

Role of Society in Gender Construction in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

Dr.Priyanka Singla, Associate Professor of English, Government College for Women, Hisar

Article Received: 09/11/2022,

Article Accepted: 11/12/2022,

Published Online: 13/12/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.12.05

Abstract: Gender is viewed as a culturally imposed role and as different from sex which is biologically determined. Shashi Deshpande is perhaps, one of the few Indian English writers who has portrayed the girl child with deliberation. There is either one girl child or there is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonist growing years. This process helps her realize that her personality has been determined by her family upbringing and socialization in childhood. The factors that influence her include cultural aspects, social and psychological factors such as the family structure, woman's position in it, female sexuality and the trauma of monthly cycle. Her major novels- The Dark Holds No Terror, Roots and Shadows, and That Long Silence- trace the quest for self-definition of women, who are educated but cannot quite shake off their background and the manner in which they have been brought up. Deshpande asserts that it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains- that we don't submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength. The purpose of this article is to critically examine Deshpande's writings in view of her treatment of social norms with respect to her women characters in the Indian context.

Keywords: Gender, Culture, Social and Psychological Factors, Quest for Identity, Feminism.

Gender is viewed as a culturally imposed role and as different from sex which is biologically determined. Gender as differentiated from sex, has nothing to do with biology- gender is a social and cultural construct. A creation of patriarchy, it serves the male flair for domination, and is not based on mutuality, but oppression. Socialization plays an important role in the construction of gender and bares the link between social values and the paradigms of male domination. Socialization is a very powerful instrument; it has enormous influence in conditioning not only a girl's psyche; but also a boy's psyche since its influence begins early in childhood. Roles no doubt are an inalienable aspect of social living and relationship, but it is the abuse of socialization in conditioning the girl child so that she acquiesces to patriarchal paradigms that make it questionable. In literature one gets how a girl child is indoctrinated to withhold, conceal and suppress her real self. Myths that socialize and contain the Indian woman abound in ancient literature. A number of studies have analyzed them for gender

discriminatory values. The overall picture one gathers from literature is subordination, exploitation, violence and oppression, trapped in patriarchal cultural values and paradigms.

The growth of a girl in Indian society is seen mainly in relation to her attitude towards her family and her duty towards it. Coming into sharp conflict with the sense of family duty is the girl's burgeoning feeling of self-identity. It is in the course of this conflict that the full identity of the girl is formed. The successful formation of this identity depends upon the delicate balance that the girl maintains between submission and revolt. Growth into maturity and selfhood is frequently tested in family situation in the course of confrontation with adults. The burden of the female child is more irksome than that of the male child because aspects of her body, the function of her femaleness intrude upon the growth of her personality. Not only the parents but also the society as a whole is influenced by the physical appearance of the girl child. This is a great hindrance in the inner growth of the child. It is in the adjustment that the identity of a child gets defined and firmly established.

Down the ages, the place of women in the tradition bound, male dominated society has been very unenviable. Despite epoch-making changes the position of women- economic, social and cultural- has not shown much change. A vast majority of women are reconciled to a life of humiliation in the form of gender bias while performing the roles of wives, and mothers in a rigidly custom bound milieu they live in. Even women with liberal modern education, with an irrepressible yearning to break loose from time honoured crippling and iniquitous social law, do often lose their mooring and find themselves in perilously embarrassing situation. Even economically independent have not been able to clear off the besetting pitfalls created by the custom and beliefs sedulously preserved in the tradition bound Indian society. It is said that the literature of a country is the store house of the cultural and sociological aspect of its people. But literature all along has been turned to the point of view of the male element. Woman is often 'marginalized', 'repressed' or 'silenced' in literary work. The role of woman was restricted by her womanhood and therefore, the experiences of the muted female forming half of the society was not reflected in literature.

But with the rise of feminism, woman became aware of the fact that her inferiority is not ordained in heaven that gender is neither nature nor immutable, because it is a creation of patriarchy and patriarchy is not given. It is a construct which can be deconstructed. Women realized that the system of patriarchy which existed since a long time, no longer served the needs of the rapidly changing society where women were trying to emancipate themselves and define their potential. Revolting against their marginalization they have started questioning the sexual politics and gender arrangement. The emergence of women novelists has considerably influenced the change in attitude. Their writing reflects a shift in the sensibility of the writer as well as the reader. Shashi Deshpande portrays the new Indian woman and her dilemma. She concerns herself with the plight of the modern Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and above all as a human being. Childhood considered so important a period for the formation of character and for the emergence of a value structure has largely been ignored as an area of human experience- specially where girl characters are concerned. This reflects both a literary and a social reality. Girls are a silent part of the family

and the society. What they think or feel about their social eclipse does not interest most writers or social thinkers. The most formative years of the woman's life- when she is growing up remains by and large unexamined and unexplored. Shashi Deshpande is perhaps, one of the few Indian English writers who has portrayed the girl child with deliberation. There is either one girl child or there is a detailed examination of the girlhood of the protagonist growing years. This process helps her realize that her personality has been determined by her family upbringing and socialization in childhood.

Deshpande unveils the subtle process of oppression and gender differentiation at work in the family and in the male oriented society. One of the features of their upbringing is their inculcation as girls into the socially defined roles as daughter/ wife/ mother. Deshpande shows great sensitivity and awareness of the ways and means through which a young girl is prepared for her future status in society. The factors that influence her include cultural aspects, social and psychological factors such as the family structure, woman's position in it, female sexuality and the trauma of monthly cycle. Her major novels- *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *That Long Silence*- trace the quest for self-definition of women, who are educated but cannot quite shake off their background and the manner in which they have been brought up.

Gender roles are conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex of relationships. In the Indian family, there exists despite its patriarchal character, an independent community of women which evolves as a result of taboo and an interaction between the sexes. It is here that the female child is acculturated into her social role of daughter/ wife/ mother. Sarita, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terror*, grows up as a victim of her mother's sexist and gender- based bias. Even as a child she remembers her mother's preference for Dhruva- her brother and the importance attached to his birthdays. The birth of a son after sixteen years which should have embarrassed Kshama's father in "Come Up and Be Dead", fills him with pride, which bewilders her. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya notices that her name had not been included in the family tree; "How can you be here? You don't belong to this family. You're married [...] you have no place here" (TLS, 143).

In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Sarita is constantly reminded that she is a girl whose destiny is to get married and leave the house, while her brother need not do so. The mother is concerned about her daughter's appearance, the colour of her skin. Should she grow dark, it would be difficult to get her married; "Don't go out into the sun, you'll get darker. / Who cares? / We have to care even if you don't. we have to get you married" (TDHNT, 140). One is reminded of Kamala Das who in her autobiography *My Story* recounts how worried her grandmother was about the duskiness of her skin and rubbed raw turmeric every Tuesdays and Fridays before her oil bath. Simone De Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman- it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [...] described as feminine" (80), becomes relevant when one sees the methods through which a girl is acculturated into femininity. Even daily household chores are set aside for girls- chores like setting the table, cleaning up after meals, helping in the kitchen, doing odd jobs. Boys are discouraged from doing them. In *That Long Silence*, eyebrows are raised when one of the girls

question angrily, “why can’t one of the boys do it? Jaanu or Shridhar? Why does it have to be me or Veena?” (TLS, 81). She had been answered by mocking smiles. Jaya’s husband Mohan is scandalized when she suggests that he should cook during her pregnancy.

Although this process of preparing the girl towards her ‘otherness’ begins in early childhood, it is intensified from the moment she attains puberty. As a girl grows up, she is made to feel different from her male siblings, made to feel conscious about revealing her femininity to the male members of the family, “You should be careful now about how you behave. Don’t come out in your petticoat like that. Not even if it’s only your father who’s around” (TDHNT, 55). And so the process of growing up becomes something to be furtive about. The concept of honour plays an important role in the repression of the girl’s sexuality. Any misbehavior on her part would bring shame to both herself and her family, resulting in decreased chances of a good match. She is groomed for the fulfillment of the desired goal of her existence- marriage. All the prayers and rituals of a girl’s life are directed towards the procurement of a husband, his longevity and the propagation of his lineage through the birth of male off springs. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya is again told that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (137), and that “the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (138).

Deshpande’s novels explore the quest for selfhood undertaken by women who come from such environment. They are caught between a traditional upbringing and the longing for freedom in the modern sense. A quest for identity forms the theme of *That Long Silence*, Jaya the protagonist, thinks of her past and tries to analyse herself to decide who she really is. The fact that she was rechristened Suhasini by her husband confuses her in her search for identity. The pen name under which she writes confuses her all the more. Jaya stood for victory and Suhasini for submission. Jaya rejects the name Suhasini, and it is significant since it is manifestation of protest against such customs. Through the process of reliving her past in her mind, she gets guidance for her future. She decides to break her seventeen years of silence and gives up being a mere passive partner to Mohan, her husband. She decides to assert herself as an individual and also a woman, wife and mother. Though she chooses to remain within the family a change has been wrought. She has come out of her confining slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society.

Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* revolts against her mother’s oppressive dictates, becomes a doctor and even marries a man of her choice. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* rebels in a similar fashion. A motherless child, she is left to fend for herself in a traditional family by her renegade father and Akka, the strict and disapproving matriarch of the family. She manages a good education, a job and a husband. Indu, Sarita and Jaya, despite their early rebelliousness, cannot quite free themselves from their early socialization and its effect upon their psyche. Indu finds herself becoming an ideal woman and becomes like her traditional aunts, Sarita’s victimization by her mother on the basis of gender causes her to become ruthlessly ambitious to the extent of undermining her husband’s confidence and making him impotent. Jaya fails to assert herself, sinking into apathy and neglecting even her talent for writing.

Inspired by the feminist movements of the West, misinterpreted freedom, made in total switch over to the other side, seeking freedom from everything including their culture.

Deshpande's characters find freedom not in the Western sense but in conformity with the society they live in without drifting away from one's culture. Jaya's decision is not meek surrender to circumstances, but a sensible compromise. Deshpande supports the view that feminism is a pro- woman but not anti- man; she rejects a separatist stance. Aware of the fact that breaking off the bonds of family would result in loneliness and disintegration of the larger social set up, Jaya looks for happiness and fulfilment within the family itself.

From Akka in *Roots and Shadows*, who was married at the age of thirteen to Manda, Nilima and Sati in *That Long Silence*, Deshpande traces the pattern of socialization and the internationalization of patriarchal norms and values. While the older woman remains chained to traditional background, the younger emerges confident. The type of family structure plays an important role in the change. In an educated nuclear family without the orthodox patterns of socialization and repressive tradition in a nuclear family they grow without inhibitions regarding their being feminine as in the generation that was earlier and in a joint family. The main theme in Deshpande's novels is not the facile one of opposing tradition with modernity or Westernization with Indian culture. Her characters' grapple with their struggles which drag them through innocence and experience, ignorance and knowledge, girlhood and adulthood, repression and submission, and rebellion, joy and sorrow that lends her novels an elemental sweep, simple as the surface text be. To Deshpande, life as a girl is an integral part of an adult life. She recognizes the childhood influences and tendencies, and in time of crisis her characters turn back to the past to search for reasons within and in the family. Her fiction is an example of the ways in which a girl child's particular position, social reality and psychological growth determine her personality. She argues that it would be psychologically unrealistic to imagine that awareness within the woman emerges suddenly, that she becomes a 'person' with the onset of adolescence. The role of early life experiences, the role of education, closeness to parents, sibling relationships are some very crucial elements that go a long way in creating a woman's personality.

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man- woman relationships especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence, the attempt to break traditional moulds in which women are trapped, sexual discrimination, the rejection of the dependency syndrome and introspection are some of the concerns which give her works a feminist bent. Her novels do move beyond feminist concerns in that they raise the existentialist question itself. They try to penetrate and analyse the very predicament of human existence and solve the riddle that is life. The important truth revealed is that self- pity is not the answer. It is only through a process of self- examination and self- searching, through courage and resilience that one can change one's situation from despair to hope. Deshpande asserts that it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains- that we don't submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength. In what has become her hallmark, Deshpande offers in her novels and *India* that is unsimplified. It calls for the undivided attention of the reader. For a serious reader, the reading and rereading of her novels promises to be an enriching experience. Her novels are also a treasure of ideas and sentences every reader would want to usurp and

make his own. In her all works, Deshpande surpasses herself as a writer, and underscores her place in the scene of international literature in English as a writer to be read, to be respected.

References:

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex* (trans and ed.). H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage, 1974.

Dass, Veena Noble. "Feminism and Literature". *Feminism and Literature*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995.

Deshpande, Shashi. "Women's Complexities Being Lost". *The New Indian Express*. June 25, 2001.

---. *That Long Silence*. London: Virago, 1988. The novel will be cited as TLS.

---. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Delhi: Vikas, 1990. The novel will be cited as TDHNT.