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Verbal and Non-Verbal Protests of Women in Select Short Stories of Sashi Deshpande and Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract

An individual or a group protests to express his/their objection and the protest may enforce a change. The subject of the objection may be oppression, suppression, injustice or exploitation. The consciousness among the women regarding their position in the society/family and the need to liberate themselves make them to rebel and protest. They register their protest in their artistic works, which is ideal for the purpose in many respect. Shashi Deshpande, one of the Indian women writers in English, rationalizes the role of woman in the contemporary society and in the epics as well. The writer registers her subtle protest in retelling or reinterpreting the episodes of *puranas* and also in her short fictions. The patriarchal classical narratives, apparently, portray women as helpless, feeble, who invariably depend on men for everything. In Deshpande's attempt to retell the *Ramayana*, Sita excels Ram while arguing with Lakshman about how a perfect man should be. She lays bare her frustration. The protagonist's protest in "An Antidote to Boredom", a short story in the first volume, changes the course of her life. Mahasweta Devi, an Indian social activist

and writer of her native language, Bengali, depicts the struggle and oppression of the tribal people in her works. In the short story collection, *Draupadi* translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Disrobing of Draupadi” (Draupadi in the short story represent her simple folks) challenges the dominant group, who is ever ready to suppress the lower caste group. This article focuses on an overview of protests in the select short stories of Shashi Deshpande and Mahasweta Devi.

Keywords

Protest; Shashi Deshpande; Mahasweta Devi; Suppression of Women.

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Literacy, information technology and urbanization have changed the family structure and modified the people’s life. For ages together the roles of women - daughter, sister, wife, mistress, sex object and mother – have been being discussed in relationship to men whereas men are merited in terms of the outside world. The space allowed to women has progressively narrowed while men enjoy measureless freedom. Being aware of the biological imposed restriction, at present, the women try to free themselves from playing the traditional roles. After realizing their strengths they voluntarily involve themselves in decision-making and are prepared to tackle any sort of crisis. They have developed the courage to voice out their disagreement, frustration and grievance. Moreover, they question the injustices and register their disapproval.

The act of objecting or the gesture of disapproval either by words or actions is protest. The protests are raised in order to propose some solution to the problem. Of course, protests alter the conditions. Moreover people protest to redress their grievance and to enforce a change. By revealing their frustration they disclose their grievance. Protests are of two categories: verbal and non-verbal. If a protest is expressed through actions and demonstrations then it is classified as a non-verbal protest. And if a protest is wordy, then it is a verbal protest.

Writers in their works communicate their ideas, perceptions and views through their characters to the readers. Writing is a medium for the authors to express their protests to the society. Ferguson writes:

The method by which the best literature communicates is to present specific characters in concrete circumstances; readers are able to extract from the specifics a generalization, a theme, which they see as relevant to other specific situations. (11)

Shashi Deshpande, the daughter of a renowned Kannada dramatist, Sriranga, is a prolific writer in English. She has authored four collections of short stories (rearranged in two volumes), nine novels, among which the novel “That Long Silence” received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1990, four children’s books and a book of perceptive essays “Writing from the Margin”. She won the [Padma Shri](#) award in 2009. In her novels as well as in short fictions she projects the turmoil of the middle-class women and articulates her (women’s) protests. They are modern and traditional characters as well. Specially, the main women characters of her short stories hardly wish to spoil the happiness of the family. They record their objections verbally and non-verbally to modify the behavior of their men in the given context.

The short story “An Antidote to Boredom” in the *Collected Stories, Volume I* deals with the protagonist’s non-verbal protest. The wife finds nothing interesting in the routine monotonous household chores, since her better-half is a workaholic. Such boredom pushes her to seek the company of a widower whom she meets accidentally at her son’s school. They are mutually attracted to each other. And she obstinately nurtures her feelings for the widower, as it relives her from the inertness of the boredom. She even plans to go on a date with him during her husband’s visit to Delhi, leaving the boy in the custody of his grandmother. But, when her husband compels her to accompany him to Delhi, she yields because his talk makes her realize that her man is aware of her actions. Now she drops her plans as she is fulfilled with her expectation, which is her husband’s care.

‘Why don’t you come to Delhi with me?’ . . . ‘I . . . I can’t!’ Then I looked up fearfully. Did he understand? But his face was as calm, as bland as ever. ‘Why not?’ he said. ‘Weren’t you saying you were bored?’ . . . I said, after a pause, . . . ‘Next time, perhaps. I don’t feel like it this time.’ ‘If I were you, I would make it this time.’ The words sounded suddenly menacing, and I looked up startled. The same face, the same voice, but for a brief second I saw a dull, red light flicker in his eyes, like a warning, a challenge, then disappear. . . . And then I knew that he knew, that he cared. . . . I let go of the mirage I had tried to grasp so long. (CS I 61)

The protagonist expresses her protest in a different way to make her husband understand her needs and she finds a solution to her problem. If she has discussed her longings with him, the workaholic husband might have rejected it. But her actions drive him to act at once and put an end to the problem which would have affected the familial harmony in future.

Silence is also a sort of communication and relates to two major activities - a rebellious protest and a pragmatic strategy. In the scholarly book *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (1997) edited by Adam Jaworski, he makes a detailed study of silence from an interdisciplinary standpoints. Adam Jaworski in “Introduction: An Overview” presents an overall statement:

Silence is a diverse concept and its study merits an interdisciplinary approach. . . . Silence [can be] discussed as an auditory signal (pause) in a linguistic theory, as a pragmatic and discursive strategy, as a realization of a taboo, as a tool of manipulation, as a part of listener’s “work” in interaction, and as an expression of artistic ideas: . . . across a wide range of genres and domains; for example, in professional discourse, in family conversation, in the ritual talk of a religious order, as well as in literature, and beyond language, in music, painting and cognition. (3)

The critic also views that silence is a “*metaphor for communication*” (3). What Jaworski observes well fits the protagonist who seems to be a silent rebel.

Disappointment leads to dislike, dislike to misunderstanding and misunderstanding to misconduct. The disappointed lady seeks a solution for her frustration, when she meets the widower. It is a kind of protest which the wife is unable to discuss it with her better-half earlier. Again the self-determined wife changes her mind-set on finding her man’s care. Karen Horney in the article “Problems of Marriage” discusses the psychic instability. She opines:

Initial fulfillment is followed by later disappointment. Disappointment is not yet tantamount to dislike, but it does constitute a source of dislike, unless we have the extremely rare gift for acceptance and do not feel that a relationship on such a restricted basis will bar the way to other possibilities of finding happiness. Regardless of how civilized we are and how much we have control our instinctual life, it is in keeping with human nature that deep inside we will feel an ever-growing rage, directed against any man or power that threatens to block the fulfillment of vitality important strivings. This rage can and will creep in, without our being aware of it, yet it will be very active, even though we may close our minds to its consequences. The partner will sense that our attitude towards him becomes more critical, less patient, or more negligent. (*Feminine Psychology* 122-3)

Shashi Deshpande takes up a few episodes from the two *ithihasas* (epics) *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* for her reinterpretations. The author in her retelling depicts an intellectual and magnanimous Sita in the short story “A Day of the Golden Deer”. Myths, in general, have attracted much attention of scholars of various disciplines. Nowadays writers try their hands in re-interpreting the epics because they offer many contours. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* treat women as inferior to men and moreover it is not possible for women to act in the same way, as the days are different from theirs. Hence Shashi Deshpande desires to reshape the myths.

In the introduction to the *Collected Stories* the writer states:

I found myself exploring the *Puranas* and the epics more and more in the few stories that I wrote. My exploration began, predictably, with Sita in “The Day of the Golden Deer” and went on to characters like Draupadi and Kunti. ‘My heart rebels against it,’ Rajaji said, speaking about Ram’s abandonment of Sita in his emotional rewriting of the *Ramayana* in English. So it is with most Indians. Nevertheless, I saw in Sita a dignity and courage that saved her from becoming a passive victim. It was no blade of grass, I thought, but her strength that kept the infatuated Ravana at bay. (Introduction)

The short story deals with the ‘Second Exile’, of Sita in *Ramayana*. Valmiki’s rendering of this episode will help to understand the author’s stand. Ram rules the kingdom with Sita as his consort. A washer-man calls Ram as a spineless man for his trust and affection towards his wife, Sita, while rebuking his wife’s infidelity. Since Ram is ignorant about her pregnancy, he removes Sita from the kingdom due to this calumnious and baseless comment. She seeks refuge in the hermitage of Valmiki in the forest.

In the reinterpretation Deshpande provides a chance to Sita and Lakshman, her brother-in-law to have a brief conversation between them, in which Sita protests verbally in the face of insincerity of her husband, Ram and his illusion. This Sita is a complete contrast to the epic Sita, who is an incarnate of patience and does not reveal her heart to her brother-in-law.

At the palace when Sita is relishing over the movements of the child in her womb, Lakshman, requests her to get ready to go to the forest again. Her happiness finds no bounds, as the days she spent in the forest were the happiest moments for her. But after realizing the true intention the rebel in Sita starts questioning him why does the King lend his ears to a stupid gossip. When he calls her ‘Queen’, she boldly refuses the title, since the King does not treat her as his partner. Moreover, she is not the daughter of Janaka as she is unable to

claim any right from her parental home after the nuptial bond. She realizes the truth that she is just an ordinary woman.

Deshpande's Sita rationalizes the reasons for her sufferings. While Lakshmana blames the fate for all the unhappiness, Sita analyzes the causes for her wretched state - her love towards her husband.

It is not fate that shapes our lives, but our wills, our actions. It was not fate that left me unprotected that day, the day of the golden deer. It was my fault, the result of my weakness, the weakness of my great, of my too great a love for my husband. It was this that made a coward of me, making me afraid he had been hurt, it was this made me say those cruel words to [you]. (CS II 140).

Sita openly criticizes Ram's traits and forgives him. His wish to be perfect in all areas is his weakness. She pities him for his ignorance - perfection is also another golden deer, an illusion, and an unattainable one.

Perhaps I will forgive him, after all, not because I am a virtuous or a devoted wife, not because I am good and merciful, not even for the sake of our shared life, our memories, tears and laughter, but because I pity him. For what is he but a victim of his own idea of himself? He is still chasing it, the golden deer of perfection, while I . . . No, for me, the day of the golden deer is over, I know it is nothing but a mirage, delusion. (CS II 141)

The reason for this open rebuke is that her man does not consider her as his wife or as a human being. When she realizes that she is not given the due consideration, she starts objecting Ram's determination. Jacqueliën Van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermansin in their article "The Social Psychology of Protest" analyse the grievance theory by quoting the views of Folger and Martin. Comparison results in grievance and grievance causes protest.

Prominent among grievance theory was relative deprivation theory. Feelings of relative deprivation result from comparison of one's situation with a standard- be it one's past, someone else's situation,

or a cognitive standard such as equity or justice (Folger, 1986). If comparison results in the conclusion that one is not receiving what one deserves, a person experiences relative deprivation. Runciman (1966) referred to relative deprivation based on personal comparison as egoistic deprivation and to relative deprivation based on group comparison as fraternalistic deprivation. Research suggests that fraternalistic deprivation is particularly important for engagement in protest. (Major, 1994; Martin, 1986). (2)

So in turn the intelligent Sita leaves to the forest without revealing her pregnancy to them. Her frustrations provide her courage to face the crisis in her life.

Mahasweta Devi, a creative Bengali writer, an activist and daughter of Dacca literary parents, often portrays the struggles of the tribal groups and Dalits of West Bengal. She has received 11 awards which includes Sahitya Academy award in 1979, the Padma Shri award in 1986, Jnanpith award in 1996, the Ramon Magasaysay award in 1997, Honoris Causa award from Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1999, and Padma Vibhushan in 2006. She is a short story writer and novelist. Some of her works were adopted into motion pictures.

Mahasweta Devi's short story collection, *Draupadi* was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The short story "Disrobing of Draupadi" is an example for both the verbal and non-verbal protest. Dopdi, a twenty-seven year old tribal woman, is in the list of wanted criminals for killing her mistress' husband, Surja Sahu, a land-owning money lender, because he refuses to share water with Dalits (erstwhile untouchables of India). A reward of two hundred rupees is announced for her head. Dopdi herself has seen that notice at the local government office. Senanayak, an official, moves with the tribal as their friend and successfully corners Dopdi in the evening. She is kept at the canvas-camp till the dinner time. Senanayak permits the officials to do whatever they like. Her hands and legs are tied to four posts. She becomes unconscious. In the morning

she is brought to the tent. On seeing the General the dishonored Dopdi tears down her clothes and walks towards him to exhibit what has happened to her. Her protests (in words and actions) freeze the general and the low-born lady and teaches a shocking lesson to the officials. To show her protest she strips herself and exhibits her wretched state to the authorities.

Draupadi stands up... Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth... Senanaya sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? (402)

The powerful representatives lose their power before this powerless yet powerful illiterate woman. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the translator and critic writes: they are unable to face the “Unarmed target”.

It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful “subject,” who, still using the language of sexual “honor,” can derisively call herself “the object of your search,” whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object- “an unarmed target.” (Spivak 388)

In Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Draupadi’ the caste Hindus try to suppress the Dalits and the latter protests against their authority. Van Stekelenburg Jacquelin and Bert Klandermansin in their article “The Social Psychology of Protest” analyse the causes for the clashes between the two groups. The upper class feels that they have become powerless and the lower group’s economic growth threatens them. The writers conclude that these two classes do not have a real competition but it is the assumption of the upper groups. They write:

Low-status groups collectively challenge the actions of the high-status groups. However, members of high-status groups may also challenge the authority in solidarity with members of the low-status groups. (Subasic, et al, 2008). At the core of this *political solidarity* is psychological change in the self-categorization of members of high-status groups through which it is no longer the authority but the minority that best embodies the relevant norms, values and beliefs that define who 'we' are and how 'we' should relate to each other. Through this process, high-status members embrace low-status members' cause as their own and become willing to collectively challenge the authority. More over members of high-status groups may perceive their own identity to be threatened too if they believe that their status is being eroded or that low-status groups are becoming more powerful (Van Stekelenburg et al, 2010). For instance, sociological approaches show that structural social changes- immigration flows, increasing political power of minorities or economic contraction-induce treats to majorities who may react with exclusionary measures (Olzak and Koopmans, 2004) or protest (Van Dyke and Soule, 2002). Interestingly, social psychological approaches show that it is *perceptions* of competition rather than *actual* competition that invoke hostility to minorities. (Sniderman, et al, 2004). (5)

The protagonists of these three short stories protest not merely to communicate their frustration or disagreement or grievance but they express their expectation for a change in the attitude of their men/society. The protests of three women convey that they know not only their power and strength but also the means to exercise them. People who know their worth alone protest and the protests lead to empowerment.

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