

THE THEME OF MARRIAGE AND ADJUSTMENT IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

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Shashi Deshpande, who holds in great worth as an Indian English woman novelist, is very much aware of the vulnerable conditions as well as secondary status of the Indian women. The reason behind their sub-graded status in the society, according to Deshpande, is long practiced socio-religious traditions, which place them under secondary sex. Moreover, illiteracy of the women, their weak and submissive nature and their love and affection towards husbands and children are also responsible for their degradation. No doubt, the educated Indian women are aware of their rights, status, identity and preservation, but they lack strong willingness and courage to fight against the exploitative forces. In Indian society, the problem before married women is how to adjust prestigiously in the family that treats women differently. They have to keep their mouth shut and be silent because of unfavourable circumstances and also their weaknesses that do not allow them to express their feelings and emotions and stand firmly against injustice. Traditions that teach women to behave like ideal wives like *Sita* and *Savitri*, tempt them to be called ideal and prohibit them to come out of the traditional circle. As a result, they are bound to bear with the exploitative as well as suppressive circumstances and situations.

Almost all novels of Deshpande narrate the story of the women who are the victims of exploitation, separation, negligence and even rape by their own family members and husbands. To them the marriage is a bond because the life of women without the husband has neither dignity nor significance in the Indian society. Deshpande has suggested certain ways and means for honourable adjustment of the married women within the prevailing marriage system in Indian society. She is of the view that the women desirous of having prestigious place in the family and preserving their rights must be bold enough to open their mouth and stand firmly against the ill treatment of their family members including husbands. This paper analyses problem of Shashi Deshpande's women and critically examines suggestions extended by the novelist for prestigious adjustment of the married Indian women.

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Deshpande is against the roles prescribed by the religious scriptures and orthodox traditions for Indian women because that not only degrade women but also make them weak and submissive. The novelist is aware of the rise of women in modern society where education has made them more assertive, more liberated in their views and more articulate in their expression. Modern women have established a coherent class structure where they are found alert and assertive for identity defying male's unpleasant authority. The novelist admits that in the fast changing social, cultural, political and economic environment of today the majority of Indian women especially belonging to the middle class as well as lower class are still far behind. They have got stuck in predicament between traditions and modernity. The attitude of men towards women in India is dominant while women are emotionally attached to their husbands and children. The protagonists of Deshpande are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male-dominated society. Caught between traditions and modernity, her protagonists search for their identity within married life. The problem of marriage is a big problem not only for the grooms but also for their parents. Talking about marriage problem in India Deshpande says:

A marriage you start of expecting so many things.
And bit by bit, like dead leaves the expectations fall
out. But... two people who have shut themselves in
two separate jars. Who can see each other, but
cannot communicate. Is this a marriage?
(Deshpande 1982: 24.)

The issue that has major concern in the writings of Deshpande is how to get honourable adjustment of women in the society within the framework of marriage system. Swine observes:

The tragic predicament of Deshpande's protagonists is the outcome of male-domination in a patriarchal culture. Their silent suffering is socio-psyche in nature. In her quest for identity, the Deshpande's protagonists move from despair to hope, from self negation to self assertion. Her struggle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and authentic self-hood. (Swain 2005: 125)

The marriage without the consent of the groom destroys and disintegrates female self. Motherhood is spoiled because of emergence

of husband as a villain. Like other Indian women English novelists like Anita Desai, Kamala Das etc. who are worried about the problems of adjustment of the women, Deshpande has shown the efforts to adjust them keeping in view the ground reality. Earlier the problems of women were more emotional nature due to their attachment to their family. Today, the educated women being conscious of their significance are much more ambitious of having a life style of their own parallel to men. In the opinion of Deshpande they have such ambition, but they lack efforts and supports. Their emotional attachment to home and family is a fetter to fulfill their ambition. It becomes difficult or rather impossible for them to break up the established ideal wife-husband relationship. Despite torture and troubles, they lack the courage to revolt against the traditions and live without the support of the husband. They are to honour the scriptures that teach them:

Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons.... Even though her husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshiped as God. (Hunter College 1983: 68.)

Even in the unconventional marriage the problems are conflicts and adjustment in the mind of female protagonists. As a result, their endeavour to be independent, results into submission to traditions. They find themselves helpless. The worries to keep the marriage intact and fear of divorce make them slave of all injustices. For example, Shakuntala, the mother of the raped victim, Kalpana, in Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*, is not ready about her daughter's rape to report the matter to the police. She knows that once the matter licks, no one can marry raped Kalpana and a life without marriage is meaningless in the Indian society.

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande reflects emotional and psychological attachment of married women to their husbands and children at the cost of suppression of their selves. The bond of marriage is so deep in the mind of Indian women that it does not allow them to leave even non-cooperative as well as oppressive husbands.

Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, *In That Long Silence* gets troubles in marriage stem from her husband's intolerance towards any deviation from her role of subservient wife. When her husband lands in trouble due to the charge of corruption level against him by the department to which he serves, he wants Jaya's companion in hiding, which she refuses. It enraged him so much that he leaves Jaya and goes away. That makes Jaya, so worried and upset that she gets confused and forgets even her daily routine of life, and finds herself unable to pass life without her husband. It is all because of the impression what she has gathered from her family background. She believes in Vantimami's advice that the husband is like a "sheltering tree", and "symbol of kumkum" that must be kept alive at any cost, because without the husband family becomes unsheltered and vulnerable. Moreover, the compulsion before women is:

Marital problems, familial disharmony, financial difficulties taken together all these subjugate and enslave women to a considerable extent that she cannot but endure everything, tolerate all kinds of masculine oppression silently. Her silence has its reverse on her psyche. (Lahiri 2005: 196.)

Jaya suffers a lot, but the circumstances in which she has been born and brought up compels her to endure sufferings silently. Jaya despite having played the admirable role of wife and mother finds herself lonely and estranged. Realization comes to her that she has been unjust to herself and her career as a writer only because she is afraid of inviting any displeasure from her husband. Jaya, like other too, becomes introvert and finds herself unable to live without husband. She has the feeling to be independent, no doubt, but she lacks the courage to revolt against her husband. Mira, another woman character in *The Binding Vine*, is victimized by her own husband who least care for his wife, but she maintains silence. Deshpande raises the hitherto untouched issue like marital rape through her novel, *The Binding Vine*. A woman like Mira has to bear the nightly sexual assault by her husband silently. To her husband she is nothing but a means to satisfy his sexual desire whenever he likes. Mira's diaries and notes amply reflects how she suffers and to which extent. Indu, the protagonist of Deshpande says:

Is not there any thing I want at all? Have I become a fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? Am I on my way to becoming an ideal woman? A woman who sheds her "I", who loses her identity in her husband's. (Deshpande 1996: 49).

Another lady, Shakuntala gets unbearable mental trauma when her daughter, Kalpana, is brutally raped by Prabhakar, the husband of her own sister, Salu. The social condition forces Shakuntala to hide such heinous crime just to protect the prestige of her family. Rejecting the advice to report to the matter to the police she cries out:

No, no, no. Tell him, Tai, it is not true, don't tell any one I'll never be able to hold my head again, who will marry the girl, we are decent people. (Deshpande 1992: 58)

Shakuntala's husband is drunkard and irresponsible who leaves his wife and children for another woman. She is to bear the responsibility of the family and protect it. She has another daughter, too. If the case of Kalpana's rape becomes public, the family would be blamed and marriage of her second daughter would be a big problem. So she, denying the doctor's suggestion to go to the police and report it further says:

If a girl's honour is lost, what is life? The girl does not have to do anything wrong. People will always point out a finger at her Doctor.... Even if it is true, keep it to yourself, don't tell anyone know of it. I have another daughter, what will happen to her (Ibid: 59)

The question, which Sakuntala raises here, is of million dollars. This is the question that agitates the mind of every parent who has daughters. Shakuntala prefers to hide such inhuman and heinous crime because of social bounds and compulsion. She has no dare to take action against the culprit at the cost of her family's prestige. Doctor Bhasker who treats her daughter, Kalpana, wonders how women

like her who herself had no peace and happiness in marriage, think of getting the daughter's marriage. In India the problem of daughter's marriage is very much acute and delicate. Even after the marriage the problem is adjustment and to keep it intact for women. Sunita Reddy observes:

It is indeed, an irony that no avoids brutalization of one kind, women willingly submit themselves to a brutality of another kind in the institution of marriage. (Reddy 2001: 95)

Marriage in the Indian society is such a sacred bond for women that even the educated women belonging to middle class become submissive only to protect their marriage because the consequences of a divorced or left wife is well known to them. That is why they all are submissive and obedient to their husbands even though they are cruel and inhuman in behaviours. The belief among them still exists that husband is the sole most of the wife and sacred duty of the women is to be ideal wife and ideal mother. Parsana Sree has rightly remarked:

In spite of belonging to modern educated urban society and being exposed to the liberal revolutionary ideas and changes shaping in the western world in the name of women liberation movement, the role of Indian women has been just relegated to that of wives and mothers. (Sree 2006: 142.).

Deshpande in, *A Matter of Time*, portrays the story of Sumi, whose husband, Gopal, abruptly leaves the family with a determination to achieve salvation without giving any thought what will happen to his wife and three daughters who are passing through career making phase. Sudden and silent desertion of Gopal brings big shock to Sumi, the protagonist, who is so shocked that she laps into complete silence. However, she apparently tries hard to keep things normal for her daughters. Gopal's abrupt desertion is a great cause of humiliation and mental trauma for her as it is not only a matter of great shame and disgrace but also a better realization of being unwanted. Any way, Sumi must be appreciated for her hard efforts to manage the home affairs and look after children's welfare even without her husband, Gopal.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror* deals with the traumatic experience. She undergoes as her husband (Manu) refuses to play a second fiddle role. After marriage she becomes a doctor due to her sincere efforts while her husband remains far behind in profession career. He has no guts to appreciate wife's advancement and assist her. Rather she dislikes her with the result that Saru becomes the subject of exploitation by her own husband only because he is not ready to tolerate his wife's superiority in profession. The husband whom she submits her entire self, tortures her because he is the victim of inferiority complex. Her husband vents his frustration on Saru in the form of sexual sadism. She does not dare to oppose excessiveness of her husband. Rather she tolerates it silently and feels bad inside. The novelist admitting the existing vulnerable and pathetic conditions of Indian women thinks that "The women had no choice but to submit to accept, and I had often wondered... have they been born without wills of life-time of disuse?" (Ibid: 6).

Deshpande's views regarding marriage are quite different from the view of the western militant feminist writers. Western writers give the females enough scope to go without husbands and even without marriage. But Deshpande, though dislikes such marriage where two people are "shut themselves off in two separate glass jars" who "can see each other but cannot communicate", but does not allow her protagonists to cross the sacred bond of marriage. What she likes is to seek solution to the problem of Indian women under the marriage system for meaningful happy life. On the other hand, the western feminist authors provide enough scope for women to live indecently even without marriage or after marriage without husband if they are not adjustable. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir writes, "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates women" (Beauvoir 1993: 22). Germaine Greer goes to the extent of saying that women should not marry. Kate Millet is of the view that "marriage reduces the status of women to a mere objective for decoration and a tool of man's sexual gratification (Sharma 2005: 112).

Deshpande knows the worth and sagacity of marriage in the Indian society. She is not against marriage. What she wants is honourable adjustment between wife and husband where the dignity and honour of the wife is safe and secured. She does not like to change the husband, but to make changes in the husband's attitude

and behaviours towards his wife in the light of modernity. Her ideology may not be of the type what the radical feminists hold, but she has her own brand of feminism which, as Jaidev says, “has to be authentic, rooted and context bound” (Jaidev 1991: 57). That is why women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s novels strive to make their marriage work in their endeavour to lead a meaningful existence.

Deshpande provides new ideals for a better wife-husband relationship. She likes to create the new atmosphere and widen the scope where the wife and husband may live together happily and satisfactorily. She also likes to maintain a balance between tradition and modernity. Sudden jump to modernity, according to Deshpande, may be harmful to the Indian women because of the culture and civilization which basically differ from that of the western people. She does not regard all traditions bad and harmful. To her, traditions are the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolizes the Indian way of life. Modernity, to her, is the assertion of independent individual identity. Keeping in view the long standing traditions of Indian society, she seeks solution of the problem by changing the mind-set of the males towards the females. She wants that women must be true to their own self if they want to realize themselves. The strajacketed role imposed on women only bogs them down in mire of negation and suppression. They must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression to their individuality and identity. The marriage must be preserved, but not at the cost of victimization and suppression of women. So the novelist seeks the solution of the problem not in divorce but in changing the attitude of the husbands towards their wives. Deshpande’s novels leave the message that to preserve their rights and maintain independent identity women shall have to be more conscious and assertive. Modern Indian women shall have to break up ideal artificial and traditional image of women to become *Sita* and *Savitri*. Siddhartha Sharma passing the remarks on the novels of Shashi Deshpande writes:

She has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the methods of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of Indian patriarchy and her initial submission resists the oppressive situation, thereby reflecting the author’s view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her individuality (Sharma 2005: 111).

Indu, Jaya and Saru, the protagonists of Deshpande, who are aware of their exploitation and conscious of suppression as well as discrimination, have the courage to fight their battle successfully or unsuccessfully, but they hardly bother for those who are the victims like them. It is Urmila, the protagonist of Deshpande, who is different from other protagonists. Urmila, who suffers mentally a lot due to loss of her infant baby, understands the problem of Shakuntala and she not only consoles her but also extends possible assistance to her. What Deshpande wants is women must come ahead to help other They must have a common feeling for victim's exploitation and suppression. If the women have to win the battle for preservation of self and protection of dignity and status, they must join hands together and fight together. Their traditional attitude as a woman and wife must change. Silence as well as endurance what they have been maintaining is not the remedy.

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