Chapter 5:

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, the women characters of Shashi Deshpande’s novels have been studied from the socio-cultural point of view. Deshpande has portrayed a selected class of women and their predicament. Most of the protagonists, as well as, major women characters are middle-class educated working women. Mostly they belong to Brahmin family. Deshpande seems to have intended to show that, if financially independent and (so called) upper class women have to face problems of identity, the plight of their counterparts in the lower income groups would be still graver. All the protagonists of Deshpande have initially a good married life, but at a certain point of time or during a crisis, they become conscious about their lives and existence. The self assessment of their lives leads them to the path of identity quest. The woman characters are unhappy with their married life. Their unhappiness provokes them to realize their ‘selves’. After the process of realization is over, they return to their normal life giving one more chance to life with clear and firm determination never to be subjugated by their husbands.

Marriage plays a very crucial role in instigating women to think about their identity. The women characters, except Kshama and Devayani, happen to realize their need of self assertion during their married life. The author’s implication is to redefine marriage with its ideals that are forgotten in the modern time. It is compared with the two wheels of a chariot that suggests equal status of husband and wife. The question of superiority and inferiority does not take place if it stands on the base of understanding. For a healthy society, healthy and strong relations between the two
genders are inevitable. In Indian social system, marriage is prescribed as a permanent bond between husband and wife. It aims at making strong relation with a view to giving strong and healthy social atmosphere. Marriage, therefore, is not merely a social issue of adjustment of two persons, but it has spiritual importance as well. Marriage requires a complete union of two souls. This ideal can be achieved only when husband and wife determine to merge their identity. Domestic work or bondage of relation is not painful. It is the way it is seen that makes difference. If it is taken up out of love voluntarily, it gives sense of gratification, but if it is imposed against the will in the name of custom, it is oppression. In the modern context, woman’s devotional approach to her husband and family becomes the reason for her subjugation. Marriage gives man power to control woman’s life and gives unwritten authority to practice cruelty against her. Hence the concept of union of souls seems impractical. The subjugation for a period eventually turns into the quest of identity.

Identity construction is a socio-cultural issue. A society that does not treat man and woman on the base of equality loses humanitarian outlook. This insensitive partiality results into the subjugation of women. Woman has been given the second position after man in every sphere of social activity everywhere in the world. India is not an exception. The formation of society and laws that bind it are variable from society to society. This distinguishes Indian society from the other, particularly the western society.

A society is formed with its own requirement, sense of security and welfare, ethical and spiritual principles and vision of progress. The Indian and the western societies differ on their fundamental concepts and vision. Therefore, despite similar plight of woman’s suppression, they have dissimilar reasons of it, deeply rooted in its
socio-cultural tradition. The Indian and the western concepts differ in many ways. Indian society is based on the principle of altruism. Social interest is held higher than personal. On the other hand, for the west individual rights are more important than social conventions. India had achieved highest phase of welfare state in the Vedic period where woman enjoyed full freedom and equal share in social, political and cultural matters. Though it cannot claim of attaining complete equality between man and woman, it had achieved it to a great extent. In the later period it degenerated into orthodox thoughts and rigidity in the name of tradition. The deterioration of ideals took place since the proper understanding of social conventions stopped being conveyed to generation after generation. Foreign invasion and foreign rule played an important role in creating sense of insecurity that ultimately resulted into orthodoxy. This social condition has made woman suspicious about its righteousness and therefore, they are in a state of confusion what to prefer – the ancient ideals or modern thoughts of the west.

Unlike the west, the Indian social law makers and visionaries have common views regarding the form of society. Hence it has been repeatedly endorsed by them from time to time and in various scriptures. This repeated affirmation of social ideal eventually turned into tradition which was at a time fair enough to common interest and individual freedom. Thus, it is not the tradition that has created rigidity, but the loss of understanding and flexibility has resulted into rigidity. In the west, the social thinkers propound their views which vary from person to person. Therefore a common concept is difficult to attain. The emphasis is on individual rights, and therefore a clear vision is not conceived about the future society.
The contemporary Indian women have perception of the two aspects of society—ideals of freedom, equality and dignity of past; and orthodox beliefs of present. At the same time they are attracted by the western ideals based on individual liberty. They do not lose faith in the cultural values, but welcome the western thoughts as well. Besides individual existence, they have aspiration to make life purposeful by social relations. This confused socio-cultural condition is reflected in the women characters of Shashi Deshpande.

A gradual development in the portrayal of protagonists can be ascertained. Characters like Saru, Jaya and Indu belong to the first category that remains contented with self realization. The second category comprises of the characters like Urmi, Arundhati and Savitribai who break the silence and learn to raise their voice. And finally, the characters like Devayani, Manjari and Savitribai take daring step of breaking the norms laid by the society.

Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, represents educated and working class women of India. Her sincerity in her profession as a doctor earns popularity and honour for her. At a stage she surpasses her husband also. This makes her victim of her husband’s jealousy. The suppressed feeling of superiority of Manu is expressed at night. Saru becomes the victim of marital rape. She stands up and determines to face her predicament. She leaves her husband’s house and returns to her parental home. Her father gives her a cold response. She feels displaced in her own house which eventually pushes her on the path of identity search. Since her childhood, she is victimized of gender bias and injustice from her mother who blames Saru for the death of her younger brother and does not forgive her until her death. Her experience of married life taught her that marriage does not give equal opportunity to husband
and wife. One is dominant and the other is dominated. She expresses her disappointment in her lecture that wife should be always a few steps back, and should never try to overtake him to make her marriage successful. With her determination to counter the injustice she realizes her ‘self’ and achieves her identity. Her strong determination compels her husband to realize her importance and gives repeated calls to return. She does return to Manohar, but with a changed outlook.

Jaya in *That Long Silence*, is also an example of a woman unwillingly trying to adjust herself into the present customs. She accepts everything in her married life silently. Her long silence and orthodox thoughts of her husband prompts her to break the silence. She walks on the path of her identity search. She realizes that continuous compromise in her life has victimized woman of her husband’s dominance on her. She determines to fight and by way of her story writing she achieves her identity. She does not hesitate to take help of man other than her husband. She even plunges into extra-marital relationship with Kamat. Her relation with him is an urge to create conducive atmosphere for woman to grow with her personal aspiration.

Like Sumi and Jaya, Indu’s struggle, in *Roots and Shadows*, is also a struggle of an awakened woman. She is dissatisfied with the conservative nature of the society. She also wants to discover her real ‘self’ through conservative atmosphere that insist her to accept customs without raising voice. She has to face strong and conservative authority of Akka. Indu’s husband, Jayant is also of the view that she should try to adjust with the system. Jayant takes the social conventions lightly, while Indu decides to stand against it. She decides not to submit herself to other’s dictates. She takes the decision of her life on her own way. She succeeds in realizing her ‘self’ and establishes her identity. However she takes middle path and maintains balance.
between tradition and individuality. The struggle of the three protagonists, Jaya, Saru and Indu is on personal ground.

The protagonists of *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies* and *A Matter of Time*, respectively, Urmila, Madhu and Sumi are stronger and courageous compare to Jaya, Indu and Sumi. Urmila, in *The Binding Vine*, endeavours to help other oppressed women inside and outside the family, and gives a call for sisterhood. Various characters like Mira, Sakutai, Kalpana, Mandira influence Urmila’s struggle against women’s oppression and quest for identity. Mira’s poems fuels Urmila’s efforts to challenge the system. She fights with the evils of society fearlessly and does not care for reputation. In fact, it is her fearlessness that helps her achieve her identity. She convinces women like Sakutai to shed the fear of honour and wagging tongues. Sakutai a lower middle-class woman also understands Urmila’s view and gets ready to support her. Finally, with the help of media, she receives massive support from people and ensures justice to the rape victim like Kalpana.

Sumi, in *A Matter of Time*, is the finest character of Deshpande in the sense that she shows tremendous inner strength without cry or shouts for justice. In the middle of her happy married life, and having three daughters, she is deserted by her husband, Gopal, without any apparent reason. Though she is not economically independent, she is not emotionally shattered, and also takes the responsibility of three daughters. Any woman in her place would have broken down. But Sumi exhibits immense courage to fight with the sudden and unexpected situation in her life. Outwardly simple looking woman is inwardly emancipated and awakened woman who construct her identity through the adoption of double responsibilities – of a husband and a wife. Though she is deserted by her husband for no fault of her, she
gives rare example of generosity in letting him free gracefully. She does not show any sign of grievance or makes verbal complaint. She shoulders the responsibilities of finding jobs and dealing with brokers to find a separate house for her. With her consistent and unchanged attitude she realizes her identity. She proves that a woman is not a creeper that requires the help of others to grow. She manages all her domestic duties with commitment. Her elder daughter Aru strongly supports her. However, she fails to understand the strength of Sumi’s silent fight.

The narrator Madhu and Savitribai Indorker, in Small Remedies, are the two important characters pave their way to realize their ‘selves’. Savitribai is firm in her process of success to be a great singer and achieve her goal of fame and accolades. She not only ignores moral values, but also does not hesitate to break it for the sake of her success. She achieves her goal and becomes Doyen of Hindustani music. She falls in extramarital relationship with a Muslim tabla player; and also gives birth to a daughter, Munni, out of wedlock. Unlike her mother, Munni tries to shed her real identity as a daughter of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab. She hopes to have respectable life and relation with Bai’s in-laws. She thus, attempts to live with her false identity. Fortunately, she is accepted by Bai’s in-laws and lives with her changed name as Meenakshi Indorker; and after marriage, Shailaja Joshi. Savitribai does not care for social prestige and criticism of people; Munni prefers to live a respectable life according to social tradition. Savitribai betrays her husband and family for her quest of identity; Munni returns to the same family and adopts identity as the daughter of Indorker family.

The narrator Madhu becomes victim for her truthfulness and honesty as she is deserted by her husband. Her married life collapses as she tells the truth of her
accidental sexual experience at age of fifteen. Her husband makes a big issue of her celibacy and their apparently healthy relations come to a sudden end. She realizes the fragile base of marriage. She lives her rest life with the memory of her dead son, Adit. The author points out the fragile bond of marital relationship. She also shows the importance of moral values in the construction of one’s identity.

*If I Die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead* are thriller stories. The women characters are trapped in mysterious murders and they indulge in solving the mysteries. The author’s preoccupation with woman’s identity is not in the centre. However, Manju, the narrator of *If I Die Today* and Kshama, the central figure of *Come Up and Be Dead* represent contemporary middle-class working women’s psyche. Manju experiences little change in male attitude towards women despite good education and prestigious profession. Kshama, by her experience of life undergoes a change in her attitude. Being the victim of sibling jealousy with her brother, she develops an attitude that family relations are burden and prevent one’s progress. Later, she realizes the importance of family ties and adopts an orphan girl, Sonali. Deshpande shows contemporary women’s psychological conflict, and reaffirms her faith in family bonds.

Manjari in *Moving On* realizes importance of freedom from her short married life. The diary written by her father consists of personal details of his life also instigate her to evaluate her own life as well. She finds that marriage needs understanding of spouses. But she gets shocked and disappointed from her marriage with Shyam. She resolves to live as a widow and prefers to live lonely. She becomes widow at the age of twenty one. She can remarry with suitable man. Raja, who is her childhood friend, is ready to marry her, but she does not want to plunge into the trap
again where a woman unknowingly starts living for her husband and his family. She dilutes her existence and suppresses her personal aspirations.

Manjari’s parents’ lives, sister’s shocking rape and premature death make her think about her liberty. Though she is warned on a number of occasions by Raja and Venkat, she does not change her decision to live alone. She does job, gives education to her son and adopted daughter, learns car also to realize her ‘self’. To protect herself from lewd sight of men, she changes her look and seems like man. Nevertheless, she experiences attempts of sexual exploitation from men. She resolves to stand firm to face the problems of her life. Though Raja is always ready to help her, she does not take his help. He fights her battle all alone. She faces the threatening calls from the mafia and saves her house. In the similar incident, her parents could not save their old house twenty years back. It is her rare courage that she wins her battle and attains her identity.

Manjari fulfils her sexual desire by having physical relation with her young tenant. Her, so called illicit relationship is intended to satiate her bodily hunger without losing her freedom; and that, it happens with her choice, and not that of the boy. She remains alone but does not do away with her responsibility and affection of her children. She learns that man cannot achieve complete freedom and hence, she achieves relational freedom. She seems rebellious and more courageous than the protagonists like Jaya, Saru and Indu; and constructs her identity by maintaining her freedom.

Devayani in In the Country of Deceit, indulges in live-in relationship with the police officer who is married and older than her. Her past experience laid a negative
impression about family relation. She believes that family relationship is a burden and it restricts one’s freedom and individuality. She rejects all the marriage proposals from her sister and aunt. From her own experience, she believes that family compels one to live for others. Devayani wants to live life on her own way and wants to enjoy freedom. She decides to live a spinster. Her sexual desire leads her to a relationship that society does not approve. She does not care for social conventions and enjoys relationship with Ashok. Like Manjari, she enjoys relation with Ashok at her will and not that of Ashok. She does not want to lose her hard-won freedom. She gets her identity free from family relation. As her sister and aunt do not approve her relationship, she unwillingly breaks it, but instead of following convention, she resolves to remain unmarried and live with the memory of Ashok.

The women characters prefer many ways to attain their identity. The women like Jaya, Sumi, Madhu, and Mira express their suppressed feelings and angst by their writings. Devayani, Indu, Urmila, Manjari are some of the characters that find their way through sharing experiences of others. Urmila and Arundhati believe in raising voice against women’s oppression. Devayani and Manjari emerge as ‘new woman’ in not submitting to the social conventions, and pave their own way of identity and liberty. Almost all the major women character of Deshpande fall into extra-marital relationship or illicit relationship in their efforts to realize their real ‘self’. Such illegitimate relationship may be defended on personal ground, but it may not be justified on moral ground. Betrayal from any side in a mutual relationship does not bring any solution to problem.

Deshpande has pointed out a very crucial social issue related to women’s oppression. Her characters belong to upper class society, they are educated and
financially independent, yet they are not happy with their lives. Modern education and financial independence do not fulfil their demand. In fact, they are demanding honour and dignity on humanitarian ground. Therefore, mere call for sisterhood and raising voice against injustice are not sufficient. They are one sided efforts. It is man who needs to respect woman for her sacrifice. In this sense, the success of Jaya, Saru and Indu in convincing their husbands is more worthwhile. Until man recognizes the sacrifice of woman and learn to honour her, the Vedic time concept of *Sarvatra sukhinah santu* will remain to be achieved.

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