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Sexual Predicament and Shashi Deshpande's Women

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Indian writing in English has now entered a new phase—the phase of an inimitable representation of the New Indian Woman who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the unconscious dawn of the patriarchal India. This new woman of the Indian English Novel views herself as the object of cultural/social oppressions and attempts to rebel against them, consciously or unconsciously, within her living space. But at the same time, she reflects the inability to reject her cultural/social background totally and hence fails to transcend the horizons depicting a revolutionary spirit. She therefore stands at cross-roads, caught between tradition and modernity.

Following Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and other writers who documented this female resistance against a patriarchally-maintained Indian culture, Shashi Deshpande—comparatively a new face to the literary arena—has re-incarnated the new Indian woman and has reinforced the female dilemma in her novels. Her concern for women is reflected in her novels which are deeply rooted in the line of socio-moral-sexual fiction. Hence, her regard for the social problems, especially of the middle-class women, is evident. Rooted in the culture in which she lives, Shashi Deshpande seems attuned to ordinary experience, vividly rendering the ordinary with intelligence, learning and insight. Since her fiction is woman-centered, the "feminine consciousness" becomes the protagonist of her novels. The day is not far

off for this "feminine" to become "feminist." She also admits her wide reading of feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf and feminist novelists like Margaret Drabble and Doris Lessing. But her feminism is not western-oriented, because it is born out of a typically Indian situation. For her, fiction represents the predicament of the Indian woman placed between two poles: tradition and modernity; between family and profession; between culture and Nature. Deshpande further mixes "humanism" with "feminism" in her fiction and so her vision of the Indian woman tends to be optimistic, though radical. In fact she would like to call herself a "humanist feminist."

Deshpande has written five novels altogether: *The Lark Holds No Terrors* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), *Come Up and Be Dead* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983), *Roots and Shadows* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1983), *If I Die Today* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982) and *That Long Silence* (London: Virago 1988)—they are all about women. Her protagonists have generally followed the course and concern of her own life: of young women, career-oriented, getting married, having children and then wondering "what next." Her first person narrators are for the most part intelligent, educated, and familiar with literature, psychology and contemporary life. The vitality of her characterization stems from her own sense of perception and her experience of living. Often we find that when the protagonist herself is portrayed as a writer, Deshpande infuses her own "writer's credo" into those of her heroines. The underlying theme of all these novels is "human relationships," not the traditional but the re-defined human relationships. For, a readjustment and redefinition of human relationships has been attempted in tune with the change in human behaviour at the turn of the century. Ultimately, what is seen in her fiction is not the identical and the fictionalized, but the perceived and felt "human relationships"—that of between a mother and a girl, between a father and a daughter, a brother and a sister, a husband and a wife, etc. In all these, the central stage is occupied by the woman and hence the narration is signifi-

cantly sifted through her feminine/feminist consciousness.

A common pattern of the novelist's feminist aspirations can be discerned in three of her novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. They deal with the Indian woman in disharmony with her sexual, cultural and natural roles. She leaves the place of disillusionment and lives a longer life wherein she unconsciously lingers in the past and then swings back to the present. This recuperates her mental dilemma and leads her to an ultimate realization of herself. She decides to assert herself not only as a woman, wife or mother, but also as an individual. Deshpande's woman does not resort to suffering stoically. Neither does she find a new radical way out of the problem. Paradoxically, she chooses and rejects both ways—staunch rebellion and meek acceptance. In Deshpande's own words, her heroines are characterized as "middle of the road kind."²

The feminist tendencies of the three heroines—Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*—are revealed in their rebellion against the roles assigned by Culture and Nature. Culture allows the woman to be a daughter or a sister in her parental family and to be a wife or mother in her husband's family. In addition, she has to play a professional role if she is a working woman. Above all, Nature assigns her a sex-based role wherein she is limited biologically. Though she is divided between her natural and cultural roles themselves, both of them still assign only a subservient, secondary and marginal role to her and expect her to disown any reversal or change in it. Accordingly, a typical Deshpande heroine can be only a daughter/sister/wife/mother/woman/ professional, but never her real "she." What she wants is the freedom to think and decide for herself and the liberation from her womanhood. For she finds her "womanly self" trapped and suffocated within her family. Thus family becomes a metaphorical "Dub in" where they find their "self" stifled and oppressed. Hence they try to escape from their tailored roles. Though they are able to escape their culture-bound roles, there is no way out of their

nature-bound roles, especially their role as sexual partners. While they complain of manifest problems i.e. their professional/cultural/social dilemma, in actuality, their problem is latent and rooted in sex. Thus their predicament is patently domestic/professional, but latently sexual.

The predicament of the Indian woman in Deshpande can thus be viewed from two angles: manifest and latent. The subject of this paper is to throw light on the latent problem and to prove that the Indian woman's predicament is more sexual than cultural/professional/social/natural. The problem in the Indian sexual panorama is that sex has been branded as a taboo and the discussion of it in public is avoided. In spite of the openness of our ancestors, who chose temple walls as excellent repositories of sexual mudras, very few people, particularly women, are willing to dilate on their sexual problems, if any. The heroines of Deshpande face the same situation in their sexual relationship with their husbands.

The discord between Saru and Manu leading to sexual paralysis in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* can be explained in Saru's words: "He [Manu] had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband." (37)

The problem is sexual impotency on the part of Manu leading to sexual sadism inflicted on Saru. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu describes herself as an anachronism especially on the sexual plane: "A woman who loves her husband too much . . . and is ashamed of it." (92) She interprets her relation with her husband Jayant, thus: "We're on different planes. He chooses his level. And I . . . try to choose the one he would like me to be on. It humiliates me." (90) Sexual alienation sets in when she does not want to show her love for him physically lest it might shock him to find a woman taking the initiative in the sexual act. This sexual paralysis deepens when she pretends to be passive and unresponsive. Though she defies tradition to marry him, she remains sexually a conservative, unable to transcend the sexual taboos.

We see a different situation that accelerates the sexual

degeneration between Jaya and Mohan in *That Long Silence*. Unlike Saru's and Indu's, Jaya's marriage is arranged by her elders. And she experiences "sex" before "love." She is expected to play a passive role contrary to her rebellious nature. When she succumbs to such an expectation, her relationship with Mohan changes. Her feelings for him move away beyond sex. Sexual act itself appears "illusory" and her idea of fulfilment through sex is destroyed.

Saru, Indu and Jaya are unable to cope up with this situation, but they keep a terrified silence over it and this intensifies the sexual stalemate. Saru's silence against her sexual predicament only reveals the modern woman's dilemma—of knowing the psychological nature of the problem but hesitant to talk it out. She says, "I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I just endure." (*Dark*, 182) For, endurance is still the Indian woman's way and the discussion of sex in public still seems "indecent," like "removing your clothes in public." (*Dark*, 38)

The sexual impasse which has rocked the lives of the Deshpande heroines, along with their acute, unusual and unconventional sensitiveness, have compelled them to perceive and define matters of sex (such as "love," "marriage," etc.) from quite a different angle. Deshpande herself calls her creations as "thinking characters" whose new definitions of categories like love, marriage, sex are the feedback from the author's reading of the Western feminists. These definitions of love, marriage and sex give a typical female point of view to marital difficulties.

In all the three novels, there is an identical strand of thought viz. the realization of love as duly a physical instinct. It can be stated that Saru, Indu, and Jaya pursue the "shadows" of romance and love but ultimately arrive at the "roots" which is sex. Their way of looking at love/marriage only from a sexual perspective aligns them with the feminist movement, for, they define these categories only with sex/lust and give no importance to their familial connotations.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's experience com-

pels her to deny the existence of "love."

Love. . . . There was no such thing. . . . Only a need which both [man and woman] fought against, futilely, the very futility turning into the thing they called "love."
(65)

Hence, for her, "the code word of our age is neither love nor romance but sex. Fulfilment and happiness came, not through love alone but sex." (120) Indu in *Roots and Shadows* considers "love" as an "overworked word, overburdened by the weight one puts on it" and realizes that it is "another word for human contact." (97) In *That Long Silence*, Jaya analyzes the illusory nature of love: "Love is a myth, without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unendurable." (97) "Love" in Deshpande is not a "metaphysical concept" or a "canonization of emotion" as in Raja Rao; it is only a substitute for "sex."

Marriage too is viewed critically and condemned as an euphemism for lust. Marriage is nothing but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generation might continue." (*Roots*, 3) Indu also envisages it as a tragi-comic picture of "a cage with two animals glaring hatred at each other." (*Roots*, 67) In *That Long Silence*, marriage is likened to a children's game of playing "tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" which have now been substituted by labels like "doctor, engineer, government official, college lecturer." (91) Jaya also sees stagnation and hopelessness in marital life in her contention that marriage makes a woman "circumspect" and that "marriages never end, they cannot—they are a state of being." (127)

This kind of questioning and disparaging of the social institutions of love and marriage vindicates the spirit of Deshpande's heroines. It is an indication that the "passive feminine" has ceased to exist. Instead we have the highly intelligent woman who questions incessantly, confronts her problem inwardly, and analyzes it objectively. The result is that love/

marriage becomes meaningless and loses status as props of life. Sex alone seems to sustain the man-woman relationship as observed earlier. This is quite a shocking/startling idea but it is traced throughout Deshpande's novels. This shift from the "pativrata" image to that of the sexually-emancipated woman certainly marks the emergency of a new class of Indian women who are coming out of their conservative shells and are ready to accept the sexual/psychological realities of human life. It is really a sign of radical change occurring in the Indian sexual landscape.

The heroines of Deshpande resort to freedom not only intellectually but sexually too. For, their sexual starvation forces them to seek recourse to extra-marital sex. Here, Freud's terminology of the sexual instinct as "motor force of life" could help to understand the situation better. Since their sexual hunger is frustrated/repressed, the Deshpande women strive for expression through sexual relationship or affair with men other than their husbands. Saru's affairs with Boozie (her boss) and Padmakar Rao (her collegemate) seem to be temporary substitutes for her unfulfilled marital life. Indu represents the "new woman" who is on her way to an "erotic sexual utopia, where informed, mutually consenting individuals could fully realize themselves sexually without public opprobrium or private guilt." So, she is sexually satisfied with her affair with her cousin, Naren and does not feel guilty of it. Jaya's affair with her neighbour, Kamat, is an aborted one and she, like Saru, feels guilty of it. Hence, they are disillusioned with sex also. Thus sex is seen as a "disease" by Saru. (*Dark*, 62) Sex, or in other words, the relation of man to woman is seen as unnatural and breeding "only treachery, only deceit, only betrayal." (*Silence*, 158)

The solution given by Deshpande to this sexual predicament is ambiguous and argumentative and too vast to be analyzed in this article. Deshpande leaves the solution to the individual. The novelist's credo is "take refuge in the self" which means that the "self" is not metaphysical but psychological. In other words, Deshpande means that the heroines

will, in future, assert themselves; they will no longer allow their "she" to get deceased. By this assertion of the self, Deshpande certainly takes her heroines to the pole of feminism, though she may not have aimed at propounding any such "ism." And these women have certainly begun their protest as indicated by their sexual emancipation. The questions in debate are these: Is this sexual prolificacy an indication of a fast spreading "new morality?" Or is it a sign of the approaching sexual ostracism/promiscuity? It is true that while men have enjoyed sexual freedom from time immemorial, women have been hedged around by unbreakable taboos. But since the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande have broken them, how far will they be accepted? The question is open to debate and is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, the juxtaposition of two contrary opinions regarding this issue will suffice. The traditional stand taken by a reviewer of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* runs thus:

Too much verbalizing of man-woman relationship on the sexual plane . . . has threatened to destroy much of the sanctity attached to marriage, and the mystery of womanhood. ' "

Deshpande's answer to this critic reveals her modern outlook to the whole problem:

All human beings have a code of mystery in them . . . a writer tries to reveal that. . . . If you talk of menstruation, it's a biological aspect which every human being knows about. It doesn't mean that you're taking away the mystery of womanhood.*

It is this working of an individual dialectic of the sexual dilemma in her novels that makes Shashi Deshpande a modernist feminist. Besides, the sexual taboos—of sex as a "male feeling"; as "the sting of scorpion to be borne by women"—have occupied the Indian literary realm for a long

time. Very rarely was portrayed the theme of a woman desiring for sex or suffering because of sex. Now it is time for a change. Deshpande has certainly transcended those cultural times when sex was conspicuous by its non-mention. By giving sexual freedom to her heroines and by her reversal of the traditional triad ("love," "marriage," "sex"), Deshpande has transferred the Indian novel into its most controversial phase. Deshpande's women have certainly gone beyond the struggle of Tess who pulsates with conflicting desires, both instinctive and physical. Yet, they do not represent the typical Lawrentian woman who holds the sexual autonomy in her hands. And uncertainty lingers over the question of whether these Indian heroines will find a place of acceptance in a well-defined area of living. The solution to this sexual predicament too remains at crossroads and depends only on the individual's solving of her own problems.

NOTES

1. R. Mala, "Interview with Shashi Deshpande," "The Predicament of the Indian Woman: The Heroines in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Select Study," an unpublished M. Phil Dissertation, Pondicherry University, July 1989, p. 143.
2. S.M. Shanthi, "An Interview with Shashi Deshpande," Tradition Versus Modernity in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande, An unpublished M. Phil Dissertation, Madurai Kamaraj University, April 1989, p. 2.
3. R. Mala, "Interview with Shashi Deshpande," p. 139.
4. Quoted by Shantha Krishnaswamy, *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Ashish, 1984), p. 163.
5. A.A. Bill, trans., *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 553.
6. "The New Sexuality," *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, April 30th, 1989, p. 17.
7. Ragini Ramachandra, "Review of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*," *The Literary Criterion*, 21, Nos. 1

and 2 (1986), p. 120.

8. R. Mala, pp. 118-19.

9. C.S. Lakshmi, *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1984), p. 6.