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Gender Roles, Equality and Feminine Identity: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

Aneri Arya,

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat.

Dr Sunil Shah,

Associate Professor, Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat.



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Abstract: Gender roles have been defined, imposed, stereotyped, shaped and reshaped throughout the ages and across the cultures. With the rise and development of feminist thought and movements, the role of women and their position in the society, both domestically and professionally, have gone through a transition and continue to do so. Despite the emergence of women to the participation and leadership in all the fields, the disparity in representation of women and men is apparent, especially in India. Literature provides a great resource to evaluate and understand such social concerns associated with gender roles in the cultural context. Shashi Deshpande's critically acclaimed novel *That Long Silence* deals with such issues in a contemporary domestic Indian backdrop. The protagonist Jaya, born and brought up in a middle-class family, suppresses her individuality and aspirations since childhood which increase after her marriage with more intensity creating conflict between her being a writer and a wife. The paper seeks to explore how an individual's identity is shaped by gender and imposed gender-biased religious and cultural beliefs which may lead one to an existential crisis. Further, it also examines and explores the power relationships that exist between the two genders concerning the notions of equality and equity in domestic as well as professional settings.

Key Words: gender, equality, equity, identity, literature.

1. Introduction

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

The above line by Simon de Beauvoir from her pioneering book *The Second Sex* is one of the most frequently quoted lines in the context of feminist studies. Even though written back in 1949, the line resonates and inspires discussions on gender roles as well as notions like gender equality in a precarious time like this. It actively challenges not only the standards associated with confining perceived norms of femininity and masculinity but also how they shape the identity of a person.



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1.1. Gender Roles

Gender roles are “the social roles, behaviours, attitudes, and psychological characteristics that are more common, more expected and more accepted for one sex or the other.” (Gochman 424) Gender roles have been defined, imposed, stereotyped, shaped and reshaped throughout the ages and across the cultures. The discriminatory gender roles have been deeply imbibed in cultures with variations and exceptions. The inequality that persists between the two genders along with the disparity among other groups goes back to ancient times as the civilizations were formed and developed through the ages. The rigid hierarchies of power that emerged came to be accepted as “natural and even divinely ordained”. (Harari 74) It was not just considered “the norm, but also the ideal.” (Harari 74)

1.2. The Emergence of Feminism Thought

The twentieth century marks the uprise of movements for equality for class, race and gender. With the rise and development of feminist movements and activities, the role of women and their position in the society, both domestically and professionally, have gone through a transition and continue to do so. Despite the emergence of women to the participation and leadership in all the fields, the disparity in representation of women and men is apparent, especially in India. Literature provides a great resource to evaluate and understand such social concerns associated with gender roles with cultural context.

In the 1970s, the feminist literary critics started to encourage the creation of literature written by women themselves about female subjectivity and experience. Its impact can be observed in Indian female writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandey and Nayantara Sehgal. Shashi Deshpande, a critically acclaimed and celebrated writer of our time, portrays the position of women in this rapidly transforming socio-economical scenario of India in her fiction. She poignantly delineates how middle-class women are conflicted between confining traditional values and new liberating modern life. Her heroines are torn between the inflicted social, domestic roles and her individual as well as occupational aspirations providing an adequate setting to explore the notions of gender equality and equity.



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2. Study of Gender Roles, Equality and Feminine Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

The novel *That Long Silence* is based on a contemporary domestic Indian backdrop. The protagonist Jaya, born and brought up in middle class, suppresses her individuality and aspirations since childhood which continues after her marriage with more intensity creating conflict between her being a writer and a wife.

Family, society, religion and culture are the factors that shape gender roles, and these are the factors that determine Jaya's course of life since childhood. She was supposed to behave according to the tasks assigned to her as a daughter, a wife and a mother with no consideration of her individuality beyond these roles. Since her childhood, her clever and curious nature is criticized and admonished by her grandmother. Like many other young women in India, Jaya is also deprived of a say for her marriage, and consequently, is married off without her consent. After marriage, she has to adjust herself with the lifestyle of Mohan as his wife. Consequently, they end up being like "a pair of bullocks yoked together." (Deshpande 11) Not only her life changes drastically putting her into the role of a wife and a daughter-in-law, but her name is also changed from Jaya to Suhasini as if to transform her into altogether a different person in the name of traditions.

2.1. The Conflict between her Domestic and Professional Life

Her role as a woman is subsided in her role as a wife and a mother causing strife between her domestic and professional life. Jaya's identity is shaped by the traditional role imposed on her life, and she does what she is supposed to do by society for years. As Sarla Palkar notes, Jaya "perhaps does the role of wife to perfection but fails as a human being." (Palkar 166) Even after playing it the way everyone expected her to, there is no happiness neither in her relationship with her husband and children nor in her mind. After several years, she follows her desire to be a writer and sends a short story for publication. In it, the husband is shown to be unable to reach his wife except through her body. This perturbs Mohan with the apprehension that the depicted disturbed married life in the story will be perceived by others to be their own life. The



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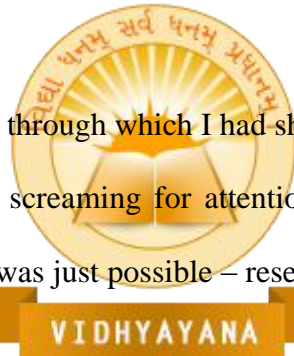
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incident upsets him, and he manoeuvres Jaya into doing what he thinks is appropriate for her as his wife. To show his disapproval, he throws the magazine towards her telling her there was her story. He further says, “How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?” (Deshpande 144) Jaya, “Looking at his stricken face”, “had been convinced” that she “had done him wrong” and therefore, despite knowing nothing was wrong on her part, without any arguments, she “had stopped writing after that.” (Deshpande 144)

There is neither equality nor equity in maternal as well as marital household of Jaya between a man and a woman. Especially in her relationship with Mohan, it is all about the appropriation of her behaviour and actions as his wife. That is why when she resumes writing, she is allowed to author the column titled “Seeta” with happy light renderings of domestic life which get approved by Mohan. She cannot write what she really wants to express.

And for me, she had been the means through which I had shut the door, firmly, on all those other women who had invade my being, screaming for attention: women I had known I could not write about, because they might - it was just possible – resemble Mohan’s mother or aunt, or my mother or aunt. (Deshpande 149)



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She surrenders to silence both as a wife and as a writer. As a writer, she fails to create better fiction as she remains silent towards the truth. As a wife, she remains silent to because she has accepted her role as a submissive wife trying not to upset her husband. Jaya “compromises her stand for she is taught the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family- as security, as a source of emotional strength.” (Alladi 4) In this context, Shashi Deshpande writes: “You learn a lot of tricks to get by a relationship. Silence is one of them. You never find a woman criticizing her husband, even playfully, in case it might damage the relationship.” (Deshpande iv)

Jaya is a representation of urban middle-class woman exposed to the liberating western ideology which is unable to free herself from the ties of cultural gender-biased impositions as they are deeply imbibed in her



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surroundings. Clutched by the unfair and meticulous life with Mohan, it takes seventeen years of marriage finally to learn to live her life on her own terms. Her identity crisis reaches the culmination point when she learns about Mohan's misconduct at his workplace, and they have to move from lavish flat of Churchgate to a small place in Dadar to avoid people.

Further, Jaya has been compared with Sita, who is traditionally considered as an epitome of an ideal woman in a religious and cultural context. Like Sita, Jaya is supposed to sacrifice her aspirations and desires, moulding her life in the ways of Mohan. At one point, she also considers herself as a character of Gandhari from Mahabharata and Maitreyee, one renounces her eyesight, and the other renounces the worldly life for her husband. Other instances of such mythical women being are "Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband" and "Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails". (Deshpande 11) Thus, women are supposed to be meek, docile and obedient to their husbands and society. In one of her discussions with Mohan, he also argues that women are not supposed to be angry, and that anger makes her "unwomanly". This societal influence later gets reflected in her arguments with her friend Kamat, "because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?" (Deshpande 147) However, it is through her experiences and later introspection, she realizes that "to achieve anything, to become anything you've got to be hard and ruthless".(Deshpande 1) In a country like India, women have to become hard and ruthless in order to achieve their aspirations. Even after all the sacrifices and efforts, Jaya is "... caught in an emotional eddy, endeavours to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but an ephemera – an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer". (Ahuja 2)

2.2. Prevailing Patriarchy and its Impact

Men are by default considered to be the head of the family and provider of safety and security to women. Mohan holds this position in his household and is also perceived as a dutiful son, husband and a father. Jaya is married off to Mohan with the promise of security sketching husbands as "a sheltering tree". However, this illusion is shattered when Mohan is involved in the malpractice at the office, and hides away in the other



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apartment. Further, men are attributed with a higher significant position in the household, while women are often rendered invisible despite their essential contributions. This problem is highlighted in the family tree incident. When Jaya's uncle Ramukaka enthusiastically shows the family tree he has prepared tracing the line of their ancestors back to 200 years, he skipped the name of all female family members including Jaya, her mother, her aunts and even her ajji "who single-handedly kept the family together". (Deshpande 149) Despite hypocritically holding women with the position of Goddesses, there is a lack of evidence of even fair recognition of their contribution in their own family.

Most of the other female characters in the novel succumb to social conformity of their gender roles. Jaya's mentally ill cousin Kusum, who is abandoned by her in-laws, later commits suicide which is even justified by her mother by saying that "she was of no use to anyone after she went crazy" and "nobody needed her." (Deshpande 22) Another instance, Vanitamai has totally internalized the dependence on man to the extent that she advises Jaya to put up with her husband even if he develops an extramarital affair with another woman. Jaya's mother-in-law also lives under the dominance of her husband pathetically her whole life dealing with his whims and fury. Even Jaya's maid Jeeja accepts the superiority of her husband over her by supporting him in his nonsensical demeanours and giving him hard-earned money to buy liquor without protest. Moreover, the widow characters of Saptagiri and Mukta follow the traditional rules, one by confining herself to a room and the other starving herself in the name of fasting.

The feminist movement for equality demanded not only equal rights but also mutual respect and understanding. In the case of Jaya, she receives it neither from her husband nor her children. While she was left alone at the Dadar apartment, "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is." (King 97) When she, at last, starts to live on her own embracing herself, it resonates with the efforts of the feminist movement to seek self-identity and autonomy. It resonates with what Julia Kristeva writes:

The consideration of femininity as marginality offers a position and not the essence, as they



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exhibit the courage to transcend the marginality and activate their epicentric participation in life.

(qtd in Gaur 66)

3. Conclusion

Despite being based on a relatively small canvas, the novel effectively depicts the root cause of lack of equality and fairness between the genders i.e. the mindset of both men and women which has been internalized throughout the years. However, the novel ends with the optimistic note breaking “that long silence” surrounding the equal and fair position and aspirations of women in Indian society. The silence is also symbolic of women all around the world who are unable to express their individuality in the patriarchal society. As the epigraph taken from Elizabeth Robins’s speech, “If I were a man and cared to know the world I believe in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy- the weight of that long silence of one half of the world.” (4)

Even though the winds of change are blowing in India in positive directions for women, yet there is a long way to go to achieve the sense of equity in personal as well as public domains. This is the high time to implement ideas into a system that goes beyond the concepts of gender equality following equity which is not only healthy and beneficial for women, but the nation and at large humanity as a whole.



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