

From Margin To The Centre: A Study Of *That Long Silence* And *The God Of Small Things*

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Abstract

The present paper dwells on one novel each of two women writers, namely Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. These two writers voice the experiences of the female sex in their works. One can today visualize a cultural climate, which is deeply affected by contemporary feminism. Women writers of the last two decades have, through their writings, launched a movement in search of their proper sphere. Warm appraisal accorded to them certainly serves as milestones in a long journey that is yet to be accomplished. These two authors have paved the way for articulation with greater confidence what remained suppressed and camouflaged for long. However, it has taken them almost half a century to find a firm footing in terms of national and international recognition for their works, which are in no way inferior to their male counterparts. Both *That Long Silence* and *The God of Small Things* are praise worthy efforts at understanding the psyche of the women characters.

Keywords: Culture, Feminism, Women Writers, Marginalization.

Traditionally, women have always been treated as marginalized figures. Male writing has not taken into account the differences that exist between men's perspective and those of the other half of the human race. Women have always been defined in terms of marriage, procreation and kinship. Virginia Woolf, while defining women's place in the globally prevalent patriarchal set up, voices the sentiments of millions of her sisters. She bemoans the unenviable position of women in her writings time and again. Rapid increase in the number of women writers and critical accolades that they have received in the past fifteen odd years is, undoubtedly, an evidence of their creative talent. But, more importantly it is a testimony to the shift of the margins towards the centre. Today, Indian women writers are not only in the race for occupying a place in the centre, one of them, viz., Arundhati Roy, has already ensconced herself there despite her several detractors.

The present paper dwells on one novel each of two women writers, namely Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. These two writers voice the experiences of the female sex in their works. One can today visualize a cultural climate, which is deeply affected by contemporary feminism. Women writers of the last two decades have, through their writings, launched a movement in search of their proper sphere. Warm appraisal accorded to them certainly serves as milestones in a long journey that is yet to be accomplished. Broadly speaking, feminism is a dominant issue in the contemporary women's thought. These writers seem to challenge male devised orthodoxies about women's nature, capacities and roles. Their works are abuzz with discussions about freedom and individuality. They seem to address an audience which is receptive to such ideas and applies them to its own situation.

These novelists write in a context of increased activity and new possibility. Even though preoccupied with the personal life of their protagonists, these writers also address social and intellectual issues. If Shashi Deshpande delineates the struggle her protagonists undergo in interpersonal relations, particularly with their husbands, Arundhati Roy too in her maiden novel focuses on man- woman relationship. While Arundhati's vision is essentially tragic, Shashi Deshpande's novels end on an optimistic note despite all the agony, suffering and tension that her protagonists undergo. The heroines of both Deshpande and Arundhati Roy are highly sensitive, intelligent, educated and career- minded. The protagonists of both the writers have a rebellious tendency. They rise in protest against the patriarchal system and begin their quest for freedom. They question the concepts of love, marriage and sex.

That Long Silence is a Sahitya Akademi award- winning novel of Shashi Deshpande, while *The God of Small Things* which catapulted Arundhati Roy to international fame, is a Booker Prize winner novel. Both the novelists highlight the theme of patriarchal authority in their respective works. Jaya, the educated and sensitive protagonist of *That Long Silence* has not experienced the tyranny of a patriarchal social order. On the other hand, Ammu, though intellectually not so accomplished but equally sensitive protagonist of *The God of Small Things*, has witnessed its pangs right from the tender years of infancy. She recollects with dread her childhood in Delhi where her mother was subjected to repeated bouts of beating by her ill- tempered and male chauvinist father. In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web: "He worked on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children, he turned into a

monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations” (GST, 180). It is to escape this tyranny that Ammu agrees for a loveless marriage.

In *That Long Silence* women belonging to the older generation like Saptagiri Aiji, Mohan’s mother and Vanitha Mami endure male tyranny as a natural way of life. They are portrayed as docile and subdued figures, “crouching in front of the dying fire, sitting blank and motionless” (TLS, 35). The women belonging to the younger generation too find the male authority overbearing. Ammu had to break out of her marriage due to the authoritative and dissipated ways of her husband. Jaya, the more enlightened and the more advanced compared to Ammu, too feels suffocated in her relationship with Mohan, her husband. She feels angry when in his decision to stay at Dadar flat, Mohan has taken her acquiescence for granted. Her anger turns into frustration when she fails to bloom in her career as a writer due to the restrictive dictates of her husband. What frustrates her further is that in the husband’s hour of need, wife’s submission or help is taken for granted: “Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husbands’ travails [...]” (11). However, unlike Ammu, Jaya is better placed- hers is not the kind of moral dilemma Ammu is placed in. Ammu is more of a victim of circumstances, whereas Jaya is the modern, educated, enlightened woman in search of the fulfilment of the self. She questions the traditional pattern, resents it, but finds her own interpretation of it for surviving marriage, “The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together [...]. It is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful, and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?” (35). Nayana’s craving for a male child is an apt summing up of the matter. This uneducated working class woman has her own indigenous solution to counter patriarchal authority as she says, “Why give birth to a girl, behanji, who’ll only suffer because of men all her life?” (36).

However, a significant difference between these two novelists is that while patriarchy as the power- centre of the social system tends to be physically aggressive, even violent, in Arundhati Roy; in Shashi Deshpande its impact is felt more on the emotional and the intellectual levels rather than the physical. Its physical aspect does surface, but only among the working class males. Further, visualizing moral deviation among men as a socially accepted norm too, is the forte of Arundhati Roy. Chako’s flirting with the factory girls, Ammu’s Bengali husband’s dissipating ways serve as a testimony of male power sphere.

Mammachi though herself a victim of male chauvinism, adapts herself completely to the “conventional scheme of things” (*GST*, 122). Ammu too, as a child, submits to this tyranny. As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in someone small who has been building all their lives by someone big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, “she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them” (181-82).

Another major concern of both these writers has been to dwell upon the relationship between women and women. In the West, there has been a considerable amount of literature that focuses mainly on relationship between sons and fathers or sons and mothers. The most well-known examples are Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* and D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. It is mostly women writers who deviate from the norm and bring into focus relationship between women and women. Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy share this literary tradition and deal with the theme of the relationship of daughters with their mothers and other women of the family. The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande, being educated and awakened, fail to conform or have perfect bon homie with other women of the family including their mothers, grandmothers or aunts. The reason seems to be partly the generation gap made more pronounced by industrialization, urbanization leading to the collapse of joint family system, and more importantly the education of women. The protagonists fail to subscribe to the highly tradition views of the women belonging to the older generation.

Yet another important factor that creates a divide between women and women is gender bias so widely prevalent and practiced in the Indian society. For parents it might be a perfectly normal way of life whereas for the sensitive protagonists of both of these novels it is a sure cause to wound their psyche. Jaya is deeply hurt when she finds no place in the family tree because of her gender as her uncle tell her, “You don’t belong to this family. You are married. You’re now a part of Mohan’s family. You have no place here” (*TLS*, 142-43). The roots of gender discrimination are more deep seated in the Ayemenem family of *The God of Small Things*. Mammachi, Ammu’s mother rarely shows any concern for her divorced daughter and her children. But Chako, the son of the family, is extended a red carpet welcome on his return from Canada after being divorced by his western wife. Again Mammachi remains a mute observer when Chako proudly proclaims himself to be the sole inheritor of the family property. Moreover, every need of his is taken care of with indulgence by his mother as well as by Baby Kochamma, the aunt. Profligacy in him is encouraged in the

name of 'man's needs' whereas desire for love in a daughter decrees the torture of being locked up in a room and subsequently thrown out of the house.

Bitter childhood experiences play a diabolic role in shaping the mentality of the protagonists both in Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy. In Shashi Deshpande, these memories stem from gender bias, they are rooted in the cruelty, violence and tyranny let loose by Ammu's chauvinist father. Both of these novelists believe that return to the parental house is the most desirable option for distressed women in Indian society. If it has to be reconciliation, the initiative, more often than not, has to be from the woman's side. Modern Indian writers like Deshpande and Arundhati Roy tend to depict the oppression of women with greater self-consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage. Earlier writers had defiled and eulogized women's suffering but the writers of the later part of the post-independent period have unequivocally presented their suffering with much greater realism.

At once conversational and formal, the reminiscences of Jaya and Ammu evoke a deeper and tragic sense of vanished time, fleeting moments, personal losses recounted in a quiet and calm voice characterized by sobriety. It follows the natural movements of a mind experiencing moments and expressions that become meaningful spots of time. The unruffled stream of consciousness of Jaya and Ammu symbolizes the flow of mind that registers experience in a prose of recollection and nostalgia. Women writers mostly focus on women characters, on women's lives and experiences in their writings. Literary works by women writers present detailed accounts of women's emotions, ideas and preoccupations. However, being in the centre, mostly the women characters are visualized in terms of their relationship with men. Nevertheless, even while dealing with the problems of love, marriage and sex, women writers perhaps present more authentic picture of the several aspects of women's lives.

Sensitive and woman conscious writers like Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy grapple with the identity crisis of the contemporary women in their works. It is not of course always that women writers write about matters which are only specific to them. In a country like India where on the one hand, a woman is equated with man through the concept of *Ardhangini*, on the other hand, there are daily reports of bride burning, dowry harassment and rape. Therefore, a favourite theme with the women writers has been an analysis of women's

position and status. Both Deshpande and Roy bemoan the popular media-generated cultural climate which presents only 'weepy women'. This is a retrograde step. The works of both these novelists are a sincere attempt at discovering these complexities. These two authors have paved the way for articulation with greater confidence what remained suppressed and camouflaged for long. However, it has taken them almost half a century to find a firm footing in terms of national and international recognition for their works, which are in no way inferior to their male counterparts. For example, Markandaya and Jhabvala, though have been prolific writers with ten- eleven novels to their credit over a span of three decades, the concept of Indian English fiction begins and ends with the recognition of a few male writers namely Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. As such, women are portrayed from male point of view not only in literature, but in every form of art. Both *That Long Silence* and *The God of Small Things* are praise worthy efforts at understanding the psyche of the women characters. Their women are placed in difficult situations. They are torn between the self and the society. These two novels tap their feminine consciousness from an awakened woman's point of view.

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