

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ASSERTIVE WOMEN IN THE SELECT WORKS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND NANCY HUSTON

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Abstract

This research paper critically and culturally examines the strong female voices in the select novels of Shashi Deshpande and Nancy Huston in the light of various feministic strains like existential, radical and extreme feminisms. These two female novelists delineate the assertive and powerful women characters. The women mentioned in their select novels are educated and aware of their social, cultural and economical conditions. They remove the shell of silence, fear and darkness from their lives due to their struggle for their individual freedom, space and identity. The present research paper throws light on how these women protagonists from the select work become the powerful and assertive voices in a male driven society. Irrespective of many challenges in the patriarchal world for women in course of their lives, they achieve the steady place for them with own stances.

Key Words: Comparative analysis, feminism, agony, assertive voices and stances and women empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Two towering and giant women writers Shashi Deshpande from India and Nancy Huston from Canada write about women realistically and critically examine women's conditions and empowerment in their respective socio-cultural milieu in their select works. This research paper has incorporated the powerful way of transforming women from silence and suffering to self-realization and self empowerment with the means of artistic skills and their own stances.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the condition of women in a patriarchal society in the East and the West.
- To study the women in the light of various feministic strains in two different cultural spectrums.
- To explore the various means of women's transformation women as assertive voices from silence and suffering.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This research study is done in the light of various feministic strains and research methodologies. Descriptive, historical, analytical and feministic approaches have been employed to assess the conditions and problems of women in a patriarchal society for empowerment. With the help of these approaches, the paper tries to focus on the means of women empowerment drastically in a male driven society.

SHASHI DESHPANDE

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980) is novel written by Shashi Deshpande. The novel explores the trauma of a middle-class working educated woman who feels trapped in the male-dominated society. The main protagonist of this novel is woman Sarita. She has childhood scars. Her fear of losing herself in the dark mysterious universe is dispelled by her understanding and realization that *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. If one can believe in oneself and if one accepts one's responsibility one can get the liberation and independence even after remaining within the family and by performing her duties towards the family. At the beginning, the protagonist Sarita is a young lady, with lots of questions in her mind about societal norms and tries to challenge them which reduce women to mute sufferers in a patriarchal society. The woman protagonist faces many challenges like the biased attitudes of her parents towards her and discrimination of males against her. It is the resistance and courage and of the protagonist that help her to move ahead in her course of life. Her desire for selfhood and her passion for meaningful and independent life make her a doctor and assertive woman.

The message which Shashi Deshpande finally conveys through her female character Sarita from *Dark Holds No Terrors* is that a woman's emancipation lays neither in suffering quietly like a fatalist nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel. She must draw upon her inner potentials, which her education has given her and it brings about reconciliation between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity. Though the female protagonist undergoes traumatic experiences in her childhood and in her marriage she decides not to protest against the oppression openly by breaking her family ties but realizing her potentials and striking for the harmony of family. Sarita protests against the oppression silently but she is not ready to take a bold step

like having divorce because she values the family and familial bonds. So, she patches up her relation with her husband Manohar. By contrast, Saru is capable of managing the male characters to satisfy her needs, wishes fulfilled. She can be tagged a woman of self- sacrifice, patience and perseverance. These are the virtues of Indian women. Hence, she emerges as a victorious character by striking a chord of balance in her personal desire and familial responsibilities. This is a virtue of Indian women. *Dark Hold No Terrors* is a critical novel about the social institution and social roles. It is a feministic text. Man- woman relationship is the main motif of this research study. The novelist puts stress on realizing and utilizing the intrinsic abilities of women to overcome all their challenges. The sense of fulfillment and the realization bring empowerment in her and transform her life. Here, one can say that the protagonist, in a real sense, acquires a room of her own for her identity and success.

That Long Silence (1988) is another novel by Shashi Deshpande. This novel is basically a critique of marriage, relationship and family in Indian context. It is a story of female protagonist Jaya Kulkarni, a mother of teenage children. She is unsuccessful as a writer. Her familial life is disturbed when her husband is suspected of business malpractices. The novel is a vivid description of a woman trying to erase a long silence, which began in her childhood. The novel traces the life of the narrator, Jaya, who is married to Mohan and has given birth to his two children. Jaya, a writer, gives up everything to take up “her only profession” – being Mohan’s wife. Her husband is a conservative man who wants her to be silent and passive in the story. He even dislikes her writing. Their marriage turns weak and bitter soon due to their ideological differences in them and selfish nature of Mohan. The novelist achieves this by introducing the peripheral crisis of Mohan being implicated in business fraud at his job. The steps he takes to save his job inadvertently includes his family’s moving out of their permanent residence in Churchgate to the narrator’s brother, Makarandmama’s flat in Dadar.

Jaya eventually reclaims her life by getting back to writing after facing the double trauma of Mohan leaving her and her son, Rahul, going missing. The novel is concerned with women’s quest for self, an exploration into female psyche, and an understanding of the mysteries of life and women’s place in it. Deshpande refutes the notion of a woman as an object to be used and abused. The protagonist breaks her long silence in order to make a balance in her family

being a responsible wife and caring mother. The novel *That Long Silence* marks the journey of the protagonist's liberation and empowerment with her means of writing and self-stand. Thus, she turns out to be an assertive voice and she attains her selfhood.

NANCY HUSTON

Slow Emergencies (1996) is novel written by Canadian writer Nancy Huston. It deals with the universal story of a woman who must choose between her life as a choreographer, and as a wife and a mother. It depicts the two distinct realms of experience of its characters: the professional world of dance and the private world of home and family of its protagonist named Lin Lhomond. The novel describes the emotional turmoil of its protagonist and her family. The novelist focuses on the issues of marriage, relationships, divorce and adjustment.

The novelist uses many references of fairy tales and folklore in the book. The female protagonist of the novel is the wife of a professor named Derek who works at a small New England college. They have two children named Angela and Marina. Lin is in a dilemma between her two worlds - artistic passion and family responsibility. She takes divorce from her husband for pursuing her career in dance. She pursues her career with unrestrained passion and purpose, and she abandons her family for her career. However, even as she becomes one of the world's most renowned dancers and choreographers, Lin is haunted by the thoughts and recurrent dreams about her children. She feels guilty of abandoning her children. Her husband and two young daughters suffer emotionally and mentally due to the choice, Lin has made. Though she becomes independent, assertive and successful by leaving her family yet she feels depressed.

Another novel by Nancy Huston is *Infrared* (2010) which focuses on the growth of the female protagonist in terms of her artistic desires and developments. The novel explores the complex family relationships of the protagonist and her feministic attitude of fulfilling her artistic aim of life. The protagonist of the novel is Rena Greenblatt, a 45-year-old photographer, who is frank in expressing her desires for men as both photographic subjects, objects of beauty and vulnerability. She makes her living as a photographer, working strictly in infrared film, allowing her to pursue what lies beneath life's surfaces. She, who supports her family, is a creative, bold and courageous and woman and artist in

the story. But unfortunately, her childhood was marked by pain. Her memories of childhood reflect Rena's difficult upbringing. Her chequered personality emanates from her bad experiences in family and in society. She is abnormal in her sexual life too. The absence of the mother in the family has forced her to suffer more in her life. Still she is able to cope up with all this due to her career as a photographer. The novel points out how the sexuality of the protagonist is marred by her childhood. The novelist fearlessly investigates the links between the protagonist and her family intimacies in a very subtle manner in the novel. The protagonist has found her strength to build a career as a photographer. In spite of her distressed childhood and many failed marriages, she has achieved success as a photographer. She achieves a great status in her life due to her courage and power of art. Her profession of photographer is a symbol of her empowerment and independence. With the help of it, she fulfills her dreams and becomes more assertive and powerful woman in the end. In praise of Rena, Shakti Kapoor and Rattan write, "Her profession of photographer is a symbol of her empowerment from the jaws of patriarchal society" (*Bohal Shodh Manjusha* 142).

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

This present research paper critically and socially highlights the similarities and differences found in the study of the women protagonists in the select study from the East and the West. Man- woman relationship is the main focus of this research paper. Both the novelists Shashi Deshpande and Nancy Huston minutely depict women and their predicament and acknowledge their assertive voices in the study. Novelist like Deshpande, in her select works projects even the men characters are the victims of the traditional roles. She carefully studies the delicate texture of Indian middle-class family, where the female protagonists are highly qualified, courageous, and strong. But they struggle to cope up with the existing norms of the society. She makes them reach a sensible compromise within the family bonds because she rejects a separatist stance.

The women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande and Nancy Huston from their select works emerge as powerful women by putting aside their stereotypical roles and rebel against patriarchy and its repressive forces. In a wise manner, they break the societal rigid traditions and they appear to resist the patriarchal notion of male superior and stereotypical roles. They turn out to be the liberated

voices of women. Therefore, one can say these women protagonists are tagged and called as pragmatic protagonists. Women's emotions are centred in the works of Shashi Deshpande whereas women's body is central to the works of Nancy Huston.

Women protagonists from Nancy Huston are those who believe in breaking the societal norms for establishing their individual identity and turning into assertive voices. They take participation in public activities to liberate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy: Lin as a dancer and choreographer performs many public shows and Rena as an artist involves in numerous intimate relationships with many men to liberate herself. These women protagonists get the ample sphere of their individual freedom. The following quote is fit to throw light on the women characters of Nancy Huston as follows:

New woman is more open to experiences of sex without qualms, be premarital, extramarital, queer or even incestuous. Whether or not this trend is crucial to liberation is another question but is certainly shows the march from silence to assertion, from speech to action.(qtd. in *Writing Resistance* 26)

Thus, it is seen that Nancy Huston's women characters are endowed with the artistic power or artistic skills like dance (choreography) and photography (infrared). Fantasy is employed by her in her works as a symbol of women freedom and happiness. While dream is employed by Shashi Deshpande in her works, referring to women's liberation.

Shashi Deshpande depicts the limited domestic spheres of her women characters. They sacrifice their own identity for the welfare of family. In a steady way, they move from silence to assertion. As a woman novelist Shashi lays emphasis on women inner vision and potentials to achieve autonomy. As it is said that, "assert yourself, you don't have to crawl before him, do you?" (*The Binding Vine* 80) Women acquire the status of breadwinners in the family from subordinates. For instance, Jaya is a writer by profession, besides a house wife. It is a tool to provide her with recognition. As it is said, "Writing is a way through which women maintain a sense of intellectual and even spiritual community with another" (Bande 29).

A unique thing is that the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande and Nancy Huston have power to resist against the patriarchal codes imposed upon them and remove darkness and fear from them. It is said that feminism is a weapon of

women to resist patriarchy and a way to find their assertive voices in them. The words of these protagonists show their resilient resistance against man-made societal codes. They assess how women can become self-sufficient. The resistance of Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists to patriarchy is mild and moderate one.

All the female protagonists become find the sense of independence and happiness when they respond to the call of their inner potentials in the end of the stories.

Women in Shashi Deshpande novels are either shrewd or manipulative, selfishly, guarding their little worlds, or too feeble and ineffective to act according to the prescribed roles. The traditional, idealized, self-effacing, kind and affectionately devoted mothers are missing from her narratives. While the women protagonists of Nancy Huston are bold, sexual, frank and more individualistic. All these female protagonists speak of their profession, power, independence and individual identity. Their courage, resilience and fortitude in the struggle against all odds make them independent women, fighters and against all kinds of oppression and patriarchal codes. *That Long Silence* is a critical novel about the social institution like marriage and gender roles. In patriarchal society, independent and successful women are generally seen as virtual threats to males. What distinguishes Jaya and Saru from the Western women like Rena and Lin is their undefeatable spirit and staunch faith in the harmony and progress of family. They can bear pain and problems for their family. They cannot be broken and shattered. Jaya and Saru epitomize the women of faith and strength for family. On the other hand, Rena and Lin are the women of individual will and freedom. The first person narrative is used by both the novelists in the select study to depict the conditions of women artistically and realistically.

In the Western society, women attain their individual space of freedom and personal ambition even by abandoning their families. The suffering of women in the taken up study of Shashi Deshpande and Nancy Huston stems from two things: the presence of rigid and repressive forces of patriarchy and second the passive attitude of their husbands towards them. One common thing in all female protagonists is that they become powerful and assertive in the end. The following things: education, skills and bold decisions and courageous actions and above all their powerful professions such as doctor, writer, dancer and

photographer convert them into the powerful and successful women in the stories. All these female protagonists speak of their profession, power, independence and individual identity. Their courage, resilience and fortitude in the struggle against all odds make them independent women, fighters and against all kinds of oppression and patriarchal codes.

Both the novelists write about their own experiences of life. There seems to be the inclusion of the autobiographical details of the novelists in their select works. The powerful female protagonists appear in the select novels and they become self-independent due to their struggle and search for individual identity. These all women seem to pick up and follow the precious piece of suggestion from Simone de Beauvoir to become assertive and independent:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have independent existence and she will continue nonetheless to exist for him also mutually recognized each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other. (*The Second Sex* 686)

TO SUM UP

This research shows that the conditions and problems of women are more or less same in the East and the West. There is identity crisis for women in the both patriarchal societies. They become helpless in the patriarchal society which does not offer them individual freedom and equal status in the beginning of the stories. But in the end, they achieve selfhood due to their perseverance and virtues. Due to inequality in their socio-eco status, women suffer from a number of problems: suppression, violence, identity crisis pathetically. They are compelled to undergo various traumatic experiences. To overcome all these problems, women have to struggle a lots and they need to embrace many approaches for their empowerment and individual freedom. All the female protagonists in this research paper are educated, capable and professional women. Their resistance to patriarchy and existing social and cultural roles is note worthy. Their valuable resistance to patriarchy and realization of their inner potentials probe them the women of worth and assertion. Both the writers focus on women's problems and offer many ways to overcome them for women in course of their life. Here, one has to understand that women from Shashi Deshpande choose a middle way to establish their individual identity and success whereas women characters from Nancy Huston crave for individual

freedom and liberation by going against their families. They attain their individual liberation and success by leaving their families whereas the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are they who make many compromises for their personal freedom and family. Here, it is studied that women from the two different cultural spectrums choose different approaches and means of their liberation and empowerment in the select study. And it is quite important mentioning here that they may be right at their own places and circumstances for their stances for their liberation and empowerment.

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