

Marital Discord in Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande

J.U.GAYATHRI

Ph.D Research Scholar, Reg.No: 20112024012003
Aditanar College of Arts and Science, Tiruchendur
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli
Email: ilovemyfamily132312@gmail.com

Dr.A.PARVATHAVARTHINI

Research Supervisor
Assistant Professor of English, PG & Research Department of English
Aditanar College of Arts and Science, Tiruchendur
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli
Email: apvarthini@gmail.com

Abstract-Marriage is a social institution which is defined by laws, culture and religion. It permits a man and a woman to live in an interpersonal relationship. In India, marriage is considered to be compulsory before pursuing any sexual activity. Sex plays a crucial role in holding the relationship together. The closeness experienced during monogamous sex helps to maintain a healthy level of intimacy, love and belonging, which human beings need naturally. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian novelist, regards marriage as a serious and pragmatic commitment. Her women protagonists often cross caste or religious boundaries in their attempt to find them a perfect partner. In their efforts, they find themselves entrapped in the roles assigned to them by society. The present paper attempts to study marital discord with reference to three novels of Shashi Deshpande namely, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. Through her novels, she carefully expresses the frustration and disappointment of married women and their efforts to strike a balanced and mature relationship.

Key Words:-Monogamous, Pragmatic, Marital discord, Patriarchy, Subaltern

Marital Discord In Select Novels Of Shashi Deshpande

Marriage is a social institution which is defined by laws, culture and religion. It permits a man and a woman to live in an interpersonal relationship. As Swami Vivekananda remarks, in India it is thought of as a bond thrown by society round two people to unite them together for all eternity. Those two must wed each other, whether they will or not, in life after life. Each acquires half of the merit of the other. And if one seems in this life to have fallen hopelessly behind, it is for the other only to wait and beat time, till he or she catches up again! (423)

Nonetheless, he shunned human relationships in all forms. He expressed his sincere feelings on this subject in a letter to Marie Halboister, dated 25th July, 1897. He writes,

I wish I had nobody to love, and I were an orphan in my childhood. The greatest misery in my life has been my own people – my brothers and sisters and mother etc. Relatives are like deadly clogs to one's progress, and it is not a wonder that people will still go on to find new ones by marriage!!! (1681)

In India, marriage is considered to be compulsory before pursuing any sexual activity. Sex plays a crucial role in holding the relationship together. It promises the longevity of a relationship and ensures intimacy. It is more about establishing a connection between the mind and soul through the act. For men, it is connected to so many aspects like confidence, self-worth, connection and validation. The closeness experienced during monogamous sex helps to maintain a healthy level of intimacy, love and belonging, which human beings need naturally.

In India, most marriages are arranged. An ideal wife is groomed to sacrifice everything for the happiness of her family. She does not have the privilege to dissolve a marriage as most Indian women are financially dependent on their husbands. Since the entire social structure is built on the blueprint of the household unit, the patriarchal system does not allow divorce. Divorce is still

considered taboo in several parts of India. Moreover, the social structure in India places a lot of emphasis on children. Most Indian women are conditioned to believe that they inherently possess the virtue to compromise unconditionally. As Anandalaxmi writes,

The supremacy of the male is so well established that the average Indian is surprised to even be queried about it. Whatever the ecology of the social group, even in communities where the women may be breadwinners, the male is considered superior...the birth of a son gives a woman status. (31) Marriage is turned into an endurance test and Indians measure a successful marriage in terms of its longevity. This is the reason why most couples stay together even when they grow cold and indifferent. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian novelist, regards marriage as a serious and pragmatic commitment. Her novels present women who are modern and educated. Her protagonists often cross caste or religious boundaries in their attempt to find them a perfect partner. In spite of all their efforts to smooth the complexities of man-woman relationship, they find themselves entrapped in the roles assigned to them by society. They are physically abused by their husbands who expect their women to be mere subordinates. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?",

Between patriarchy and imperialism subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third-World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (65)

Shashi Deshpande views marriage as a very strange thing and an intensely private affair, where men and women try not to cross the lines drawn for them. The present paper attempts to study the marital discord with reference to three novels of Shashi Deshpande namely, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. Through her novels, she carefully expresses the frustration and disappointment of married women and their efforts to strike a balanced and mature relationship.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is about Sarita, who tries to escape her past through her marriage. From childhood, she is accused by her mother for the death of Dhruva, her brother. Her mother's words, "you did it, you did this, you killed him, why didn't you die?" (191), continues to haunt her throughout her life. Sarita becomes aware of the growing changes and demands of her body. She is thrilled as she wonders, "Man and woman, male and female, how exciting..." (123). Determined to become a doctor, Sarita joins college where she meets Manohar. Bewitched by his looks and charms, she marries him, in spite of her parents' disapproval. Being a doctor, she is respected more than her husband and this is where the rift begins. He is annoyed by the public response his wife receives and his salary is also much less than her. He finds himself a defeated man. Engulfed by envy and anger, he starts tormenting Sarita in the only possible way. Being sexually assaulted, Sarita embraces her pain thus,

The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body. And above me a face I could not recognize. Total non comprehension, complete bewilderment, paralyzed me for a while. Then I began to struggle. But my body, hurt and painful, could do nothing against the fearful strength which overwhelmed me. (112)

Sarita could have fought back her husband. But she chooses to remain silent. When she goes back to her father's home to escape the brutality of her husband, she explains the reason for her endurance thus, "I couldn't fight back. I couldn't shout or cry, I was so afraid that the children in the next room would hear. I could do nothing. I could never do anything. I just endure" (201). Sex, to Sarita, is an expression of love. But Manohar's ego turns it into a dirty act and repulses Sarita. Shashi Deshpande analyses the reason for this marital discord thus,

Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That's important very important, balance it's symbolic of the truth. A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he is 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage. (137)

Roots and Shadows is the first novel of Shashi Deshpande, though it was published after *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *If I Die Today*. In this novel, Shashi Deshpande narrates the story of Indu, an

individual who tries to fulfil her roles as a wife and a writer. She is hopeful that her marriage with Jayant will bring her the freedom and happiness and lead her out of the bondage in her ancestral home. Unfortunately, she is denied the freedom she deserves both before and after marriage. As Simone de Beauvoir, in 'Introduction' to the book *The Second Sex*, rightly comments, "Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations" (9).

The realization that she will never be free in this society ruled by patriarchy forces Indu to say, "But twice in my life I had thought I was free. Once when I left home as a young girl. And the second time, when, once again I left the family and returned to Jayant. Both times I found out how wrong I was. New bonds replace the old: that is all." (36)

This eventually makes her put up a charming and complacent expression and also teaches her to screen her thoughts and her true self from Jayant. In spite of her rebellious nature she tries hard to conform to the image of the ideal wife. She is quite disturbed by the love she has for husband and her total surrender to him pains and frightens her. Marital discord surfaces in her life when she is betrayed by Jayant during her professional crisis. He does not support her in her decision to resign from her magazine. His lack of effort even to understand her situation triggers a hiatus in their relationship. Jayant, who is not interested in having children, postpones it saying that they lack the resources to nurture a family with children.

Indu is emotionally exhausted with the strain of adhering to the whims of Jayant and maintaining a happy face. Her disappointments and frustrations are evident when she says,

"I've learnt my lesson now. And so I pretend I'm passive. And unresponsive. I am still and dead... Not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife. But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately and is ashamed of it." (92)

Later, in her ancestral home and away from Jayant, she realizes her needs and desires in her marital relationship. She understands herself better and decides not to be consumed by her love for Jayant. In spite of her physical relationship with Naren, she decides to focus on her marital life. Knowing fully well that her marriage is a failure she decides to return to her husband and live her life in her own terms. Shashi Deshpande, in this novel, concentrates on the marital discord that operates at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels.

In *That Long Silence* Jaya, the protagonist faces several problems both as a child and as a married woman. Her father names her Jaya – a name that represents victory. After marriage she is given the name Suhashini by her husband Mohan. It means submissive, lovely, meek, passive and devoted. Marriage becomes the destiny of Jaya, as she, like other young girls, thinks that "it was not love, but marriage that was destiny waiting for us" (19). She often remembers Vanita Mami, who constantly speaks about the role of a husband. She compares the husband to "a sheltering tree. Without the tree you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable...And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies" (32).

Mohan marries Jaya not out of love but because of her ability to speak English fluently. He proudly admits this to Jaya, as he says, "You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukaku's house, you were talking to brother Dinkar....I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you" (90). Her marital life fails to amuse her and her frustrations are visible through her words, "We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us" (95). As a husband, Mohan crushes Jaya's urge for an identity and limits her to a confined space. As a man, he destroys both the woman and writer in Jaya. Like Shashi Deshpande's other protagonists, Jaya too suffers in silence and wonders, "First there's love, then there's sex – that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan I had realized that it could so easily be the other way around" (95).

Mohan is happy to be the husband of a writer but when he reads one of Jaya's stories he is infuriated. The story is about "a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body" (144). He assumes that people may think that he is the man portrayed in the story. Though Jaya knows that there is no truth in Mohan's assumption, she does not argue with him. Instead, she stops writing. She expresses her anguish thus,

Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced. I had done him wrong and I had stopped writing after that. Perhaps, if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his heart, and I had not been able to counter that, I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking scared – scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had my marriage. (144)

The sexual relationship between Mohan and Jaya is evident when she says, “We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us” (95). Her sexual encounters with her husband lack any sort of affection and she finds it extremely mechanical. Every physical encounter she has with Mohan only stresses the fact that he is totally indifferent to her desires. She is consumed by a sense of loneliness and sounds desperate as she says,

But, lying there my body still warm and throbbing from the contact with his, it had come to me in one awful moment – that I was alone. The contact, the coming together, had been not only momentary but wholly illusory as well. We had never come together, only our bodies had done that. I had begun to cry then, desperately, silently, scared that I would wake Mohan up, trying desperately to calm myself. (98)

Marital discord which appears to be a dominant theme in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence* is a result of the discriminations prevalent in the Indian society. Though biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeable fixed entities, such as those assigned to women, especially in the Indian society, some people still hold to the idea that a woman needs a man and that marriage makes her feel complete. Men feel threatened when they find their women better than them. Many men, especially Indian men, decline to accept the fact that women can be their equals. They refuse to regard women as autonomous beings and this leads to marital discord. Shashi Deshpande's novel captures the true state of Indian marriages where the woman has the virtue to fix what has been destroyed by the man.

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