy her married life.

Jaya confessed, "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony." She needed a change in life. The pent-up feelings started rushing to find a vent. She found a similarity between her marriage and "a pair of bullocks joked together....." it is because she believed that she was like one of the bullocks that moves in the same direction and with same speed as the other one, to avoid pain and discomfort. She also compared herself to Gandhari, who blindfolded herself to share the blindness of her husband. She realized that she had totally altered and lost herself during the process of pleasing Mohan. She changed her name, personality and profession according to Mohan's will. Mohan expected her to change because he did not need Jaya, but a woman who could serve him, support him and act as dictated by him.

Now left by Mohan, Jaya was broken and helpless. She moved out into unknown streets. She felt the situation unbearable, but it is this crisis that awakened her to her own identity. She decides to search for her identity and sets on in quest for her identity. Jaya in her quest reached at a situation of Compromise. She agreed to change herself and hoped for a change in Mohan who had written a telegram that announced his arrival. The compromise on the part of woman, as well as man makes Shashi Deshpande a liberal writer who does not commit to a writing that chooses ultimate freedom for women and assigns domestic chores to men. The novelist moved a step ahead of the female dominated vision and portrayed the female psyche. Jaya thus emerged out as a round character that developed in the due course of time. It is the same Jaya who longed for disaster in the beginning but awakened herself so much that during crises she decided to be hopeful and start life anew. Therefore, this novel deal with female quest for identity in which the female protagonist long for self, identity and self-dependence because she suffers from silence and lack of communication with husband. On one hand, the novel teaches women to fight the silence and express themselves and on other, it gives a message to the man folk to try and understand women in a better way. In male-dominated society, woman is given a secondary place. Whether a woman is a technologist, a bureaucrat, a lawyer, a novelist or a scientist, she cannot escape her ordained duties as a wife or a family member; this is neatly pictured in the selected novels.

"A free and autonomous being like all creatures- (a woman) finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other".<sup>3</sup>

In *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande delineates the delicate swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed, the life of senses as well as the heart-wringing anguish of the narrator protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer. The novel depicts the life of Jaya at the level of the silent and the unconscious. A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it portrays and inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years. It centers round the inner perception of the protagonist, a woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is.

The question, “who am I?” (p.24) haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is “and utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest Understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible” (69). Hence her agonized cries – “I can’t hope, I can’t manage, I can’t go on” (p.70). In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her feminine dilemma is expressed in her vacillating state of mind:

“I could and couldn’t do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly” (p.83).

Towards the end of the novel Jaya consciously acknowledges her writing as a kind of fiction and quotes Defoe’s description of fiction as a kind of “lying”, which makes “a great hope in the heart.” Hence, she decides to ‘plug that hole’ as said earlier by speaking and listening and erasing the silence between her and Mohan. It is this erasing of the silence that symbolizes the assertion of her feminine voice, a voice with hope and promise, and a voice that articulates her thoughts. The novel does not depict Jaya’s life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests “hope” and “change” for the better:

We don’t change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that life would be impossible. (p.193)

This ending suggests a new beginning for Jaya and Mohan. Modern Indian writers like Deshpande tend to depict the oppression of women with greater self-consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage. Earlier writers had deified and eulogized women’s suffering but the writers of the latter part of the post-independent period have presented their suffering with much greater realism. But Shashi Deshpande “Overdose the theme of women suffering so that the novel is in some danger of turning into a sociological tract”<sup>6</sup>. William Walsh considers “the combination of the analytical and detached,”<sup>7</sup> a particular and unusual quality of the novel. The noted critic further observes:

“Turmoil of feeling is conveyed in cool, idiomatic and sensitive prose. And it is served by a memory which is so rich and minutely specific and able to produce not just bright discrete images but rather a flow of naturally related scenes that it is a creative faculty making past life lives again in the present”<sup>8</sup>.

At once conversational and formal, the reminiscences of Jaya evoke a deeper and more tragic sense of vanished time, fleeting moments, personal losses recounted in a quiet and calm voice characterized by sobriety. It follows the natural movements of a mind experiencing, moments and expression that become meaningful spots of time. Jaya’s unruffled stream of consciousness symbolizes the flow of mind that registers experience in a prose of recollection and nostalgia. Shashi Deshpande has made the story self-propelled without the novelist acting as a meddler and as an omniscient narrator. In fine, she has tentatively succeeded in introducing “the reader directly into the interior life of the characters without any intervention by way of comment or explanation on the part of the author”<sup>9</sup>.

Deshpande has ridiculed the mythical women, Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari...etc she has questioned why women have blind-folded themselves to the misdeed of their husbands. There is Mohans’ in India who has been amassing wealth by unlawful means and thousands of Jays’ are enjoying the riches, with their eyes closed to the moral lapses of their husbands. Jaya recounts her own story with a touch of irony. She recalled,

“Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn’t want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that the things we needed... decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling first class. And there was enough for Mohan to send home to his father – for Sudha’s fees, Vasant’s clothes and Sudha’s marriage. (p.120)

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In such a stifling and suffocation domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up, she finds her female identity obliterated. Jaya is Suhashini and also "Seeta" Urmila in *The Binding Vine* is diametrically opposite to Jaya. She is aggressive, economically independent, takes her own decisions and her feminism borders on militancy, and prompts harshness in her equations with others. A lecturer in Bombay College, she lives with her mother, Yamini and her six-year-old son, Kartik. Hers is a love match with Kishore, a former neighbor now working with the Merchant Navy and away from home for long spells. Although she lives with her mother, her representation suggests the strong-willed single woman. In a way, she is like Indu, only stronger, more strident. In that respect, she is like any other of Deshpande's protagonists. Deshpande who is dismissive of militancy in women has possibly created a radical feminist only to subvert such a character. The novelist reveals through the representation that expressing one's needs, accepting one's vulnerability are not weaknesses but liberation, and that assertiveness and not aggressiveness is the desired ideal.

Urmila has much strength. Her fiercely independent nature is first seen when at the age of fifteen, she chooses to stay alone with her grandfather Aju's dead body (Aju had hanged himself to death) while Kishore goes to fetch some other members of the family. Unlike Mohan in *That Long Silence*, Kishore in *The Binding Vine* is a very supportive and understanding partner. So, the crisis in her life is not caused by a domestic wrangle but by the sudden death of their one-year old baby girl, Anu. The novel is ostensibly about Urmila's coming to terms with her child's death. It is, in reality, about Urmila's re-definition of her identity, values and choices with greater apprehension of her relationship with others, especially her husband. The death of Anu is one event that reveals her at her most vulnerable. It is an event that causes her intense grief. Traumatized, she repeatedly asks, "Why me?" Her distresses sometimes manifest itself in psychosomatic attacks of asthma so that she is left gasping for breath. At other times, she is driven into hurting herself masochistically to experience pain, as she explains. The underlying theme of the five dreams she describes in her narrative is helplessness and despair, emotions that are a typical of the strong Urmila:

I am running along the sea. There's someone else with me... I can hear the footsteps, I can hear the heavy breathing, but I cannot see whoever it is ... I have to keep running .....Noe it is becoming difficult t; the sand, soft and squishy under my feet, keeps dragging me down.... I can't go on...I can't go....  
(Pg.16)

The feeling of failure, the unconscious death wish, the psychosomatic expressions of repressed grief are explicit in her dreams which she never shares with the others around her. Her later self-disclosure made as a narrator, marks the growth that Deshpande envisions as strength in a woman. Unlike Deshpande's other protagonists who define themselves with respect to their usual gender roles, Urmila is out and out a feminist. Urmila is a strong woman but more aggressive than assertive. Her growth as a character in the book is marked by her gradual realization that to assert is not to deny others their rights, that assertion means to stand up for oneself without hurting others. As a protagonist rest of the protagonists who are initially passive and whose evolution towards self-assertion record their growth. Urmila's growth is characterized by her evolution towards self-assertion from the opposite end that is aggressiveness.

On the positive side, Urmila's strength is also very admirable. She stands up for her values and convictions as few Indian women do. In the midst of family censure, she continues her friendship with Bhaskar Jain, exhibiting full responsibility for her decision. She also supports Kaplana, the raped young woman, and Shakuntai her mother, as domestic worker. She teaches the uneducated woman of the underclass to speak up so that her wronged daughter may get justice. She educates her not to live in fear, guilt or blame, which are the result of conditioning in Indian women. Reaching out and sharing her life with the oppressed (unlike Jaya who turns a blind eye towards suffering women), she is enabled to overcome her grief for the dead Anu as she learns to give herself to these others. She is the most proactive of Deshpande's protagonists.

The story of Deshpande's protagonists always begins at the critical point where despite "total" freedom and sometimes-total surrender to the expectations of their husbands (as in case of Jaya), they are discontented and unhappy. Therefore, they wish to re-define themselves. A woman must give expression to her inner space and self; at the same time, she need not reject the social institution of marriage and family (and the duties that accompany it) or her basic human values. Her protagonists are not her representatives instead they emerge as living persons who, though similar in some ways, possess personal traits and characteristics that set them apart from the other characters in her books, and form one another. Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, whose name is "small, sharp and clear, like her face..." is however, passive, and has silenced and muffled her own voice consciously. She has the potential to re-define herself. Urmila in *The Binding Vine* is the plain looking young woman who wears glasses, and blouses that don't match her saris. There are astonishing resemblances too among the protagonists – they are intrinsically defiant and committed to oppose oppression. Together they represent the new, collective voice of dynamic young women who are not going to lead circumscribed lives.

Deshpande presents the conflicts of her protagonists without presenting simple solutions. She lets the different choices speak for themselves, the choice to conform or to break free. Sometimes she seems to be faintly echoing the sentiments of de Beauvoir, who she admits, has influenced her, and according to whom it is women who "have to define, measure, and explore their special domain". Deshpande believes that women have so deeply internalized the dominant mores that sometimes, despite being better endowed than most other Indian women, her protagonists cannot visualize an independent identity for themselves and so they become submissive.

Perhaps, through their portrayals, Deshpande is also trying to explode the myth of the 'educated Indian woman' who, it is popularly assumed, is automatically liberated. Their education should have given them the freedom and the courage to do what they believe in. It should have given them the determination to assert themselves as individuals, to set limits with their partners. However, they have failed to utilize their education or benefit from its advantages because of a latent, patriarchal mind-set ingrained in their childhood via socialization.

#### **Self- Concept**

'Self' is one of the vital concepts, which haunt human existence in this mundane world. Since childhood human beings spend a lot of time brooding over the feelings, perceptions and real or expected, ideas about oneself. They develop some ideas of his own about his own self and many things in the world, familial and social interaction, and lead to the basis of the experience with the self. The concept of self develops in a cultural context, which has the element of continuity, keeps changing with the relations of people and places, and when the gap between ideas and reality persist, the person may feel alienated, isolated and deceived. Hollow between ideas and reality, consciousness and unconsciousness divides the person into many selves who ultimately leave him disjointed and the victim of continual crises.

The post-modern literature highlights many such issues, which even today remain unresolved. One important contemporary voice is Shashi Deshpande who concerns herself with the struggle a woman undertakes in a society to find and preserve her identity as a wife, a daughter, a mother and above all a human being. Shashi, however, doesn't advocate a radical or strident kind of feminism, which sees man as the cause of all troubles. Instead she highlights the need to harmonize the relationships, the need to grant others a space and a freedom to express. She seeks a re-orientation of societies in which balanced relationships find a room for cultivation. There is a constant tussle between patriarchy and tradition on one hand and self-expression, individuality and independence for women on the other and it is this crisis which Shashi Deshpande brings into focus through her novels. The themes of marital incompatibility, identity crisis, imbalanced family relationships and the patriarchal gaze are brought to the forefront through her fiction. The established conventional ethos is questioned and deconstructed to get more constructive answers. In her novels *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, the crises that engulf present day women are very effectively reflected. The women protagonists pass through various stages ranging from the self-oblivion to self-awareness.

Love and marriage are interrelated concepts of human relations. Love has many forms and one of its forms is seen in the relations of husband and wife. This relation has been the major concern of feminists all over the world. The most stable, pious and natural form of love, and its expression in daily life changes with time and space, from a permanent fountain to occasional drops. Even in this expression, a woman has no equal share and this result in dissatisfaction, subjugation and suffocation, which is well brought to the fore by Shashi Deshpande selected Novels'. A male partner not only changes a female's identity from a girl to a woman, but dominates her whole life to such an extent that she accepts herself as a part of his identity. She accepts everything silently, not because she is afraid of changing the society, but she fears changing herself, her relation, and her forced identity. She becomes so suppressed from within, that hardly she feels the need to change her predefined roles and assume her new identity. *That Long Silence* is an exploration of the nature of the cultural and social construction of female identity and behavioral pattern particularly as a wife and a mother. It projects a multitude of women's problems, dilemmas, disputes and frustrations. The novel revolves mainly around Jaya, a convent educated, middle class woman married to Mohan who is a materialist at heart. Apparently living a stable life with two kids and responsibly managing the household chores, Jaya suffers from an inner psychological crisis. Jaya is haunted by the ghosts of Suhasini and Sita, the ghosts, which haunt her more than terror, and make him more fearful than fear. She analyses and finds that "the ghost most fearful to confront is the ghost of one's own self." (pg. 13)

The marriage fails to offer her the genuine respect and understanding irrespective of the fact that she places her own self at stake for the happiness of family. Jaya sets her life pattern in accordance with the likes and dislikes of her husband but ends up with nothing more than emptiness and silence. She loses her real life in her efforts to become an ideal wife and mother and this realization arrives to her when she self-introspects. She tries to locate the cause of their marital incompatibility and finds that it is the 'long silence' that they dwell in which has destroyed their happiness. Jaya breaks the silence at one level by writing for the magazine 'Seeta' but even this annoys Mohan who believes that to be angry is to be unwomanly and Jaya sets her mind not to be angry even in writing. She confines her thoughts and defines her role according to the expectations of her husband. Naturally she loses her 'true self'. The internalized anger turns her nervous and incompetent. She says: "...no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? ... A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (p.147). Jaya is not a feminist but a woman caught in a tussle between submission and assertion. However, the repeated allegations and accusations by her husband finally force her to react sharply. And she realizes that it is not only Mohan who is responsible for her plight but her own being also. It is she who allowed herself to be victimized. And when this realization dawns upon her, she decides to come out of her cloistered self and be the real Jaya. Towards the end of the novel, she decides to break the silence, reveal her real self to the world, and start anew. She grows from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion. Her determination reveals itself in the lines:

"I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase that long silence between us." (p. 192).

Jaya is every woman who submits herself to roles assigned by the society and in living up to those roles loses her own identity. She is every woman who devotes her life to the family and in turn gets nothing more than emptiness and Jaya is every woman who has the potential to rise and establish herself in whatever way she can but is restricted by the dogma engulfing the society. Shashi Deshpande conveys a strong message to women through Jaya's portrayal: "women should accept their responsibility for what they are and see how much they have contributed to their own victimization." She advocates that women should sing of their true selves and transcend the oppressions. *That Long Silence* is the preparation of a woman towards the articulation, which will break the chain of silence and offer newer solutions because "...life has always to be made possible" (p.193). Jaya finds her existence so altered and disturbed by the changed circumstances of their life that for the first time she begins to question herself. Her husband has lost his status, and she, her identity, as a result. Traditionally, a woman has an identity only as her father's daughter, her husband's wife, or as her son's mother. Self-revelation is a cruel process. Her inward quest makes her realize that: The real picture, the real "you" never emerges. Looking for it as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces. Now she shakes off all her panic. After her self-analysis, Jaya becomes

fearless. She finds it difficult to define her real 'self' because so far, she has been defining herself differently with different people. She has no individuality. So much so that she cannot even decide at which point to begin.

A search for the self, for an authentic life is undertaken by her protagonists who actually represent numerous women caught in the conventional clutches in this world. Her fiction provides an insight into the psyche of Indian women. Her novel, *The Binding Vine*, focuses on the struggle of the inner mind and self of shackled women characters. Urmila, the protagonist and a college lecturer by profession is a typically feminine voice who struggles through her own gloomy domestic atmosphere not subduing but voicing and trying to sort out things for herself and for other women also be they her mother-in-law Mira or the rape victim Kalpana in the novel. The novel begins in Urmila's personal loss. She, having lost her daughter, fights the despair alone as her husband, Kishore, a sailor by profession remains out mostly. Urmila is quite different from earlier protagonists in composure. She possesses a better control over herself and her relations also. Though being married to a man of her own choice, she is desperate of her marital life. Kishore and Urmila don't share the bond of love and understanding. The incompatibility results in alienation. Irrespective of being economically independent, Urmila requires Kishore by her side as a supporting oak to entwine her around. The novel describes the trauma and anguish that she goes through and the stages through which she passes before coming to terms with the death of her daughter. While struggling, she comes across the poetry written by her Mira, her dead mother-in-law and through her diaries she gets to know about Mira's suffering as a woman and as a victim of forced marriage. Mira comes as a refuge to Urmila as she easily identifies with her and finds relief from the excruciating pain. Mira happens to be a silent victim of loveless marriage who faces death at a very young age but through her poetry is revealed her desire to be recognized as a writer and a poet. Mira happens to be a woman, who used pen as a vehicle for self-expression, to save herself from abuse, from anonymity and mutilation in the prison like house of her husband. Mira represents a multitude of women who are forced into marriages at a very young age and succumb to the lust of their husbands. Urmila gathers the courage to publish her poems and reveals Mira's suffering to the world. Through Mira Urmila gains a new insight into herself. Though accused of being a traitor to Mira, Urmila remains firm enough in her resolution to break the silence of women in the name of social taboo or family honour. She advocates love as the binding force in relationships.

The present-day worldviews marriage as a business institution and that is why the hollow marriages are dissatisfying both physically as well as spiritually. Instead they confuse a woman whether to revolt or submit because both end in discontent and it is this set up, which requires change. As Urmila she says that "each relationship, always imperfect, survives on hope..."

*The Binding Vine* is projection of woman's biological needs and raises the questions of woman's right over her own body even within the marital domain. There is an effort to restore the discarded reality of life. The post-modern fiction of Shashi Deshpande doesn't have debating voices or doesn't intend to develop any thesis in the debate. The novels are simply open examinations of the experiences of people in specific settings. They are not just feminist in concern but packed with multiple issues at work. Jaya, Sarita, Urmila present in a literary microcosm the condition of society at large. They are women trying to understand their history, their place, their role in the society and above all their relationship with others and themselves. Shashi writes about "human beings and about other human beings who happen to be woman." The characters are true to life and their problems, which nobody wants to talk about but they do and thereby, encourage others to break the silences on injustice. It is difficult for women to do away with the stereotypes and traditions especially for those who belong to the lower stratum of the society. There is a dire need in our society to harmonize the relationships. However, subjugating or destroying the male can offer no victory. Annihilating the existing order, being anti-men or anti-marriage doesn't lead one anywhere. Reconciliation and a re-orientation is necessary starting with the self itself. Apparent failures at different levels can't endanger the inner strength. On the contrary, extreme despair can ignite the superior self and grant an impetus to look forward for newer ways of living. Women need to rise from the quandary of their troubles and tribulations as victorious not defeated, re-energized and not worn out. They can't afford to be the ones who run away but they should

become the ones to return with more firm resolutions. Shashi Deshpande's literary interventions into the postmodern Indian society need to be recognized for her writing in itself is an outpouring from a world within the woman. Thorough her novels Deshpande emphasizes the role of 'Self' and the importance of self-esteem in this modern world wisely projecting vision of humanity and the value-based structure of life, which needs to be strengthened and taken into consideration.

Thus, Deshpande give the impression to be conveying the idea of exert and come out of the quagmire of patriarchal oppression, to emerge as individuals and as human beings in their own identity. At least the educated Indian woman must do it so that she can light the path for her daughters. That seems to be Deshpande's vision of the future.

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