Chapter-II

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Indian fiction in English has a galaxy of women novelists starting from Kamala Markandaya, a galaxy that includes among others, such widely acclaimed novelists as Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. In the changing scenario of postcolonial Indian society that observed crosscurrents of traditional ideals and newly imported ones, these women novelists were burdened with the task of giving their women characters the specific roles that would fit in the socio-cultural modes and values of the changed society.

A new generation of women emerged, embracing the changed values according to which women have a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. These women, who have the capacity to make free choice android not therefore depend on the choice of the male, are portrayed in the novels of the new generation women novelists. These
new women characters are not however the same everywhere: they react to the particular situation they are in, and their psychic and moral dilemmas are exposed accordingly.

The voice of this newly emerged class of women, who have the same education as the men are having, and are sometimes given the opportunity of supporting themselves financially, is heard in the writings of the contemporary women writers. A voice of protest against the marginalized condition of women as a class is also audible in their works. The meek and submissive heroines who were accepted as the standard women characters are replaced by the bold heroines, having moral courage necessary for self-assertion. It is likely that the approach of one such enlightened woman will be different from that of others. But the common point in their approaches is distinct: the misrepresentation of women by the male writers, who always liked to render the woman as subordinate to man, is challenged.

Shashi Deshpande’s approach to women’s problems, as depicted in her novels, is quite distinct. It is possible to differentiate her approach
from that of her contemporaries who either protest against the existing norms of the society or remain indifferent to the social system responsible for the oppression of Women. Shashi Deshpande did not choose the way of protest as such, although she is loosely described as a feminist, one who is influenced by the individualistic feminism propagated by the Anglo-American feminist tradition. Deshpande’s protagonists, who are educated women and most of whom are financially independent, have not necessarily developed an antimale attitude. When one such character suffers and the husband is blamed, her father, brother or some male friend is found to be her saviour. Again, a woman is often rendered responsible for the suffering of another woman even if she is her daughter. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* it is Sarita’s mother who creates the guilt consciousness in Sarita through her hysterical accusation that Sarita had killed her kid brother Dhruva, and ultimately this repeated accusation drives her to the border of schizophrenia. In fact, Sarita desperately tried to save her dear brother Dhruva when she saw him getting drowned in a pit full of muddy water, but denied any knowledge of him out of fear when asked by her parents.
Deshpande sought to highlight Sarita’s psychological condition as she was being alienated from her parents after the mishap, though she was then the only child left to her parents. The author criticizes the society that cares only for a male child and ignores the female child and fails to provide the latter a healthy atmosphere for physical and mental growth. It would be an exaggeration to hold that the sister’s authority over her kid brother forms the battleground on which she was fighting for a space of her own. It is quite natural for a child that he/she likes to draw full attention of the parents without which a child feels insecurity. Therefore when the parents go for a second baby they are advised not to neglect their first issue lest there be any psychological complexity. Sarita’s psychological complexity was enhanced by her mother’s suggestions that she should not go out into the sun and should take care of her complexion; she hated to be treated as a member of the feminine world who is supposed to take care of her feminine beauty lest she be rejected by a male for being his partner in life. This is an insult to her individuality, and she developed contempt towards femininity. She was in fact desirous of being treated as
a human being, no more and no less. If others (including his male counterparts) have the freedom of moving into the sun why not she? Sarita’s desire to be emancipated was fulfilled when her father, much to her mother’s irritation, came forward to support her both morally and financially and she came out as a medical practitioner. It may not be full justice to Sarita and her creator to interpret all her actions as per feminist’s programme. Sarita represents, as do other protagonists of Deshpande, the contemporary woman’s struggle to attain an “autonomous selfhood.”

Sarita, Jaya (That Long Silence), Indu (Roots and Shadows), Sumi and Aru (A Matter of Time) and other women characters in Deshpande’s novels try to assert themselves as independent individuals through confrontations with the traditional constraints in Indian society.

As the tradition demanded, the women protagonists in Deshpande’s novels usually start with their roles assigned to them by the society. While other women in their surroundings appear to be happy with their roles, they cannot be happy as they have a strong urge to make a free choice for themselves. This urge is very close to an existentialist’s urge for making
an independent choice. A man is condemned to be free, said Sartre. And those who say that they are not free are only lying to themselves. This lying to oneself is called ‘bad faith’ and Sartre considers ‘bad faith’ to be a moral flaw. The intelligent and highly conscious individuals (the women protagonists) in Deshpande’s novels proceed through the hazardous way of making decisions on their own, for this is the only way to assert oneself. As it is realized by Jaya towards the end of the novel, That Long Silence, Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita suggests this free choice for His devotees. To quote a few lines from the novel,

_The final words of Krishna’s long sermon to Arjuna, ‘Do as you desire,’ I’d thought it something of a cheat. Imagine the Lord. any Master telling his disciple. … ‘Do as you desire’! What are Prophets and Masters for if not to tell you what to do? But now I understand. With this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. ‘I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire._
Jaya's realization throws light on her creator's view of free choice as a moral act. After one gains full knowledge of oneself and of the way of the world, one is free to act according to one's desires. For, this time one's knowledge would act as one's guide and there is likely to be no fear on the way. An individual is expected to be true to him/her and only then preparation for free choice is complete. Broadly speaking, the protagonists in Deshpande's novels suffer on their way to getting prepared for the choice and the novels display several stages of self-realization leading to the act of choice.

The female characters in Deshpande's novels are basically Indian women; when they try to assert their individuality, emancipating from the age-old patriarchal pattern of thought, they exhibit their unique way which is sharply different from the western feminist movement. Deshpande has laid stress on the mixed cultural value systems prevalent in India and thus the indiscriminate application of western models of feminism will not do justice to her works. As Vrinda Nabar aptly comments, "The vastly different scenario in India encompasses contradictions of a kind undreamed
of in the mainstream (western) feminist philosophy.” Thus it is almost impossible for someone, who is not accustomed to the thought pattern of the Indian middle class people, to understand how the publication of poems written by a woman long dead can cause dishonour to the family. When the central character Urmi in *The Binding Vine* is so much haunted by the poems written by her mother-in-law, who died at the time of giving birth to her son, and decides to publish the poems, a serious charge of being a traitor to the family is brought against Urmi. A slight hint at the dead woman’s relation to her husband through her poems is equated to blasphemy. Hence Vanna is enraged when she comes to know that Urmi is going to publish Mira’s poems. “It is as if the knowledge of what her father did, of what he was, has threatened something, disturbed the inner rhythm of her being. So that there is a sense of disharmony about her.”

(181) A common woman in a male-dominated society is nourished in such a way that it is impossible for her to see things from a fresh point of view, other than the male one. The traditional Indian mind fails to appreciate a poem as a work of art independent of its context. Almost a similar incident occurs when Mohan in *That Long Silence* brings the charge of
infidelity against his wife who was supposed to have made public the secrets of her married life through her novels. Mohan's ego is hurt and his wife Jaya ceases to write about matters that might hurt Mohan.

Shashi Deshpande keenly observes the nature and the causes of the plight of an Indian woman writer who is suppressed both at home and in the literary world outside, in various ways. In *The Binding Vine*, Mira's diary records the conversation between Mira and the rising poet Venu who later became famous in Indian literature. Having read some of Mira's poems. Venu is reported to have said, "Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men." (127) This is the way of humiliating the other sex in the male-governed world. Whatever a woman writes is considered unnecessary, if not trash. And at home, there are psychological fears and physical sufferings along with the demand that a woman "must always be a few feet behind her husband," and in order to maintain a happy married life, she should not "try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role." (*The Dark Ph.D. Thesis*)
In order to assert her individuality, to be a human being in the proper sense of the term, every woman has to try hard to move beyond the barrier made for her in the society. Deshpande reveals this attempt of her protagonists in her novels and she is hardly biased against the male. That is why Urmí's husband (in The Binding Vine) is rendered as an ideal husband, and Urmí hardly has any dissatisfaction with her. But she has to struggle for the cause of other women in the society in order to assert her humanity.

In Deshpande’s literary world there are characters taken from almost all the sections of life. There are medical practitioners and writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and the maidservants. Besides poverty, bereavement and such other common adversities, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering a woman has to undergo. Sometimes the suffering is attached to the social taboos, and sometimes the woman is silenced in the name of family honour, and is compelled to digest torture. Kalpana’s case in The Binding Vine is an example. When Kalpana is...
found in dying condition after she has been molested by her own relative, her mother Shakutai requests the doctor not to inform the police lest the honour of the family is gone, leaving her unable to marry her daughter off. "I'll never be able to hold up my head again," she says. "Who'll marry the girl, we're decent people." (58) Urmi understands that women like Shakutai, who are rejected by their husbands and have to face the humiliation and torture, must have felt that marriage is the only shelter of a woman's life. At least one is "safe from other men." (88) This insecurity felt by the womenfolk in general puts a bar on their way to free thinking. The parents hardly encourage their female child to develop independent thinking as they are eager to get relieved of the responsibility somehow, by marrying her off. And if some parent does encourage (as does Jaya's father in That Long Silence), this act is hardly supported by others in the family.

Deshpande makes the social system responsible for the sufferings of women, and this system includes its female members too, who have been moulded by the society and are rendered unable to think otherwise.
The anguish of the soul, weakened by unthinkable humiliations and physical torture, may be revealed by one who has direct knowledge of that anguish and a hold on language necessary for revealing that experience. Shashi has the capacity to delve deep into the anguish that eats into the very core of life, and hence she can create life-like characters like Sulu. Sulu (in *The Binding Vine*) has no other way but to give Kalpana the proposal of marrying her husband Prabhakar, as desired by him. And when Kalpana refused, and as a result was raped by Prabhakar, Sulu had no option but to commit suicide as the poor soul could no more disgrace herself by telling a lie to save her husband. Sulu’s suicide throws light on the dark chapter of keeping the women silent in Indian society a society that remains blind to its male members turned into wanton animals, possessed by lust.

Shashi Deshpande’s sincere attempt to break the silence of women has been widely acclaimed in home and abroad. Her clear understanding of human relationships, her close observation of the way of the world, her unbiased attitude to dogmas and movements and her hold on English language explain her success.

Ph.D. Thesis