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FEMININE EXPERIENCES IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Feminist issues related to female biology such as puberty, menstruation, sexual intercourse, rape and child rearing practices and a realization of the distinctiveness of female body have attracted the attention of many women writers of the day. These issues of distinctive biology have given women the status of the “other” in the patriarchal society and are the sole cause of power gender relationship. These are also responsible for creating social images of women, depriving them of realizing their identities and defining them according to roles. Female biology is the root cause of oppression of women that results in the suffering of woman at economic, emotional, social and psychological levels. Shashi Deshpande too has broken the silence on such issues. She has given a sensitive treatment to various Indian themes and has given a competent representation of contemporary middle class women. Shashi Deshpande depicts women as sufferers but in their due course of suffering they revolt against it and emerge as bold and challenging women. Shashi Deshpande ventured to change the conventional hold of patriarchy on women. Her world consists of women who strive to realize themselves only within the accepted institutions of society. The present paper discusses her reflections on feminine experiences as depicted in her selected novels.

Key Words: Feminist, patriarchy, silence, sensitivity, self-revelation.

In the discourse on feminism, the issues related with female anatomy carry a significant position to determine the nature and complexities of gender relationship. Simon De Beauvoir believes that the relegation of woman to “otherness” is derived from received conceptions of female biology. The distinction of biological attributes, coupled with age long cultural practices constitute the spectrum of feminine psyche and it is essentially impossible to transcend its impact as a shaping force. Women’s natural attribute of procreation is a power as well as weakness. Beauvoir maintains that a woman in her failure to transcend the attributes of distinctive “biology” becomes “other”. Feminine consciousness gets constructed on the basis of the biological determinants corresponding with the socio-cultural practices. De Beauvoir in her analysis of female anatomy covers the issues that are the integral aspect of female existence and are the basis of power based gender relationship. It covers the issues like puberty, menstruation, sexual intercourse, rape and child rearing practices and a realization of the distinctiveness of female body. Shashi Deshpande used her pen to break the silence of women against these issues that are often associated with the idea of morality and religion. These feminist issues require a better realization of independent female spaces and speeches beyond the canons and paradigms of gender equality and social liberation. Simon declared, “Because I realized that we must fight for the situation of women, here and now, before our dreams of socialism come true.” (De Beauvoir : 32) The

defenders of liberal feminism negating the concept of formal sexual politics, have tried to expose the politics of the 'private' domestic sphere. Betty Friedan admits the imbalance in gender relationship and accepts that the possibilities of the oppression of woman are rooted in "feminine mystique" which defines the status of woman in context of her femininity and judges her solely according to her performance as "wife" and "mother" without taking into consideration the real experiences associated with these issues. The social images of "mother" and "wife" fail to do justice with the mental oppression involved in these obligations of femininity. Her submissive acceptance of male sexuality renders her physically and mentally weak. It is said, "Liberal feminism leaves masculine values intact and does not address the systemic injustices fostered by the patriarchal relations that sustain women's sexual and economic dependence." (Sandra Burt: 39) It has also been accepted that biological inferiority that compels to confine to domestic spaces with "menial, non creative and isolating nature of household tasks mark them as alienated labour." (Sheila Rowbotham: 39) Biologically female sexuality has been a cause of exploitation by males. It has led to the experiences like undesirable pregnancy, abuse, pornography, female disease and sexual colonialism. Sex is an innate human instinct both with man and woman but the cultural paradigms in patriarchal society that are gender specific are responsible for the suffering of woman at economic level, emotional level, social level and most significantly at psychological level. Woman is socially conditioned to suppress her sexual suffering in perpetual silence. The distinction of sexism as manifested in patriarchal families has encouraged pornography, child abuse, rape, abortion, undesirable pregnancies and renders a woman weak and helpless. Such experiences associated with femininity made Robin Morgan to conclude, "Sexism is the root of oppression, the one which until and unless we uproot it, we continue to put forth the branches of racisms, class, hatred, ageism, composition, ecological disaster and economic exploitation." (Morgan: 10)

It has paved a way for the damaging practices of "rape", "sexual abuse" and "sexual colonialism". It perpetuates woman's oppression. In this context in the institution of motherhood, woman's reproductive freedom has also been an issue of serious concern. It involves physical, mental and social segregation of womanhood. Shulamith Firestone admits, "Biological reproduction is the primary source of women's oppression" (Firestone: 54) She believes that the woman can revolutionize her biological weakness only through the technique of reproductive technology. She exhorts that to maintain her position; women should reject the hold of man on her body as sex object. Adrienne Rich in her revolutionary ideology has focused on the experiences of motherhood. On the one hand it is the extension of female identity but on the other hand pregnancy is an unacknowledged triumph of masculinity on female body. She celebrates women's strength as keeping much of the experience of motherhood for themselves despite the power of institutional control. In context of the idealism of 'motherhood', she states:

A complex power structure produced by the interlocking forces of law, medicine, culture and professional expertise works to create an "invisible institution" of male control over women's bodies and minds. (Adrienne Rich: 58)

In the form of the surrender of body without emotional fulfillment, woman finds herself humiliated and tortured. Sexual relationship without the spaces for 'love and 'mutual consent' has been defined as "rape" may it be within marriage or outside marriage. It distorts "self will" and "self respect" of woman. It has been said:

Legally rape is recognized as a crime with physical aspects only, namely the penetration of the vagina by the penis against the will of the victim. In effect, however, the real crime is the annihilation of man or of woman as a human being. (Griffin: 79)

All these experiences related with the experiences of femininity have significantly contributed to distort the inner psyche of women. It gives birth to conflicting ideologies required to resist the forces of patriarchy.

Gender inequality and its attended influence on woman's psyche is the cardinal core of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980). The plot of the novel revolves round the struggle of a sensitive and educated woman who carves out spaces in professional life to achieve economic independence and "accountability" to her own 'self' beyond the paradigms set by her conventional patterns. It has been said:

Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* ambivalently projects deconstruction as well as reconstruction of Gender roles as the female protagonist of the novel is constraints and often

unconsciously in search of an inner space which is instrumental in the reconstruction of gender identity in the wake of being deconstructed. (Tripathi: *Gender Identity and Inner Space*: 42)

Saru, in her parental home witnessed the horrors of 'gender discrimination' and on the support of Manohar, she designs her career as a successful doctor. In her marriage with Manohar, she encounters discontent, apathy and discrimination. Her marriage with Manohar brings no consolation in her life. She finds disgust and nervousness in the paradise of "matching curtains" and "handloom bed" spreads. What she wants in marriage is love and emotional bonding. Manohar protects her but as a husband he fails to cope up with the emotional demands of the life of Saru. Her decision of marriage was a compensation for her loss but it proved an error in her life. For a while Saru enjoys the pleasure of the company of Manohar but sexual relations in marital life fail to bring desired contentment. She looks forward for the confirmation of sexual life with the repeated act of love. Saru's dilemma is the dilemma of 'love' and 'sex'. She declares:

I was insatiable, not for sex but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our, love of my being loved. If ever had any doubts. I had only to turn to him to prove his love for me. (40)

In Saru's life, "the moments of 'private pleasure' bring love's sad satiety." (Agarwal: 27) Subsequently with her popularity as a doctor, Manohar feels himself humiliated. Manu's isolation and indifference generates the guilt of 'negligent wife' in the life of Saru. She becomes conscious of the possessiveness of Manu and feels herself insecure in it. Manu is insecure. She refutes the concept of love:

Love ... There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against futility turning into the thing they called 'love'. It is only a word. Take away the word and the concept will wither away. (72)

In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Shashi Deshpande takes a complex pattern of the inner world of feminine experiences. Saru wants to seek a compensation of her own insecurity in the childhood experiences but she does not want to turn back. Her marriage with "Manu was an assertion and affirmation of her feminine sensibility." (Swine: 35) However "the forced and feeling less personal relationship was a greater loss to Saru's individuality and femininity." (Agarwal : 41) In Manu's possessiveness, she finds the reflections of male domination on female body. Manohar remains silent but he becomes a "violent stranger" of night. Saru questioned how a can a man be so divided in himself. During sexual intercourse, Saru becomes just a "terrified animal" who finds herself too nervous to resist his male strength. Being disgusted with the sadism of Manu, she becomes apprehensive about "undesirable pregnancies". She vomits but she realizes, "It was like a pregnant woman vomiting but I knew it was not life, she carried inside her but death. Her face was grey like the ash on a burnt coal." (108) Manu's inherent sense of humiliation in the company of Saru reflects in the form of sexual cruelty. Saru reveals the horrors of male sexuality in the darkness of night. She narrates:

He attacked me, he attacked me like an animal at that night. I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this ... this man hurting me with his hands, his teeth, his whole body. (201)

In *The Dark Hold No Terror* through the anguish of Saru, Shashi Deshpande enables her to speak on the issues like pregnancy and forced surrender to male passions. For a woman these issues are closely related with her inner self and the undesirable domination on her body ruins her physically, mentally and emotionally.

In the novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Shashi Deshpande through the dilemma of the protagonist Indu, ventures to explore the fragmentation of feminine psyche on the issues like the balance of sex relationship in marital life, spaces and quest for extramarital relationship and the appreciation of female desires in the institution of marriage. In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande depicts the anxiety of an educated and self aware woman searching for a balance between her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother in the patriarchal society. The impact of legends and myths, social conventions and domination of male sexuality has subjugated women's freedom in the matters of marriage and personal relationship. Besides of the deterioration of social position, it has done a great hazard for the feminine psyche. Sarah Grimke observes:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank, she was created to fill. She has done all she could do to debase and enslave her mind. (Grimke: *Equality of Sexes* : 10)

In *Roots and Shadows* in the backdrop of traditional values Shashi Deshpande tries to establish that in spite of social constraints a woman retains her own individuality related with the matters of personal life and it can motivate her to recollect the strength of 'resistance' and 'reaffirmation'. It is said, "*Roots and Shadows* is a symbolic representation of the dialectical nature of man and woman relationship set each other in material terms for power struggle. "'Roots' stands for tradition and 'shadows' signifies the marginal culture." (Meitel: 79)

Indu was born and brought up in a traditional family with her emancipated vision of femininity, female sexuality and female roles. She chooses a marriage of her own choice beyond the mechanical bonding of man and woman relationship. She nurtures the romantic ideology of marriage, "What was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generation might continue." (3) However, she finds the silent acceptance of marital bonds is like signing the bonds of slavery. Indu feels suffocated at the convention that all the norms of marriage are to be decided according to the choices of man. Indu expresses her resentment, "a woman's life... contained no choices. And my life especially in this house, I had seen the truth of it. The woman had no choice but to submit and accept. And I had often wondered, have they been born without wills or have their wills atrophied through a life time of closure." (6) Indu in order to reveal her own vision analyzes the life of Akka, her grandmother and Mini, her cousin. Akka who at present time appears the pillar of authority in the family, had been subjected to sexual torture as a child bride. The brutality imposed in the form male sexuality develops phobia for sex in her life. Further Akka's failure to conceive a child made her position more miserable in the family. More than this dismay, Akka's husband used to maintain his relationship with a mistress. It is a humiliation of female sexuality even within the institution of marriage. In this respect, conventional marriages perpetuate male sexual colonialism on female body. Indu registers her protest against this practice of sexual colonialism:

Man considers it as a normal behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and physical levels outside marriage, while it ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case a woman indulges in it even though accidentally the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not even involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts prosecuting her. (84)

In the background of the life conditions of Akka and Mini, Indu reflects on the nature of her own relationship with Jayant. She follows only what Jayant demands and was expected to suppress her responses as they were the bits of 'garbage'. Jayant considers pregnancy and child birth as a "game" while in the state of pregnancy; Indu perceives the possibilities of loss of her autonomy. Such mental subjugation is resented by Indu, she confesses, "When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I dress, I think of Jayant, when I undress, I think of him. Always what he wants ... I have I become fluid with no shape, no form of my own." (49) She considers marriage "a trap" or "a cage" with "two trapped animals, glaring hatred at each other." (61) Akka also rewards her own pain against the sexual violence inside the institution of marriage, "Her husband ... he had a weakness for women. How could a frightened child satisfy him! He always had mistress. And Akka could never give birth to a living child... Every time she had a miscarriage, her mother-in-law scammed her for it and he made it for her." (70) Shashi Deshpande through the rage of Indu and Akka suggests that silent social violence gives birth to the psyche of self persecution and converts it in the form of violence and obstinacy. Indu cries out, "women, women, women... I got sick of it, there was nothing else, it was a kind of Narcissism. And as if we had locked ourselves in a cage thrown and away the key." (78) For Indu, the first realization of womanhood comes with the beginning of menstrual cycle when a warning was given by Kaki, "you are a woman? You can have babies yourself." (79) Infact it was her first realization of her weakness as a woman.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande also constructs the experience of female sexuality and female desire for male companionship. Indu resents sexual violence but retains her desire. She candidly confesses her desire for sexual contentment and accepts it as a method of the culmination of the union of male and female relationship. She expresses her own craving for male companionship may it be Naren or Jayant. However the sexual relationship without 'love' generates contempt and discontent. Indu is disgusted with the mechanical sexual ritual with Jayant but she maintains her sensation and sexual excitement in the company of Naren, her boyhood friend. Shashi Deshpande maintains that for a woman there is a difference between love and sex, social consciousness and biological needs. Indu's sexual life with Jayant was "dead",

“passive” and “mechanical”. In Jayant’s authority in the matters of sexual relationship, she finds the humiliation of her female sexuality. She feels herself lonely and isolated. She admits:

But between the idea and reality, there is an immeasurable distance. To see, to feel a real man was far removed from the idea of love and it to me then. And yet gradually the experience had fallen into place into those slots of vague longings and definite aching emptiness that had shamed me. Now that fulfillment was possible. It seemed so natural and perfect but there was even then a small crack in the perfection. Jayant was so passionate, so ready sitting up suddenly and saying ‘No’, ‘No’ not now. (82)

In the same breath she admits that such indifference of Jayant in the moments of ecstasy induces greater pain and nothingness. She questions, “Will I never reach that stage... no passion, no emotion, no unruffled placidity? My recurring day dream into which I retreat at times of stress, me lying in bed, glasses and reading tranquil, detached and unshakable.” (108) In contrast of the frustration in the company of Jayant, she looks forward for a “completeness” in the company of Naren, “I had felt incomplete not as woman but as a persons.” (115) It is also remarkable that Indu not only expresses her longing for fulfillment in the matters of such relationship but also expresses her disgust in “female functions” like the sucking of the child that makes the position of a woman awkward. It is only in the company of Naren that Indu gets the realization of her real womanhood. Getting rid of traditional guilt and shame, she makes an open confession of her “sexual instincts” that essentially seek its outlet in the form of male copulation. She cries out:

The sexual instinct ... that’s true, the maternal instincts... That’s true... self interest, self love... they’ve they have the basic truths. (150)

In spite of such an open confession, Indu yields to social paradigms recommended for a respectable married woman. Indu’s dilemma is an affirmation of the truth that social commitments reconstruct internal moral codes and the essential female sensuality follow two divergent tracks.

In *Roots and Shadows*, through the emotional crisis of Indu, Shashi Deshpande establishes that woman always feels herself humiliated in those female functions that ridicule female body and makes female position ridiculous and obscene in male constructed fabric of social behaviour. The imposition of male autonomy on female body even inside the institutions of marriage generates contempt and disgust for man and woman relationship.

The novel *That Long Silence* (1988), the first authentic voice of female subjugation is a remarkable effort of Shashi Deshpande to enable a woman to speak on those issues that have been defined only in context of guilt and shame. Biology and sexism are inmate human instincts but it has become a part of sexual politics. The narrative in *That Long Silence* is fabricated to record the direct experiences of womanhood and recognizing the identity of woman as a woman. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, appears as an intelligent and sensitive woman endowed with the gift of writing creative pieces. However, after marriage, she designs the pattern of her life, according to the desires of her husband. She keeps silence against her private experiences, mental convulsions and aspirations. She has been defined as an “intellectual who finds herself out of place in the society meant only for man.” (Sarabjit: *Images of Women* : 138) Jaya in order to locate the position of her own reactions and experiences moves to record the experiences of women of her own family like her mother, and her neighbor Mukta. In her investigation, she draws the inference that ‘silence’ is the ultimate predicament of women in male dominated society. She is in panic to realize that “self-revelation is a cruel process.” Her husband Mohan expects implied consent of Jaya in all his decisions. Once Mohan after being trapped in embezzlement, led her to shift to Dadar flat to avoid his own shame and ignorance. Jaya with this experience falls in introspection and reflects on the various experiences of personal life and the life of all women. In her marital life, in the company of Mohan, she finds herself as “a pair of bullocks yoked together.” It makes her aware of the humiliation of “womanhood” and “female sexuality” in the institution of marriage. As soon as she looks at Nayana, her maid, she finds that Nayana is pregnant again. She fills with indignation and cries out, “Poor Nayana, pregnant again.” (79) She identifies her own suffering with the undesirable pregnancy of Nayana. She calls the monotonous routine of her life as “guerrilla warfare”. In the retrieval of her past, she recalls how after her marriage her name was changed. Her childhood name was “Shivani”. She recollects the occasion of the pathetic death of Vimala, the sister of Mohan. She was not able to conceive a child and nobody was conscious and careful for her failure. She was suffering with ovarian tumour with

metastases in the beings but she was not permitted to talk even of her own illness. Her mother in law used to make a remark:

I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing. As if other women don't have heavy periods, what a fuss, but those women who've never had children like that. (39)

Shashi Deshpande in her treatment of female experiences takes an insider's view with the exceptional strength to expose naked reality of social conventions and social apathy against the mutilation of female body.

Similarly Jaya is disgusted to find that Jeeja silently accepts her husband's second marriage for the sake of childbirth. It vitalizes the image of "breeding animal" in the mind of Jaya. She reflects on the experiences of early days of married life when Mohan used to be over enthusiastic about his professional achievements and she was left "to mediate her own problems of periods, bleeding, pregnancy and undesirable and painful abortions on such occasions, Mohan never shared the emotional crisis and physical pain of Jaya, "Pregnancy was a personal trial of Jaya instead of collective responsibility of Mohan and Jaya." (Agarwal: 75) Once Jaya came in sudden bleeding and she was in the soar need of immediate medical consultation. Mohan instead of being sympathetic for her pain expresses his concern for the fine dresses of Jaya. In context of this experience, Jaya also recalls the experience about painful bleeding during her regular periods, Neelima with utter disgust used to say, "I don't want it, why can't I stop having it. Isn't there any drug, I can take to stop it." (63) Resentment and fury is reflected in this open confession of Neelima about the painful experience of menstruation. It is not only the voice of Neelima but the voice of the entire womankind.

Jaya also has a realization of the oppressive burden of pregnancy, "... my body had seemed to go berserk at my attempt to control it. It had stimulated pregnancy. There had been uneasiness, early morning sickness, the same wretched feeling of being at war with my body..." (64) Like the experience of pregnancy and menstruation cycle, Jaya also records her sexual relations with Mohan. In the company of Mohan, she has a realization that there is no significance of her sexual desires in Mohan's scheme of personal relations. She is expected to maintain silence and stoicism in the matters of sexual relations. Jaya expresses her craving for more passionate relationship. She recalls, "I had cling to him at night, feeling with relief the warmth of his body, stroking his chest, letting my palms more with his even deep breaths." (96) Such sort of suppression in sexual relations leads to destructive consequences. In one more event, Mohan along with Ravi makes a mockery of Vanitamami's suffering, "She is holding on to her uterus hoping even now she'll get a kid." (107) This obscene comment makes Jaya wild with rage because she becomes conscious of the devouring spirit of female sexuality. She snubs Ravi with utter contempt, "What did he know? What did he understand of women... But can any woman deny the link? Those painful spasm in the middle of each cycle, those massive driving on-to madness contracting pains of child birth." (107)

Jaya in the company of Kamat reshapes her career as a journalist to seek sublimation for her suppressed sexual instinct. The involvement of Jaya with Kamat generates the psyche of guilt and anger in Mohan. Unconsciously Mohan takes it as a humiliation of his manhood. Mohan pays no heed to the fact that woman retains her own instinctive autonomy to regulate her own innate desires and seeks an outlet of it. The institution of marriage can channelize these instincts but can't eliminate them in the name of social morality. Jaya reflects on the maze of the obscurity of her own relationship:

These odds, almost flippant changes and such deadly anger. What was he getting at? It was as if we'd been silently wearing the threads of guilt, anger and resentment between us all these days. Now the fabric was complete and yet I had no idea what the overall design was. (116)

Sex is not a mechanical mode of personal relationship but it requires the lively spark of love and emotional affinity. Without love, sex generates discontent and suffocation and subsequently distorts the harmony of man and woman relationship. Against the apathy of Mohan, Jaya asserts, "the relation of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another, Natural? That's the only treachery, only deceit, only betrayal." (158) In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande prepares a wide spectrum of female experience and makes Jaya to "speak" and reveal feminine consciousness on them against the symbolic order of mechanical responses.

Conclusion: It can be safely concluded that Shashi Deshpande agrees that women's social position cannot be appreciated and evaluated without acknowledging the significance of female functions and feminine experiences. She acknowledges this fact and her protagonists apparently seem to bear the oppressive burden

of these experiences because it perpetuates the mechanism of oppression and make their position weak but significant.

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