

## Quest for identity in Shashi Deshpande's fiction

Muhammad Afzal Akash<sup>1</sup>, Hafiz Muhammad Hammad Javed<sup>2</sup>, Mutie UR Rehman<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Wajid Hussain<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D., Scholar Department of English University of Baluchistan, Quetta, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D., Scholar Department of English, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan

<sup>4</sup> School Education Department, Govt. of the Punjab, District Bahawalpur, Pakistan

### Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's fictional works address the issue of how it feels to be a woman in a traditional and patriarchal Indian society as well as the difficulty a woman has to face in adeptly handling multiple roles, enjoined on her by the society. Deshpande's protagonists belong to typical middle class family and are caught in the dilemma between patriarchy and tradition on one hand and the desire to have an independent identity on the other hand. All the women characters of Deshpande's fiction try to assert themselves both within and without the familiar zones by overcoming the challenges and hindrances and have proved their individuality and unique identity as human beings by taking decisions on their own through suffering and enlightenment.

**Keywords:** independent identity, patriarchal Indian society, deshpande's protagonists

### Introduction

It is socially acceptable that within the family the man is the master and the woman is the inferior and the subordinate partner. Social pressures force women to maintain this status quo. (Flavia, 152)

Shashi Deshpande has emerged as a luminous literary figure in the arena of Indian English literature with a powerful collection of eleven fiction and several short stories to her credit. Her work has drawn critical attention for her minute, sensitive and realistic portrayals of Indian urban middle class women, who are caught in the web of patriarchy on one hand and the urge to make themselves socio-economically independent on the other hand. Her novels wonderfully delineate the inner conflict and anguish, disappointment and dilemma in a woman's mind, both in the external and internal spheres of life. Deshpande's writings explore numerous experiences of Indian women in domestic and social zones, experiences that are ingrained in "the presumption that (a woman) is an inferior being, of carrying the burden of being an unwanted female child, of having to battle an ingrained, deeply entrenched patriarchal system – all of which give rise to problems specific to their sex" (Deshpande 8). To combat such discriminating tendency of our typical patriarchal social structure what is essentially needed is the establishment of an identity, an identity that is specific and unique to an individual, an identity that gives a woman her reason of existence, the motivation to survive strongly without being dependent on anybody. As Vanamala Viswanathan has observed in her interview with Deshpande:

The urge to find oneself, to create space to grow on one's own— that seems to be [Deshpande's] major occupation. Personally I think that's every woman's problem as well. That's where [Deshpande has] touched a chord, I think. (Interview with Deshpande 12)

### Concept of Identity

Identity is a strong and determining factor in shaping a person's life in society, in recognizing a person's power and position in society. Identity enables a human being to have a strong hold on himself/herself without being a dependent crippled creature, often considered as a burden to others. Not only this, a person's identity is the key to his/her survival as an independent entity. Without a specific identity a person cannot earn self-respect and cannot even hold the courage to express opinions as an individual. Having a definite identity bolsters one with a positive aura, self-esteem, clarity of thought, resolute approach and a determined frame of mind.

In our traditional patriarchal Indian society women consistently play the triple roles of an obedient daughter, a dutiful wife and a doting self-sacrificing mother. The identity of a woman is entangled in these socially defined roles. Scarcely have they found time to think of themselves as an individual human being with a freedom of their own and very often they are brought up in a way to be dependent on men. But with the changing scenario women realized the necessity to create a space of one's own, an identity of one's own, independent of the socially ordained roles of a mother, daughter or wife. Shashi Deshpande's fiction explores in a magnificent manner a woman's quest for identity to establish herself, to fulfil her dreams as a human being, to survive as a self-esteemed individual, not as a victim or subordinate one. In this regard Chandramani observes:

Novels of Deshpande abound in female quest for identity. Her novels are usually narrated by female protagonists who strive to find out their own selves throughout the novels ... Deshpande got success in her representation of real life experience through *That Long Silence*. She realistically depicts the inner conflict through Jaya, who suffers from the beginning to the end craving for the quest

of the self and identity. (98)

### Deshpande's Protagonists in Quest for Identity

In *A Writer's Diary* Virginia Woolf gives vent to her feelings regarding women's liberation of mind and self in an astute way:

I will go on adventuring, changing, opening my mind and my eyes, refusing to be stamped and stereotyped. The thing is to free one's self: to let it find its dimensions, not be impeded.

What Woolf suggests is that a woman needs to be liberated, emancipated, to have a space of own to think only about herself as an individual. In fact Woolf vehemently proposes the idea of cultivating one's mind through writing to make women at par with men in terms of intellectual capability. Literary writing by women, Woolf observes, cannot only give them financial independence but also boost up their moral strength and establish their entity as individual human beings.

In Deshpande's award winning novel *That Long Silence* the protagonist Jaya embarks on a journey in her quest for an authentic identity as a woman, specifically as a writer on serious social issues regarding women. She feels extremely claustrophobic in portraying the role of an ideal wife and a perfect mother so far in her married life. The way she describes her apparently successful marital life with Mohan clearly pinpoints her apathy and repugnance towards life:

Two bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? (TLS 11-12)

Rejecting the traditional concept of 'stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world and you're safe' (TLS 17), Jaya wants to be something more than simply being Mohan's wife, or Rahul's and Rati's mother. Till now she has been writing about 'the travails of a middle class housewife' (TLS 148-49) only to satisfy Mohan who objects to her creative bent of mind and engagement with serious social issues concerning women. But Jaya realizes that time has come to speak her mind, to write what she wants to write and not to live the remaining life as Mohan's puppet. She musters the courage to defy Mohan to fulfil her quest of establishing identity as a writer with moral responsibility, as she observes:

To achieve anything, to become anything, you've got to be hard and ruthless.

Yes, even if you want to be a saint to love the whole world, you've got to stop loving individual human beings first. (TLS 1)

Following Santwana Halder it may be said that Jaya emerges victorious in her journey because "the process of her self-realization is complete and she acquires necessary courage to face the readers of her writing and justify her stand" (Halder 113). Jaya has found the key to success that lies in living life on own terms and principles, not on the condition imposed by others.

Deshpande's another novel *Roots and Shadows* is all about a woman's effort to proclaim her individuality, to materialize

her dreams and how her attempts make her confront with her family and society at large. A modern educated Indian woman Indu is a journalist, financially independent and is married to a man of her choice. But she undergoes a huge crisis both in personal and professional lives as she lacks the spirit to assert her feelings emphatically. Economic independence does not provide her the power to live life the way she wants because she is dominated at every step by Jayant, her husband. To overcome the stifling and strict ambience of her marital life she leaves home to go back to her roots, i.e. her parental home. She once breaks the chains of tradition bound life in search of an autonomous independent life with Jayant but in vain. To her utter dismay she now finds that she has lost the capability to live alone. Marrying Jayant does not give her access to an independent life; rather she loses her individuality in Jayant completely, as she pathetically ponders:

Now I dress the way I want. As I please. As I please? No, that's not true. 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. What he would like.

What would please him? And I can't blame him ... it's the way I want it to be. (RS 49)

The realization that she have become 'fluid with no shape, no form of my own' (RS 49) once again arouses the latent rebellious attitude in her. She denies surrendering her independence to Jayant's dominating personality. Indu's homecoming after a long break serves as a remedy to her problems, from which she is deliberately escaping. She realizes that she should listen to her conscience, do what she thinks morally right and never compromise with her individuality. Rightly does O. P. Bhatnagar comment:

In the end comes the realization that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere it. (8)

Penelope Brown observes that women feel suppressed and tormented in their lives when they

"don't have control over their lives, decision making ability, freedom of choice ..." (244). Brown's observation aptly conforms to Sarita's life in Deshpande's fiction *The Dark Holds*

*No Terrors*. Despite achieving professional success as doctor, Sarita's disintegrated life at home, marital discord with Manohar and embittered relationship with her parents compel her to review her identity as an individual. In her childhood Sarita has been a victim of gender discrimination and she gradually started hating herself for being a girl, as she blurts out in anger: "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (TDHNT 63). She has faced how her own mother wanted to seal her destiny by marrying off instead of supporting her desire to pursue higher studies in medicine. The astounding words, uttered in utmost disappointment "Is that all I am, a responsibility" (TDHNT 144) clearly echo the grim picture of society whereby women are denied access in decision making process of their own lives. In order to prove herself a strong determined woman Sarita successfully makes a career in medicine but her disastrous marriage with Manohar once again thwarts her personality,

crumbles her spirit and she is left with a traumatized mind. The brutal way with which Manohar assaults Sarita every night totally devastates her and she feels like a trapped animal with nowhere to escape: "I was pinioned to a position of an abject surrender of my self" (TDHNT 10). Her identity as a doctor seems to have failed in boosting up her crushed spirit. But the moment she revisits her parental home to revive her lost relationship, she feels rejuvenated and with her father's assurance she decides to confront her problems to regain her identity. The epigraph from the Dhammapada aptly describes Sarita's journey from darkness to an illumined stage in quest for herself as a bold individual human being:

You are your own refuge  
There is no other refuge  
This refuge is hard to achieve.

In their book "Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of her Fiction" Atrey and Kirpal make a powerful observation on Deshpande's art of writing:

Her protagonists, at the beginning of their quest, find that they have passively accepted their socially ordained roles. Deshpande advocates that to realize herself, the woman must be true to her own self. The sacrifice and nobility that is expected of the woman is a stereotype that only bogs down the woman in a mire of negation and suppression. The woman needs to venture out of the familial framework, to discover her potential as an individual and give expression to her inner space and self." (120)

What Deshpande desires to convey through the character portrayal of Sumi in *A Matter of Time* is that women must curve their own identity to assert their individuality in lieu of accepting the submissive role of a suffering wife or a self-sacrificing mother. Like Deshpande's other protagonists Sumi is "a new woman, both enduring and assertive, seeking liberation through education and struggle" (Singh 221). Sumi's individuality and sense of self-esteem make her strong enough to accept with dignity Gopal's sudden withdrawal from the role of a family man. Neither Sumi crawls before Gopal for financial help nor does she expect a forceful patch up:

We can never be together again. All these days I have been thinking of him as if he has been suspended in space, in nothingness, since he left us. But he has gone on living, his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine.  
Our lives have diverged, they now move separately, two different streams. (AMT 85)

Sumi's earnest search for a job and a house of her own gives her a sense of liberation and pride for herself. She has moved on from the stereotyped role of a docile wife. Instead of wailing over her status of a deserted wife and disregarding society's frowning over her Estranged condition, she calmly accepts:

It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have got used to being alone. (AMT 23)

Sumi's confidence in starting a new phase of life reflects her sense of freedom as an individual as well as her faith in her potential. Rightly does S. PrasannaSree point Out:

Modern and liberal in outlook, Sumi defies the outdated social opinion and orthodox treatment of a woman subjected to desertion by her husband. She has the courage to rise above the consequential problems and difficulties, humiliations and frustrations. She has the generosity to gracefully free her husband from marital bonds without venting ill-feelings ... the courage, the dignity, the responsibility and the independent spirit displayed by her proves that she has reached a stage of self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment. (Sree 118119)

### Conclusion

Deshpande's protagonists-Jaya, Indu, Sarita and Sumi-are undoubtedly authentic portrayals with individual characteristics, problems and plights, failures and disappointments of their own. But there is a common thread that binds the all, the factor being their quest for identity, yearning for liberty, aspiration for individuality as human being. Through her portrayals of such strong women characters Deshpande desires to express how women desperately try to assert their individual entity as human being amidst predominant patriarchal social order. The desire to overcome the problems of life springs from resoluteness and unflinching bent of mind that characterize most of Deshpande's heroines. Despite various hindrances and pressures from all corners, the protagonists never give up and emerge victorious in their journey from a dependent and subordinated creature to a selfdependent, confident and motivated human being with an individuality of one's own. As Deshpande observes in her book *writing from the Margin and Other Essays*:

"Many women do enjoy housework and find fulfilment within the home. They have every right to do so. But there are the hazards of not being able to support yourself when it may be necessary to do so; glorifying the wife and mother role sometimes hide this ugly reality. To be dependent means to be a burden on another, at times to be forced to endure violence because there is no choice". (Deshpande 84-85)

Hence it is essential for a woman to curve an identity of her own, to develop her qualities, to hone her potentials, to take her decisions and foremost to live her life on her own terms.

### References

1. Bhatnagar OP. "Indian Womanhood Fight for Freedom in Roots and Shadows". Indian Women Novelists. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.
2. Chandramani. "Gender and Disharmony in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence". International Journal of English and Literature. 2014; 5:4.
3. Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd. Print, 1983.
4. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989.
5. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990.
6. *A Matter of Time*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1996.

7. Writing from the Margin and Other Essays. New Delhi: Penguin Books,
8. "A Woman's World...All The Way!" Interviewed by VanamalViswanathan. Literature Alive. 1987; 1:3.
9. "Demythifying Womanhood". Talks to Veena Matthews. The Times of India, Ahmedabad, 1995, 8.
10. Flavia, Agnes. "Violence in the Family: Wife Beating". Ghadially, 1988.
11. Haldar Santwana. "Representation of Women in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence". The Critical Endeavour, 2010, 16.
12. Singh Prabhat K. "Brand India: Shashi Deshpande's Female Subjectivism". The Critical Endeavour, 2013, 19.
13. Sree S. Prasanna. Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003.
14. Woolf Virginia. A Writer's Diary. Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press, 1956.