

Analysing Female Resurgence: A Gyno-centric Study of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract:

The different fictional pieces by numerous writers of the present-day period greatly encapsulate the nuances of the female self. Writers like Namita Gokhale and Shashi Deshpande easily can be regarded as stalwarts in the field of penning down enticing pieces with women protagonists rising to the occasion in numerous instances. If on one side Gokhale primarily focusses on how females are made to overcome umpteen hurdles in their lives and still they establish themselves, on the other side, Deshpande mainly focusses on the prevalence of stereotypes in the Indian societies which curb the instincts of the females down. However, what lies at the helm of both the writers is the concern to showcase the emergence of the females to be the regulator of their lives. Thus, it can be stated that it is the construction of the identity of one's own personality of the various female protagonists which both Gokhale and Deshpande concentrate on in their novels. Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is a notable tale of a poor village girl, Shakuntala who is rendered secondary in the novel by the forces of patriarchy. However, it is her comeback as one of the strongest literary characters to assert her own position which elevates the greatness of the novel. *That Long Silence* by Deshpande portrays the character of Jaya to be longing for a proper identity in the society. This paper is a humble attempt in order to critically analyse the resurgence of the two female characters, Shakuntala and Jaya in the two concerned novels. In order to study the attributes of the self, the paper attempts to make use of the theory of gyno-criticism.

Keywords: emancipation, gyno-criticism, female, identity, resurgence.

"...we are not born with an identity, but it emerges in a number of different forms through a series of identifications which combine and emerge in an infinite number of forms so that there is never one fixed, coherent identity but several in play."

--Kath Woodward

The contemporary scenario of the literary circuit concerning fiction writing has witnessed the rise of the portrayal of the females to be subverting various otherwise norms and dictates. There is a greater concern being laid on the portrayal of the emancipation of females who make strenuous efforts in order to dismantle the patriarchal obstacles. This, in the process, plays a great role in the establishment of the identity in the society. With the rise of numerous women-centric schools of thought and movements like that of *écriture féminine* and gyno-criticism, ably supplemented by the contemporary wave of feminism as well, there is an all-together different picture concerning the portrayal of the females, particularly in present-day Indian literary writings. The two concerned novels in this particular research paper also explicit the idea of the rise of female identity by portraying the characters of Shakuntala and Jaya in *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* and *That Long Silence* respectively. In her notable article "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties," Shashi

Deshpande has made a critical comment on her nature and category of writing. She states,

I have been put into the slot of woman writer; my writing has been categorized as 'writing about women' or feminist writing. In this process, much in it has been missed. Now, after 26 years of writing I am able to define myself as a novelist and short story writer. I don't think any qualifying words are necessary- not Indian, not Indo- English, not woman, not feminist, not third world. (107)

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory is one of Namita Gokhale's most remarkable novels which deals with the character of Shakuntala and her curtailed life amidst the bindings of the patriarchal society. Gokhale portrays the character of Shakuntala in the novel to be very much zealous and adventurous from the very outset. It was seen that she could always sense the various differences which were meted out to the females by the male members of the society. Gokhale even portrays that even after her marriage with a guy called Srijan who was a mahasamant in the society, she was always experiencing a feeling of curtailment of personal space and identity. Moreover, the sense of the assertion of the self was vividly evident right from her very childhood as she used to fly into a rage when she could sense a favouring towards her brother by her mother. She remarks,

I had known rage before, and anger, when, as a child. But this was worse, a collapse of all that had been good and true in my life. I screamed and sobbed aloud, beating my head against the stone walls of the temple like the kind of woman I had not imagined I would ever become. (Gokhale 58)

Gokhale showcases that there was the lack of emotional attachment between the two as Srijan could never really understand her. He remarked once in the following manner when Shakuntala expressed her longing for brand new locations, "You are an odd woman' ... 'You do not care for ornaments or rich garments or a man's flattering words" (Gokhale 50). It was as if the entire life of Shakuntala was being regulated by the males who showed, as it was understood by the readers, very little interest towards the individual desires of Shakuntala. Also, it was seen that Shakuntala too could not render her duties properly which was evidenced by her own statement, "I was painfully aware that I had been lagging in my duties as a wife" (Gokhale 49).

The rise of the female character in the novel is shown by the writer by depicting Shakuntala to be abandoning her home and advancing towards the

world of experience along with Nearchus who was a merchant. Gokhale, very subtly depicts that there was quite a close bond between the two which led to them being even physically close to one another. As it can be observed, Shakuntala, found a great companion in Nearchus and they both made rounds of a lot of places. In order to bring her changed personality to the forefront, Gokhale depicts Shakuntala to be accepting a new identity called "Yaduri: the 'fallen woman.'" It was her earnest quest to learn more which made her a sort of "fallen women." She remarks,

I knew there was more inside me than the limits of my experience dictated. I thirsted for glimpses of new lands, people, ideas. It was as if the move from my mother's home to my husband's—the half-a-day journey from one village to another—had suddenly made the impossible possible. A man's equal in bed, why could I not desire what men enjoyed: the freedom to wander, to be elsewhere, to seek, and perhaps find . . . something? (Gokhale 48)

Hélène Cixous, the notable feminist critic, in her theory of the *Écriture Féminine*, opines that it particularly is associated with the rediscovery of identity of a female through a larger body of writing. The portrayal of the character of Shakuntala by Gokhale very well falls on the same plane of this theory as it encapsulates the growth and development of Shakuntala amidst all odds of the patriarchal society. Cixous is of the opinion that is the male dominated society which has suppressed the inherent desires of the females because of which they are not able to establish and express them. The novel paints a captivating picture towards the end when the character of Shakuntala was given a different dimension to be embracing the nuances of death as she realised that it was indeed a blessing for her to be embracing death in the pious land of Kashi. In her words, "I would not depart humiliated from these shores. I would hide, escape, return to the earth and the rocks that knew me, and the parrots, and the patient fisherman who sat by the banks of the Ganga, baiting her fish" (Gokhale 198).

Shashi Deshpande's that Long Silence can easily be considered as one of her greatest literary achievements which foregrounds male domination and vividly illustrates the quest for a proper identity in relation to the central protagonist, Jaya. The novel is a tale of Jaya who has been living under the envelop of silence as she was never been heard by the members of the society. Deshpande deals with the plight of the character to be absolutely heart-

wrenching as she was shown to be a helpless housewife who was always relegated. What is really staggering is that right from her life as a little girl, she was almost conditioned to follow the dictates of male dominated society as she was told numerous tales of different mythological characters like Sita and Draupadi of Indian epics along with their umpteen sufferings. It was the lack of a proper authority and a voice which created all the relegations in the life of Jaya. Deshpande shows that her husband, Mohan never paid any heed to whatever she was saying and she had to blindly follow the instructions given by him.

To draw the sympathy of the readers, Deshpande depicts that her husband even stopped her act of writing as he never supported her. This was one of the primary acts by her husband which almost shattered the core of Jaya. It acted like a mental wound which could not be cured. It was writing which had given her the leeway of understanding her own self as she contemplates her position to be “An utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of the motives of her actions seemed impossible” (Deshpande 69). She also remarks,

I had known that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan, it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him. To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist. (Deshpande 144)

In the notable essay, “Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism,” (1984) Elaine Showalter elaborates the core idea of gynocriticism saying it to be “the putting into discourse of ‘woman’” (Jardine 58). As the novel progresses, Deshpande makes the readers understand that Jaya was making her mind in order to come out

of the shackles of silence which had been bogging her down till that very point. As notable evidence, Jaya assertively states, “I will have to erase the silence between us” (Deshpande 192). The lack of compassion and attachment in their marital life which was rather cold was also despised by Jaya later on in her life as she could not come to terms with the image of “a pair of bullocks yoked together” (Deshpande 89) which was an important symbol of their unfulfilled marital life.

The decision by Jaya at the end to come out of the seventeen-year long silence and speak for her rights and position provided her with a sense of renewed zeal and vigour. As it was seen, this renewed life of Jaya established herself to be a better individual as there was no shackle which would tie her down. As she states, “We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope without that life would be impossible” (Deshpande 193).

Thus, both the novels are sheer masterpieces dealing with the rise of the females. Jaya and Shakuntala are truly portrayed as the epitomes of female emancipation who have carved their own identity in the society.

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