

DECIPHERING THE DOMESTIC LABYRINTH OF EXISTENTIAL WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Machismo, backward practices and domestic catastrophe are primordial issues to be dealt with an open eye. The paper “Epitome of an Existential women: with reference to the select novels of Shashi Deshpande”, critically explores and analyses how the protagonists seek identity as an autonomous self with fortitude and dignity through metamorphosis and evolution, eventually probing into the themes of existentialism. The fear of rejection in a new environment fetters the women in an intangible emotional situation and this stimulate the tormented women to find their own voice thereby continuously strive in search of self-definition. These Existential Women experiences the journey towards self-exploration by easing themselves from the tangles of their troubles and torment, they aspire and always rise triumphant, not vanquished and they emerge rejuvenated not refurbished which symbolizes the protagonist’s attempt to forge for herself a new identity laced with wisdom.

Keywords: Existentialism, Insightful intellectual, self-independent in discerning their identity and distinctiveness, human psyche

Introduction

Deshpande is, at her best, a writer with immense subtlety and also a rare sensitivity about men and women trapped in relationships and situation. Her works reflect an ongoing process of dealing with life's conflicts and compromises, resolutions and irresolution, ironies and affirmations, triumphs and tragedies, and so on. Even though her writing is extremely Indian in its frame work, the themes honor no borders. It is an established truth that she used to concentrate only on women, but it is the human being that prowls behind her characters. It becomes impossible to ignore the shades of these characters as seen to be cast across her plot. There are myriad facets of loneliness in life, and Deshpande has explored many of these factors in her short story collection. All of these are imbibed within her fragile frame and it profusely displays her creativity. Amorphous thoughts and thought-provoking issues portrayed with a defying captivity through simple yet powerful words pull the strings of her effortless prose and her indomitable spirit. Deshpande's protagonists always have a constant quest for identity which keeps haunting them. Their struggle is majorly accentuated mainly due to their frustrating experiences born of the prohibitive and inhibitive nature of the Indian Patriarchal Society.

This paper delves into the trials and tribulations of women namely Saru, Jaya and Sumi as portrayed by Deshpande in her novels.....Deshpande analyzes a number of issues which leads to silence the protagonists, their roots and factors contributing towards the doom of who they actually are. These novels are undoubtedly a raw portrayal of Indian womanhood in agony and distress; also they labour under an obsession of compulsive pre-occupied affliction with a woman's quest for selfhood. Deshpande's protagonists Saru, Jaya and Sumi invariably undertake an arduous journey which transports them from a state of self-effacement to the elevation of one's self realization.

Saru is a successful doctor during the day time, however, at night she becomes a scared and trapped prey in the hands of her husband and this routine life becomes the tale of matrimony on the rocks. Manohar, her husband, is an English Teacher in a small college. The novel begins with Saru returning to her father's home after fifteen years, a place which she had once proclaimed that she would never come back to. She is no longer able to bear with the carnal cruelty and perversion of her husband. The rest of the novel is an account of what Saru reminiscences. Her aspirations and dreams seem to face a choking sensation; the nights are a terrible nightmare. Loneliness becomes an important aspect of her livelihood and she seems to be leading a dual life. For the world, she is a competent doctor, but in reality she is nothing but a tormented woman. She goes through quite an unconventional disposition of life which is only a pretense and deceit in its entirety.

The novel dramatizes the protagonist's response and reaction towards the traditional concept that everything in a girls' life is shaped or directed towards the sole motive and purpose of pleasing a male. The journey of life is not a luxurious path for her, but it has had its very own share of the impediments of existentialism too. Since her childhood she had to toil hard to accomplish what she wanted. As her mother is resolved to be against fulfilling her each and every wish, she leaves to Bombay to study medicine against her mother's will, where she marries a man outside her caste. In spite of the fact that Saru marries Manohar opposing her parent's desire, she does not feel any grief or regret at this detachment but her traumatic childhood background still seems to threaten her. She hardly believes that Manu is her rescuer, her passionate hero who rescues her from the horrible maternal home. And on the other hand, she had always felt insecure in her parent's home, her marriage to Manu meant to be encompassing the altitude of that sort of love and security which she had always yearned for.

After her marriage, Manohar and Saru begin to travel not only in varied directions but even in contradictory directions. There is nothing but an understated divergence with Manohar for he was a person who had relished a happy childhood. He is a man of fervor, a creative writer, a public speaker, director of

plays and an inspiring and admired personality cult. Ever since his marriage with the novel's central character, the protagonist Saru, he begins to enjoy a superior financial command and respectable social status. Both of them also enjoyed a harmonious relationship until the point of time when Saru was only his wife. But when she turns out to be a renowned lady doctor, disaster begins in her marital life. She recalls, "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (42). Shubha Tiwari states that,

Helplessly entangled in the racial and social prejudices prevalent. Saru is conscious of the fact that she is superior to her husband in her qualifications, social status, mental caliber and in many other respects.

But in her heart of hearts she repels against it. Being an unwanted child to her parents she has inherited a psychology which does not allow her to displease anyone. (91)

Saru comes to realize the fact that a woman must remain a step behind her husband. She decides to return to her father's home as an emotionless being. She is full of remorse since she had to desert her parents to marry Manohar. She feels that she has inferred injustice on her mother, husband and her children as well. She analyses the dark corners of her soul and introspects herself. She also begins to judge her life and relationships. Her authentic self emerges out when she unveils her mind through memories and dreams. She attempts to get over with her mental fears as the dark holds no terrors. She comprehends that terrors are only lying within self all the time. Saru has finally come to understand at last that somewhere the proneness of her own self has conceded the society and the public's opinions to vanquish her life. As the plot progresses, the protagonist presumptuously awakens to face and revolt against the greatest terror of her life that is her husband. She finally determines to take charge of her own life by herself. Saru, towards the end of the novel, is finally liberated from the fear of the darkness in her life.

The varied experience of Jaya in *That Long Silence*, the protagonist as a woman and human being aids to explore and discuss the fact that women are no longer a toy to play or possess. As the novel depicts, Jaya suffers mutely in the name of family and its prejudices. Marriage is still a social necessity, where women pursue security, and men claim responsibility and authority. As Eva Figes in *Patriarchal Attitudes* claims that:

Dominance is the keynote in an analysis of the man-woman relationship where the male attributes are ones associated with mental thought and positive activity, at the same time as the woman is regarded as essentially passive, her role to be the respectable of male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species. (125)

Ensnared as this by the Indian family system, Jaya is deprived of her genuineness and credibility of a human being. She fabricates herself according to the wishes of Mohan. Jaya is forced to abdicate her job which she has cherished and wanted to preserve. She also had long cherished the desire to adopt a baby and nourish the same which was again ruled out of question yielding to Mohan's domination. Jaya even goes to the extent of renouncing her passion for creative writing for the sake of her insensitive husband. During the early years of her marriage, she was on the brink of acquiring some merit. Jaya does not want her marriage to be disturbed or damaged and hence she changes her style of writing. Mohan's words and reaction seemed to be very disturbing and imploring as strong enough to chop the creative instinct, and the writer in Jaya even before it could make an attempt.

On the other hand, Jaya diverted her attention towards trendy and attractive writing and started to write under the pseudonym of Sita for a women's magazine. This pseudonym itself is inferential in the fact that in Indian mythology, Sita symbolizes total self-surrender. Sita and Savitri were strong and

individualistic women but their energies were aimed not towards self-liberation but only towards the welfare of their husbands. Jaya has outlined her life according to the wish of Mohan and loses her own self and identity. Jaya fails to distinguish her integrity and does not enjoy her own individuality. She sees herself as someone's daughter, wife and mother, thereby only shunning her own identity. Since the day one of her marriage with Mohan, Jaya begins to conclude that Mohan is never receptive of Jaya as an individual and renames her as Suhasini, meaning soft spoken, obedient and ready to serve as against her actual name of Jaya which means victorious.

After her marriage, Jaya is materialized as an object by her husband who in every chance is always dominated. Jaya's world is turned upside down. But this brings out her abandonment. In fact, Mohan always portrayed and introduced her to others, mainly their acquaintances, as a small time writer, basically focused on writing for children's magazines. When Mohan leaves the house, Jaya picks up her pen and begins to write about her unbroken elongated silence, by giving an account of all that had been happening in her life since the beginning up to the present. When she resolves to articulate her very own adversity in her writing, she visualizes that she will be liberated from the clasps of her long suffering. But this was not what happened. Jaya, the protagonist, is an injured right from her childhood, which continues even after her marriage.

In the process of self-divination through writing, Jaya comes to perceive herself as a failed writer because when she had begun to continue writing, her stories had been rejected for lack of genuine feelings which she, in reality, had chosen to lay aside. Estrangement or alienation is the word that would best describe Jaya's position. Her ingenious urge and prolific zeal free her from cramped domestic and socio-economic commitments. All her stories were being refused and hence she stops writing. Jaya during the process of introversion comes in terms with the awareness of the prerequisites of the cynical reasoning and self-detachment. Jaya always anticipated a variation and she had always lamented for a catastrophe or any misfortune that would be able to trail her out of the sluggish work day. Her self-analysis conceded her own defects and she sequentially prepped herself for encountering how things actually are in reality.

This discloses the actuality that Jaya is encountering existential predicament which is nothing but the outcome of human nothingness. Finally Jaya by self-scrutiny and quest decides to give voice to the varied roles in her life. She finally emerges to become the real Jaya, the champion when she surmounts her own barriers and apprehensions, to bring the hidden self to the front and realizes how her voice is silenced with respect to coherently expressing her experiences. In her retrospection she is alive to the constraints of her own self expression. The character's journey uncovers the boundaries inferred on a woman's power to compete with freedom in the society.

A Matter of Time as a novel travels further beyond the concerns of feminism that leads by itself to the question of existentialism. Self-pity not being the solution, it is the significant truth that the novel leads us into. If the situation has to shift from despair to hope, then it is possible only through adapting to the techniques of self-inspection and attempting to search within one's self, and only with the help of courage and perseverance. The novel *A Matter of Time* is directed in the ambience of an urban, middle-class family of Gopal and Sumi along with their three daughters- Arundhati (Aru), Charulata (Charu) and Seema. Failed marriage forms the core essence of the narrative of the novel. Sumi's husband Gopal, who is a Professor at a University, paces out abruptly from his twenty year old marriage. He quits his job and nearly all of his substantial ownerships. Nothing seems to be the reason for this occurrence. There is no other woman interfering in the relationship between Gopal and Sumi. It becomes a question of withdrawal in all simple reasons. Gopal longs to recede into his own self and attempts to look for his liberation from the bindings of marriage and the restrictions it has imposed. Sumi takes no efforts to convince him or even wants to attempt to do so, while others condemn and strive to bring Gopal back by reasoning with him. Gopal's abandonment

is illustrated by Keerthi Ramachandra in these words, “He waits for Sumi’s reaction, but within moments both realize that there’s nothing more to be said he leaves as quietly as he had entered” (21).

The responsibility, demands and obligations of motherhood further complicates the stiffness and constriction encountered by them as deserted women. It is not an easily manageable task that can be handled by a woman all by herself. The title of the novel *A Matter of Time* by itself is suggestive of the fact that the past is still and existentially real as against the present which already seems to be existentially real and the future which is existentially possible. It is significant that Deshpande attributes to a matter of time, which is not something privileged for that matter, future over the past. The past seems to remain as an integral part of the protagonist’s family, which now consists of Sumi and her three daughters along with her parents. These women seemed to be governed with designs of pattern which is similar in nature.

It is based on this awareness that Sumi decides to defend her own self and begins to rebel by not succumbing to grief and begins to adapt to the new phase of life. Though she is being forced into this plight of situation, the society on the other hand shames. Sumi is shamed and condemned by the society stating that it is due to her inefficiency and failing to persuade her husband to be interested in and stay at home. Sumi comes into the picture as an insensitive, uneventful and weak woman until the moment she picks up the thread and begins to showcase her earnestness and autonomy. Sumi is entirely inclined towards moving on and get on track with her life, and the quest for discovering the purpose of her existence. She does not flounder

er herself with self-pity and explores to find her own destiny. . It is now re-birth for Sumi rising from the embers of her horrifying past. In the meanwhile, Gopal’s abandonment reverses Sumi to infiltrate into the world of creative writing. While writing a play *The Gardener’s Son* for the purpose of staging it during the event of a school function, Sumi begins to feel so good and contented on its success all of a sudden. The very success of the play *The Gardener’s Son* prompts her to write one another play, inspired by an epic character. She adjudicates to write her next play about Surpanakha, who is the demon sister of King Ravana, as the central character.

For a significant point of time, Sumi is seen to be prosperous in achieving a significant amount of personal independence. She begins to pursue teaching and writes plays for which she earns applause, and also equips herself to drive a scooter, in a society where very few women are seen adapting to the skill of driving and taking the seat of a driver. She prepares herself and adorns her heart to be prepared to confront the future. Sumi seems to proclaim an essentially optimistic vision towards life. She exhibits strength and maturity even during the calamity of adversity. She never wants to culminate her life like her mother. Sumi seems to be evolved as a strong and independent woman by progressively liberating herself from the clutches of absolute isolation and sourness as connected with the invisible strings of pressure from patriarchy and responsibilities of the family. She comes to experience the upheaval and strain of a deserted wife and the distress of a lonely partner as a result of Gopal’s desertion. The novel recounts on how the pivotal character reaches the stage of fulfillment and self-sufficiency with determination, virtue, responsibility and a free and indomitable spirit, beyond the agony of her husband abandoning her.

An examination of Saru’s character authenticates that the protagonist Saru is unquestionably an existential character. Sinking into the ocean of memories and challenging to relive her past only exaggerates her problems of endurance and diminishes her strength. Saru surrenders to the development of purgation and determines to lead a life by facing the reality. Saru feels anguished because of her freedom being condemned by her husband. She is trapped by the nightmare of her husband even when she is awake. She feels fettered by her husband and loses her freedom. This results in the consequence of an anguished soul. Sartre also states that anguish leads to self examination and realization which in turn paves way for the freedom of choice. Similarly, Saru introspects herself while she is at her parents’ house. She explores herself and finds the fact that freedom is within herself and she feels that the dark which has held her is no more.

As of in the case of Jaya, is a tormented soul confined within the walls of domesticity. She feels marooned at her own house and is restricted from living a life of her own, She just survives rather than living. Thus she lives a miserable absurd life. Her life is meaningless devoid of her identity. An absurd life is logically possible but humanly impossible. When her husband leaves her she realizes the absurdity and there begins the meaning of her life. She brings meaningfulness by her writing and understands that life doesn't begin and end within walls of domesticity. She breaks her long silence and speaks through her writing, thereby awakening the champion within her inner self.

Sumi a pivotal character lives a pitiable life with no goal and meaning. When her husband leaves her, though she falls momentarily, she still manages to get up with sheer enthusiasm and turns her life a new leaf. As, it is stated, resilience is not just resisting but learning to live. Sumi learns to live and in fact lives through her writing even after her death. Her life is all about the matter of time. It is true that she didn't have enough tie to prove herself. She understands her potential and uses it in the midst of adversity. Though she has been surrounded with darkness she knew that there is always a light ahead of her and has always moved towards it. She not only resists her misery and torments but also learns to live.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the paper is the result of an attempt to analyze the protagonists not as solitary weepers, but on the contrary, to make decisions, perform actions and be ready to face the consequences, irrespective of whatever they are and aspire to be strongly ambitious to redefine themselves, and not be confined and entrapped in the name of domesticity by probing into the themes of existentialism and to relate it with the novels of Deshpande. From the above mentioned observations, it can indisputably be assured that all the three protagonists of Deshpande put up with existential Anguish, Absurdity and Resilience. The three insightful intellectuals Sarita, Jaya and Sumi face the tribulations of existence but they surmount all this and they evolve to become self-independent in discerning their identity and distinctiveness. The three women protagonists - Saru, Jaya and Sumi discover themselves ensnared in the roles designated to them by the society and endeavour to emphasize their individuality. An understanding and familiarity with life instructs all the three protagonists to boldly fight against the existential crisis audaciously rather than from breaking away from them. Metamorphosis of dragon fly is equated with the life of existential women such as Saru, Jaya and Sumi. All the three symbolizes Strength, Victory & Power. Deshpande who is enthusiastically disturbed with the human quandary investigates the human psyche so as to disentangle the mystery and obscurity of the human existence. Saru, Jaya and Sumi seeks to shudder off the fear, instigate themselves to live devoid of fear, being despised or devoid of love, underestimated or being misunderstood. As Kelkar says: "One way to combat domestic violence in India would be to make women economically independent" (79).

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