



A REINTERPRETATION OF SILENCE IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

GAYATRI ANAND

Post-Graduate in English, MCM DAV College for Women,

Panjab University, Chandigarh.

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is an Indian author of paramount importance and whose influence is ubiquitous in the literary sphere. Although her novels have been analysed in great depth, the analysis has been one-dimensional in some respects. She has been viewed as a feminist rather than an iconoclast in more generic terms. The depiction and critical analysis of men in her stories will be highlighted in this analysis. It is a well-established fact that Shashi Deshpande is a feminist. The women who form the protagonists of her stories are realistic and yet ideal, moral without attempting to be entirely perfect. Their subjugation at the hands of a patriarchal society cannot be debated. However, not enough consideration has been given to the portrayal of the other gender. This paper focuses on an elucidation of some of her works, with added emphasis to the characterization of male characters, who have been relegated to the backdrop for far too long. This other aspect of her stories which is often neglected is a critical aspect of her work that needs to be brought out into the open.

In her essay *Writing from the Margin*, Shashi Deshpande says, "Factors which unite us, are far more important in our lives than the gender differences which divide us; it is we who have made these important." She also brings forth the poignant question: "Is writing by women only for women?". It is evident from her statement that she has always intended to reach a wider audience than one composed only of women. As her books are meant to be read by both genders, to relegate them to a merely feminine viewpoint would be very reductive. Baba is blamed for the fact that Vasundhara remains silent about her illness in *Moving On*. However, it is not easy to decode silence. The importance of communication, which is an essential aspect of healthy relationships, has been rendered unimportant on a societal level. The characters illustrate this tendency in society, amongst many others, in which marriage is not seen as relationship to cultivated. Rather, it is a necessary evil containing within it roles that were developed centuries ago and which society as a whole wishes to keep intact and away from progress and development of any sort.

In *Why I Am a Feminist* the author herself remarks that feminism cannot be anti-men "... when it is really working for a better, more meaningful and companionable relationship between men and women, instead of the uneasy relationship between tyrants and oppressed." Yet, the former has been denied both readership and analysis. Shashi Deshpande declares in an interview with Gita Viswanath "And as far as readers are concerned I

would like them to read me as a novelist, not as a feminist novelist or women writer or whatever.” In another, with Pallavi Thakur, she vehemently opposes the feminist label and says “Once you say I am a feminist writer, you are putting some sort of a boundary, an edge around my writing which means that there is nothing else. I deny it very strongly. My writings are not limited in that way. It is all about human beings and ultimately universal” This absence needs to be subverted, before it is mistaken for the misandry which it is not.

The idea of pre-defined roles, an obsolete one, needs to be ideologically banished. The relationship between Manohar and Saru is rampant with sociological and ideological evil. However, Manohar’s undeniably ill treatment of his wife is not merely an assertion of his patriarchal dominance. It is the culmination of an age-old problem which both genders face. A man who is less qualified than his wife and earns less than she does is treated with derision and contempt. He is a victim as well, the prey of a lifetime of judgement, hierarchy and labels that society has imposed upon men and women for too long. Gopal’s absence and familial neglect in *A Matter of Time* is a mere microcosm of a macrocosmic problem.

M.K Naik defines domestic novels as female-centric. Why have men been denied the domestic sphere? Just as Akka’s degradation into a tyrant in *Roots and Shadows* is the result of a lifetime of abuse, an indication of the damage society can inflict upon a soul, the supposedly evil male characters in Deshpande’s works also make it evident that the true villain is society itself. In her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Shashi Deshpande says “A wife should always be few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA you should be a BA. If he is 5'4'tall you shouldn't be more than 5'3'tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage...No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care it is unequal in favour of the husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, God help you, both of you.” This is the warning which the narrator wants readers to heed, one that steeps of age-old bias and prejudice in the name of tradition and values. Narrow-minded bigotry which is the result of generations of bias has resulted in a close-minded society, one that is discriminatory and detrimental for humanity in general, irrespective of gender. The author wishes to highlight the idiosyncrasies based not in logic and fairness but institutionalized rituals that eventually culminate in problematic lives for both sexes. This kind of old-fashioned dogma becomes a type of indoctrinate ideology that societal components find it difficult to subvert.

Can inequality be quantified with perfect accuracy? This statement is usually, and correctly, read in terms of how unfair societal expectations of women are. Her brilliance, her beauty, her achievements need to be diluted and hidden. Her greatness becomes the cause of her shame. However, this situation is extremely unfair for men as well. He needs to constantly prove his manhood by being stronger, better, greater. Whether this situation is more unfair for men or women is impossible to state with certainty. It is an unwarranted state for both. Once that realization sets in, a much needed cultural transformation might just be possible.

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