

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

CROSSING BARRIERS – FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY

The foregoing study enables us to conclude that Shashi Deshpande is unique in bringing to the fore a social problem so far overlooked by the authors of novels and short stories. However, the novelist approaches social problems rather superficially and conventionally and offers no suggestions to solve them. Rape, including marital rape is the only exception. Society blames the victim instead of the victimizer in cases of rape which discourages the victim and her relations to fight back. The practice of hushing up cases of rape permits the culprit to escape scot free. Marital rape takes place mostly in cases where the wife is much younger than the husband. But that is not always the case.

The conventional patriarchal structure has conferred upon man the 'right' to use a woman's body according to his whims and fancies. It may be with or without her consent. So, the marginalization of women is twofold; firstly because she is a woman and secondly the conventional social structure considers her inferior to man.

Traditionally marital rape has been treated as a non – issue in society. Both law and religion have given almost total mastery of the wife's body to her

husband. Solution to the problem of marital rape seems to demand a change in the thinking of the husband. He is expected to treat his wife as a partner, not an object.

Deshpande tries to stress the fact that the traditional gulf between parents and children has not disappeared but there are signs of its shrinking slowly. Preference for male child still prevails and some parents make a hell of their own lives and of their family when they lose a male child. Some parents still want to impose their choice in respect of marriage and career on their children but they are not sure of their ground as reality does not seem to favour them all the time. Intelligent ones among the children, both male and female, are asserting themselves in the choice of career and marriage and sensible parents are awakening to the new conditions. That is bound to develop an understanding between parents and children. Working mothers often face the dissatisfaction of their children as the latter miss them when they are at their job.

It is seen that the lives of middle class women oscillating between traditional and modern roles are mostly highlighted in Shashi Deshpande's novels. Women have progressed a lot in the sense that they are getting higher education, learning several languages and adopting careers like journalism, lecturer ship, medicine, law etc. Some of them are becoming singers, political leaders and trade unionists as well. They are asserting themselves in the choice

of career and marriage too. Many protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels have married beyond caste, language and/or religion. However, the less intelligent ones have no option but to submit to the dictates of tradition. Women still face a lot of difficulties in society. Not a few parents still deem it better to provide for higher education of the son and save money for dowry and marriage of the daughter. They are still expected to marry not beyond caste, language or religion. Certain occupations are deemed especially suitable for women while the rest are considered otherwise. That stands in the way of women who, for example, aspire to become singers. Political parties and trade unions are dominated by men and only a few women (widows or relations of a deceased leader) are able to rise to the positions they otherwise deserve.

Shashi Deshpande through her novels has highlighted the sharp contrast between the traditional women with their biased mindset who prefer getting their daughters married than pursuing a career and modern women symbolized by their priority for empowerment and personal opinion. Women characters in her novels resist obeying the established and accepted patriarchal social set up. They question the authoritative attitude and supremacy of the masculine gender refusing to be reduced to mere stereotypes. Therefore, they face a constant struggle to establish their position and identity in the society.

The novelist shows how society despite all the progress in science and technology, despite loud talks of democracy and socialism remains based on

inequality and exploitation and nourishes the same. Capitalist society, like its feudal predecessor sustains patriarchy which means the supremacy of the man and subjugation of the woman. In such a society women are expected to keep a low profile. They are not expected to talk or to laugh aloud. They are taught to be submissive, to suffer everything in silence and never to complain. Shyness is supposed to be a virtue in women, an ornament as the old proverb says. It is no business of woman to assume power, to command or surpass men according to the prevalent notions of the present society.

In all the novels Deshpande shows her women characters mostly careless and ill informed about the deeds of their husbands. Even though the women characters cannot escape the consequences of their husband's doings yet they choose to remain indifferent and ignorant. Like Sarita in *That Long Silence* they do not assert their right to know that. Often even in vital matters of survival like food and medical care they do not voice their needs or are rebuked for doing it; the consequences are fatal as in case of Mohan's sister in *That Long Silence*.

Female sexuality is not a taboo for Deshpande. Her freedom loving women characters are not restricted to one particular partner. Women characters like Indu, Madhu, Jaya leave the idea of living and loving one particular man. The myth of equality of sexes is questioned by Deshpande. She makes her women characters go beyond the social rules by not sticking to one partner. In a

way she is questioning this paradoxical society where men have the social sanction to develop extra marital affairs but women are treated as social outcastes for the same. Sex is deemed a sensitive matter and women have to remain passive or to pretend to be so as female sexuality shocks and annoys husbands. Jayant in *Roots and Shadows* is an instance to the point. Even though his wife, Indu was the one to take the unusual step of proposing, he is alarmed at the assertion of her sexuality. That compels her to hide her passion and pretend to be passive. Such experiences teach women not only to be ashamed of their natural sexuality, but also make them deceptive.

Such sensitivity also leads to ignorance of the majority of women about the means of birth control. Even when they need and desire to control their bodies they cannot do that because they cannot discuss with their husbands the best means suitable to them. Despite the government propaganda for family planning, the poor, illiterate women have to accept the age old view that pregnancies are God given and they have to submit to God's will. That is why Venu and Nayana in *That Long Silence* are frequently pregnant.

Mohan's mother takes the advice of a quack to terminate her last pregnancy and dies in that desperate attempt. That is the state of not a few even now in India.

Though Shashi Deshpande dislikes the idea of being termed a feminist, she has made a courageous attempt by breaking the 'long silence' of women

and making them voice their sufferings and frustrations. Her novels are a portrayal of the deplorable condition of the urban middle class women whose status and position in society has remained unchanged even in this 21st century. Modern education is leading the new generation to adopt birth control devices as people want to build their careers before having children. But here too, the will of the man prevails. Indu cannot have a child even though she desires one as Jayant does not deem it expedient now. This is the other extreme to which a section of our society has gone. For both health and happiness, the women must have knowledge and means of controlling their bodies and the choice to have babies or not must be theirs.

The condition of modern middle class women is far better than that of, say Mohan's mother or Venu or Nayana. They are educated, they can find a job and become financially independent and they can even marry the man of their choice. Moreover, they can and do control their bodies. But their married life is not devoid of problems. In fact, all the novels of Shashi Deshpande deal with these problems.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu faces several problems. First is the sexual one. Even though Indu was the person to propose and marry Jayant, the latter does not expect passion in her. She solves the problem by pretending to be passive. Second, though she wishes to have a baby, Jayant does not for purely financial reason. Third, she is dissatisfied with her job as a journalist because

she is compelled to pen things outrageous to her soul but Jayant as a man of the world does not entertain her idea to resign. The legacy left to her brings with it a fresh challenge: whether to use it for enriching herself and building her own career or distributing it among those who need and deserve it. Needless to say, she makes the best use of it.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita's husband develops a complex as she surpasses her in income and image and turns a sadist at night. First, she accepts it in silence deeming it as a self imposed punishment of some guilt committed by her in past. But later when she talks about it to her father, he advises her to talk to Manohar or consult some psychiatrist if necessary. That gives her courage to face the reality.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's husband falls into trouble due to some shady dealings she is not fully aware of. She spends some time in a sort of a hiding with her husband waiting for the dust to settle. That gives her time to reflect and realize that she has not done the right thing by remaining silent and unaware of what her husband has been doing at his job.

In *The Binding Vine*, the protagonist has no problems with her husband who spends most of his days abroad at sea. Her difficulty lies in people around her who oppose her social activity as she proceeds to help a victim of rape.

In *A Matter of Time*, Gopal leaves her wife Sumi suddenly for no apparent reason which places the responsibility of maintaining the family on Sumi. She along with her three young girl children faces the situation boldly after all their attempts to bring Gopal back fail.

In *Small Remedies*, Madhu, the mother of a boy in late teens, remembers all of a sudden the incident of a pre – marital sex she had when she was only fifteen and tells it to her husband. That embitters the couple's relationship as her husband does not take that easy. Her agony is aggravated when her only son dies. Under the circumstances, Madhu cannot but wait until time heals her wounds.

In *Moving On*, Rajani, a widow in her early forties is shouldering the responsibility of two grown up children, her own son and an adopted daughter. They are living elsewhere for their education and Madhu lives alone. Raja, a friend of hers, proposes to marry her for the sake of security and well being. The two children are not opposed to it but she refuses despite her strong passion as she thinks she can do without male protection and chooses to lead a free life.

Thus with the exception of the two, namely, *A Matter of Time* and *Moving On*, her novels are oriented toward reconciliation. Even in *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, reconciliation after open discussion of the problems between the couple is implied though the husband is a sadist. This is done by the suggestion that the husband is not the only person to blame. Commissions and

missions on part of both of the couple are responsible for the problems of married life and it is obligatory on part of both to sort out the same and seek an amicable solution.

That seems reasonable enough. But behind it lies the belief in the society of the present institution of marriage and family, which the novelist deems eternal and perfect one. Even though we find at one place in *Roots and Shadows* the family united only in “a readiness to reveal to others, to misunderstand, to see the worst”, (RS 60) the following seems to be the final judgement:

“The family....it’s all right to sneer at it. But tell me, what have you get to put in its place? What will you have in its stead? It gives us a background, an anchor, something to hold on to.” (RS104)

As a matter of fact, the present institutions of marriage and family are neither eternal nor perfect. As established by Lewis H. Morgan in *Ancient Society* (London, 1877) and reiterated by Fredrick Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), man – woman relations took different forms in different ages according to the social life of the time. They have taken their present form through a long process of evolution.

As for the perfection of the present institutions of marriage and family, Engels pointed out the characteristics stamped on them in consequence of

having arisen out of property relationships, namely, the dominance and indissolubility of marriage. He deems only the relations based on love and moral and pleads full freedom in marriage which

“can become generally operative only when the abolition of capitalist production, and the property relations created by it, have removed all those secondary economic considerations which still exert so powerful an influence on the choice of a partner. Then, no other motive remains than mutual affection.” (Marx and Engels 1977: 233-234)

Shashi Deshpande herself frequently compares the relationship of the married couple to two animals yoked together, which is significant and needs no elaboration. The Anand Bazar Patrika reported last year about 8 persons between the ages 65 to 85, all victims of their sons, had sought remedy from Calcutta High Court and Justice Dipankar Dutta ruled in their favour and ordered their sons to look after them properly. Such cases of the wealthy sons throwing away their parents on the street are not rare nowadays. We often read about them in the newspapers.

There is the other side of the coin. Not all parents are financially sound and mentally prepared enough to care and educate their children properly. If they are dead and helpless, the worst befalls their children. They are exploited and abused by their relations or thrown away on the street. The condition of the

younger and the weak is a bleak one. The Anand Bazar Patrika reported few days back about five female mental patients of Malda Sadar Hospital who were languishing there as their families did not take them back even after they were cured.

As Romila Thapar observed on the ancient Indian texts about the emergence of the state,

“its purpose was to protect the people as well as the institutions of family and private property and to maintain law and order”.

(Thapar 1973: 55)

So the myth of the eternity and perfection of the institution of family is inevitably connected with the myth of the eternity of private property and state too. In perpetuating the one, the novelist seeks to perpetuate the other.

The novelist does not conceal her support for the status quo. The words of her protagonist in *Roots and Shadows* are undoubtedly hers: “...it is not in me, the material of which revolutionaries are made. I no longer have any desire to mould people, to change them, to reform society.” (RS15) She interprets the epic story of Nahusa in the same vein. The story has been used through the ages to illustrate the consequence of pride, of losing control over one’s senses. But to the novelist it turns into a plea against revolution. According to the novelist, the

story tells us that “every revolution carries within it the seed of its own destruction. One oppression only replaces another.” (RS 214)

The very existence of a state at the border which has abolished capitalism is an eyesore to the upholders of the status quo. No wonder, her *Small Remedies* contains a subtle attack on the People’s Republic of China with a question about Tibet and with a suggestion that “the Chinese invasion” was the cause of Leela’s leaving the Communist Party for the Socialist Group. (SR 96)

The attack is even more pronounced in *That Long Silence*:

“I heard the cries of ‘Hindi-Chini bhai bhai’. But almost immediately came the war. We had been stabbed by our ‘brother’. Yes, that betrayal had been the watershed between hope and disillusionment. Things would never be the same again.” (TLS 59)

That is true enough in as much as the hostility will remain as long as the reactionaries do not succeed in restoring capitalism in China.

But all the hue and cry against China cannot belie the truth that emancipation of not only women but all the oppressed lies in socialist revolution.

As Engels wrote:

“With the passage of the means of production into common property, the individual family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public matter. Society takes care of all children equally, irrespective of whether they are born in wedlock or not.” (Marx and Engels 1977: 249)

All that did not remain a distant dream when the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia.

“Six weeks after the revolution, civil marriage replaced the rule of the church, and before a year was out the marriage code was produced. This proclaimed full equality of husband and wife, and abolished the concept of illegitimacy by declaring complete equality of illegitimate with legitimate children. ...By invalidating the old code with its language of domination and submission, by allowing freedom in choosing which surname to use, and by forbidding spousal control over business, friends, correspondence and residence, in many ways gender equality was greatly advanced.” (Marik 2008: 419-420)

Abortion was legalized in 1920. Child care facilities, nurseries, kindergartens, communal dining halls and laundries were set up to remove the drudgery of women.

But the resources of a backward country like Russia were not adequate for the task ahead. All the progressive measures concerning gender and sexuality were heavily pushed back during 1928 and 1943. Motherhood was glorified and divorce laws were heavily tightened. Abortion became forbidden. The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children was reestablished. Education in schools was gender segregated and different types of courses for boys and girls were planned and justified in the name of developing the proper masculine and feminine traits. (Schlsinger 1949: 364, 393-394) Thus the USSR had departed far from the path of Bolshevism long before capitalism was restored in 1991.

What is easily forgotten in this context is the fact that USSR as well as the countries of East Europe were (with the exception of East Germany) backward. There is no reason to hold that the same thing will occur again if the working class comes to power in an advanced country like USA, UK, Canada, Germany or Japan. It will undoubtedly end otherwise – by liberating women along with the other oppressed of the world. Problems of women like the problems of all the oppressed demand socialist revolution for their solution and therein lay the strength and hope for it.

Sarabjit Sandhu states

“Shashi Deshpande says that she knows how the women feel and she knows the mood of India. It has been observed that the predominating issues and themes in her novels emerge from the situations that focus on women caught in the crisis of a transitional society where the shift is taking place from conventional to unconventional. She traces out the tensions in which the Indian woman is caught in a transitional world.” [Sandhu 1991: 13-15].

Shashi Deshpande is an author who has a firsthand knowledge of Indian society and its deep laden problems. Modernity should not remain a myth for the weaker sections of the society. Therefore to get the bliss of this modernity, some changes are inevitably demanded. That demand is voiced through the characters of Deshpande’s novels. This thesis is an attempt to understand the issue from my point of view. However, there remains a scope for further research in the area. It is not after all an exhaustive study. It is, rather, a humble beginning in this sphere.