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Can the Marginalized Speak? Raising Women Voices in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*

Mr. Anandamay Das

Research Fellow, Department of English, Rabindra Bharati University,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

Marginality is generally used to describe and analyse socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources, and full participation in social life. Marginality in the 20th century does not only involve the condition of the underprivileged class or race but also the real condition and position of women in the society. The eternal struggle of women attempting to occupy the central position in the patriarchal societal structure has been and still is a major subject for marginality-related discussion. My paper would discuss how the oppressed voices, the identity of the 'subaltern' or 'other' women are silenced and ignored, through a re-reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* where she talks about the victims who are always trying to raise their voices against this unjust male-dominated society.

Keywords

Marginality; Subaltern; Other; Silence; Identity; Feminism.



Marginality in the wider sense indicates a socio-cultural, political and economic situation, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources which are normally denied to them, and their attempt at full participation in social life where they will not only be counted merely as a part of the population but where their decisions, conveniences and inconveniences would be heeded. Marginality in the 20th century does not only involve the condition of the underprivileged class or race but also the real condition and position of women in the society. The eternal struggle of women attempting to occupy the central position in the patriarchal societal structure has been and still is a major subject for all marginality-related discussion

In East-West counter/debate (in Said's *Orientalism*), the Orientals (Asia, East & the non-Europeans) are *colonized/Othered* by the Occidentals (West, Europeans). Similarly, in the Eastern societies, the male always holds the power-centre and women are at the margin of the society. The so called *feminism* succeeds to some extent only in the elite classes but the major portion of the society till now is exhausted with severe and unjust *realities*. The status of the women in under-developed countries is as hard as nails; most developed countries also are not behind. So, in this way women are *marginalized /Othered* by the male in the Third World countries.

Human history is a history of power struggle. Right from the very beginning humans have been trying to establish their own significant position in the society. At first their struggle was against nature but gradually as they learned to master nature their field of struggle shifted to a point where they began to fight with one another for power. All the histories of human invasions are rooted in the basic desire for gaining power and of mastering the other. That scenario of power struggle also changed with due course of time/with the

passage of time when the conflict began based on gender. The men or the comparatively 'powerful' section of the mass began to exercise their superiority over the comparatively 'weak' section of the mass: the women. Thus began the history of women oppression.

Women are an integral part of human civilization. No society or a country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Although, the place of women in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all society is that women have never been considered equal to men. They have been treated like a beast of burden and an object of pleasure, and denied full justice - social, economic, political and constitutional and largely ignored as the "Weaker Sex". It is true that with the passage of time, everything is changeable. So now the women are trying to raise their voices against these injustices, inequalities and oppressions caused by this rotten, traditionalized patriarchal society.

In recent times, the question of the relative status of man and woman has often engaged the attention of the writers all over the world. Indian English Writers have also begun to come out into light on the contemporary literary scene with their abundant talent of writing and, Indian women writers are taking a leading role in this respect. Their fictions hold the mirror up to reality.

One such brilliant novelist with sparkling wit, who has earned a unique place in Indian English fiction by her significant and rich contribution, is Shashi Deshpande. Deshpande tried to depict women suffering due to sexist bias in patriarchal society and she envisions a world which should be based on equality and harmony between the two sexes. She has dealt with so many various ramifications of women's marathon struggle for seeking and established their identity and space in this patriarchal society.

Shashi Deshpande is a confident voice who explores individual and universal predicaments through the female psyche. Undoubtedly, she is an eminent Indian woman novelist who has a strong objection about herself being

labelled as a feminist novelist rather it is better to say; according to Shashi Deshpande, she is a serious writer genuinely concerned with women's issues. In an interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom, she asserts that: "I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism" (Holmstrom 248).

Shashi Deshpande has articulated modern, middle class, educated Indian women trapped between tradition and modernity and struggle for self-expression and individuality. She says: "Basically, mine is a quest for the human self within the woman" (Kaur 20). She felt that she was not only a woman, a mother or a wife but a human being with a mind. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan, Shashi Deshpande admits that:

I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that 'that fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women.' I think that is my idea of feminism. (Deshpande 254)

According to Deshpande, feminism means an improved relationship between man and woman. It is an erasure of gender discrimination and all oppressive practices against a woman. Most of her characters and situations are rooted in values and mores of the Indian middle class. Shashi Deshpande attempts to deconstruct the numerous levels of patriarchal and sexist bias employed towards girls and women in Indian middle class society, particularly in a marriage or within the family set-up.

For example, Saru, the main protagonist of *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, believes in inter-caste marriage and marries a man of lower caste. She does not like rotten tradition and social customs. Thus the character raises her voices

against this rotten, man-made society and tradition and also tries to establish the equality between man and woman.

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) is Shashi Deshpande's second novel. This novel presents the condition of the women in the Indian society - her role model - and how the different types of women play their roles with their silence. Shashi Deshpande is a typical Indian feminist writer who delves deep into the problems of women: "Her novels are concerned with an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it" (Ramamoorthi 116).

The novel tells about the story of a marriage of Sarita who is a "two-in-one women". She is a successful doctor during the day time and at night a terrified and trapped animal in the hands of her husband, Manohar who is an English Professor in a degree college. Against her parent's wishes, Saru married a boy from a lower caste. Her marriage to Manu (Manohar) is a sign of her turning away from the traditional ways and values. Saru has chosen the career on her own. In Sarabjit Sandhu's words:

She is brought up in a traditional atmosphere but the education she receives makes her a changed person with a rebellious attitude towards tradition. As an educated young woman, she does not accept anything without reason. Her mother almost forces her to stay the four-walls of the house. She does not give up her permission to take admission in the medical college, but Saru does not listen to her... (Sandhu 88)

The theme of the novel is woman's predicament. Her struggle to create an identity for herself in the family is depicted. She wants to prove her living overcoming all the obstacles that came her way and lead a life of worth. The path of her life where troubles are awaiting has no end. She has to walk on and on. She knows that she has no escape, but to stumble and fall, and lastly to meet the awaiting doom. Premila Paul also regards that "the novel, *Dark*

Holds No Terrors, focuses on woman's awareness of her predicament, her wanting to be recognized as a person than as a woman and her wanting to have an independent social image" (Paul 36).

In a word, Saru desires to liberate herself from the shackles of tradition and exercises her right to reveal her individual capabilities and realize her feminine self through identity assertion and self-affirmation. In the words of S.P. Swain: "Saru's journey is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from difference to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine-self" (Swain 39).

The *Dark Holds No Terrors* reflects women's awareness. In this novel, Saru is represented as the spokesperson of middle-class working women in modern India. She rebels against traditional norms but eventually tries to compromise with the existing reality. This is because, Saru lives in transitional society. In spite of her innumerable sufferings, she faces the situation very courageously and thinks that escapism is never a solution, and, that she is her own refuge.

In an incident in *That Long Silence*, Jaya questions her parental uncle about the "patriarchal" family tree wherein even boys of the family find mention but her name is missing. Her uncle replies that she does not belong to this family and she has no place here. Jaya feels very shocked to find no mention of her mother, her aunts and even Ajji who kept the family together, the women who have spent their lifetime in that house. She is full of anger and desperation over such gross gender discrimination. Here the woman protagonist, Jaya challenges male-devised orthodoxies – about women's nature, capacities and roles.

Thus Jaya is unable to digest the meaningless practice of the male-dominated society where a woman is totally ignored. She is told that she belongs to her husband's family and not her family. She learns that her name and existence, along with those of other women in the family, and completely

blotted out of the family history. It proves the point that a woman, whether traditional or unconventional, is not recognized as an individual in a male-dominated society.

Jaya's life is the predicament of woman in the novel. She tries for expression which will break her long silence. Though many illustrations are cited in the novel that Jaya is going to break her passivity and she even asserts in these words, "I will have to erase the silence between us" (TLS 192). It is true that surely the ice will break in the relationship of wife and husband. Her initiative in breaking the long silence is a welcome step towards restoring normalcy and happiness in the family.

The novel *That Long Silence* is about a married couple, Jaya and Mohan, who get separated and about Jaya, who observes silence all through her married life only to break it in the end when she takes to writing herself, her own plight, and her husband Mohan. But the novel ends on a note of optimism as her son, Rahul, returns and Mohan promises to return. Jaya also learns the truth that "life is always to be made possible" (TLS 193).

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya asks for individuality to be valued equally along with that of man. As long as one half of the humanity is denied, decent and dignified lives, it will be far cry to hope for a better world. But Jaya is very confident of her own individuality and hopeful of a change in Mohan's attitude. She firmly believes that 'life has always to be made possible.' Such an optimistic ending of the novel, *That Long Silence* shows that the day is not far off when men and women will be considered as equal and supplement to each other.

Thus the novel attempts to rectify through its sensitive portrayal the sufferings and deprivations of women in general by presenting various characters as stereo-typed representatives of traditional womanhood. The strength of the novel lies in its bold analysis of the realities about the Indian womanhood. The novel seems to advocate that a woman should be assertive

and maintain her individuality and take her own decisions about her life and future: “The novel is an attempt by Jaya to liberate herself from the prescribed and interiorized role of the other, an adjunct to her husband and find her own identity as a human being capable of thinking and acting on her own initiative” (Roy 123).

So in this way women’s subjectivities or their stories are often refracted or deviated or one can say twice removed from ‘reality’ because their discourse is always represented through third person accounts. Even where a woman’s words might be reported as direct speech, they appear as fragments. Thus middle-class women are often rendered ‘speechless’ by the records. Colonial records emphasize more on ‘how’ women spoke rather than ‘what’ they spoke. In fact the records often attempt to deny the impact of women’s speech by implying that even within the elite nationalist circle they were made to speak rather than speak spontaneously. “For the ‘figure’ of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves...if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...” (Spivak)

A deep analysis of Shashi Deshpande’s views of feminism leaves no doubt about her genuine concern for women. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for identity within marriage. In spite of all the frustrations and disappointments, her women characters experience ‘power’ and her novels end on a positive note. Thus she upholds the Indian feminism through the representation of women characters in her novels.

So needless to say that having been ‘marginalized’ Deshpande’s protagonists truly raises their voices against role models of daughter, sister, wife and mother. They feel suffocated in the male-defined social and cultural codes. They always feel the necessity to have a place of their own to stand upon and strive to attain the ideal of freedom and completeness. This is a quest for the self, i.e. the search for identity.

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