

CHAPTER V

The Theme of Woman's Search For Self-Identity

In the modern society the place of woman has been rapidly changing. She has her own realms to wander. Formerly the education was not given to woman. Husband, children, home-duties were her whole world. She was known only through her relationship with man and has not an independent identity. With the spread of education and because of the wind of women's Liberation movement woman becomes aware of her rights, self-respect, economical independence and individual identity. Though the woman becomes aware of her identity yet the position of woman is still secondary. The Indian woman is a victim of patriarchal society. In the male-dominated society the position of woman is always secondary.

Because of the basic biological difference a woman is supposed to be inferior to man. Nurturing, love and care-taking are considered inferior works of woman and power, success and competition, these issues are superior works of man. The masculine activities are always considered superior to feminine activities. The Indian society depicts woman as a symbol of sacrifice through the image of Devi like Sita, Savitri, and Gandhari. A girl child in the Indian family is treated partially. The first preference is always given to a boy child. From her childhood the woman is taught to suppress her wills and desires. She is taught to become a good wife, mother, and daughter-in-law and so on. The woman is bound by the partial rules made by the society. She has no her own identity. People do not allow her to grow healthy. In the Indian society the honor of the family depends upon the behavior of the woman. Woman has to sacrifice her self for the family.

According to Jyoti Singh,

“Goodness of woman is in self-abnegation and self sacrifice that is by the patriarchal community.”¹

Tolerance, nurturing, adjustment, self-sacrifice are the good virtues expected from the woman. Men are not bound to fulfill these expectations.

Even today the woman is regarded as a sex-object. Though she is highly educated, economically independent she is still supposed inferior to man. A housewife's work is not valued. Though she is an equal earner with man, cooking, house-keeping are supposed her basic works and of primary importance. The society wants that the woman must think about her career after completion of her primary duties. Though she earns equally with man her income is always secondary or considered as extra money. The income of man is basic or primary income. If a woman tries to escape from the overload of the responsibilities she is called 'selfish'. If she complains about her inferior situation she is supposed a black mark on the ideal womanhood. Even today the society is not ready to give an equal status to the woman.

Quest for identity is an important search each human being feels at a certain stage in life. Sondkar says,

“Identity is a subjective sense and an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity. It can only be realized by a process of examination in to the past incidents and the personal experiences. These experiences are

different almost in every way:
emotional, physical and social.”²

The theme of woman's search for self-identity is reflected in short stories of Shashi Deshpande. Her women struggle for searching the self-identity not only as woman but also as human being. Her protagonists are not family breakers. They always give priority to family. Deshpande through her stories states that the self negation does not give the happiness. The following stories are taken for study under this theme; *It was the Nightingale, The Inner Rooms, Lucid Movements, Death of a Child, I Want..., A Man and a Woman, The Awakening.*

There are two characters in the story *It was the Nightingale*, Jayu and her husband. Jayu is an educated, careerist and modern woman. Jayu is torn between ambitions and her love for husband. The story portrays the wife who sacrifices her conjugal bliss for preserving her identity.

Jayu and her husband love each other. There is good understanding between them. The husband is not a dominating male. He respects his wife and her career. Besides her husband's objection Jayu is firm on her going abroad for two years to get bigger salary when she will return. Her husband thinks that it is unnecessary to work hard for the young wife. He does not want her to go away. Though Jaya feels his regret to leave her she is not ready to sacrifice her identity for him. Jayu's mother lived her all life through her husband and daughters. She had nothing of her own. Jayu says, "who (mother) tortured herself and tormented us. Who made her own hell and gloried in it. And so, for me each step out of home had been a battle, each success a treachery towards her". (67). Jayu does not want to become like her mother. She fears that will she shackle herself or others? To preserve her identity, she feels, it is

necessary. Formerly for men the ideal woman is always totally selfless and totally loving. The protagonist accepts that the lives of both of them are intertwined, yet they are two distinct strands. She gives example of two lights which shine more brightly together, but to keep her light burning is totally her responsibility. Jayu knows that if she surrenders to her husband's will, she will walk the road of self-abnegation forever. And her life will end up like her mother. And she does not want to do that. Finally she decides to go abroad. She feels guilty for not fulfilling her role of an ideal wife. So all her life she will carry the burden of the guilt.

Through the story as Adhikari states Shashi Deshpande shows that

“women have the capacity to determine their priorities for self discovery and still continue to weave the fabric of family harmony.”³

Man always wants that a woman should sacrifice her life. He is ignorant about the fact that self-respect for a woman causes happiness to her and to all.

The Inner Rooms is woven around the legendary character of Amba, in Mahabharata Bhishma, Salva, Vichitravirya are other characters in the story. The story is Amba's feeling of resentment. Bhishma abducts Amba, Ambika and Ambalika for his brother Vichitravirya's marriage. Amba has already decided to marry Salva, the king of Shaubha. Vichitravirya denies marrying her after knowing the fact. Her lover Salva too rejects Amba. Amba helplessly and piteously questions her self “who is she?”(92). she is not a daughter, a wife and a mother but only a woman.

It is dishonorable for each of them to accept Amba. No one feels it necessary to think about the honor of Amba, because she is a woman. There is no place to a woman in the male-dominated society. Honor of woman is an unacceptable term. Her honor is only concern with the honor of man. She has no individual identity. With the wrong decisions taken by males the life of Amba becomes meaningless as she can not become any ones wife, mother. The princess of Kashi, Amba is even ignored by the 'black people', the ignorant and lowest. Loss of identity causes intense pain and agony in her. Amba decides to finish her life and she does so. She has no control on her life but the death is only her decision. "At least this one thing would be for her choosing, the way she wanted, at time she chose" (93). The men destroy her identity for which she was fighting.

The pathetic story of Amba states the situation of women in India. Thus, the theme becomes universal. The rooms in the palace are called inner rooms. These are for women, their whole world. They never think to come out of it. The inner rooms are symbolic. If a woman tries to get self-respect, honor and identity she gets dishonor and a kind of punishment in the male-dominated society. The scholar of Shashi Deshpande's short stories T.N.geetha says,

"The Inner Rooms signify the chambers of passivity which stifle the voice of protest for the sake of social and moral security. Indeed she has to suppress her individuality and even suffer a loss of self identity for fear of being socially ostracized."⁴

Another story *Lucid Movements*, Sujata, her dying mother Sumati, her sister Shilpa, her father, brother and sister's daughter Karuna are the characters in the story. The story is about a dying woman's search for her mother's name-the identity and the process of ascertaining her individuality.

Sumati is an old lady and everyone calls her as Akka. The narrator is a daughter of Akka. Akka is hospitalized due to illness. In the hospital she asks the narrator that why she calls her Akka? Does she know her name? The narrator says that she knows it. Then Akka asks the narrator whether she knows the name of her mother. The narrator says that she does not know her grandmother's name. Akka asks her husband that if he knows the name of her mother, he also says no, he does not. Akka asks everyone about the name of her mother, but the response is negative. The old lady tries a lot to find out the name of her mother but fails. Akka, like her mother, does not want to die un-noticed. She feared that her name will be wiped out from the memory of coming generation. But Akka dies, in the sorrow that nobody knows her mother's name. After Akka's death, one day, her daughters- the narrator and her sister, tell Akka's grand-daughter-Karuna that, the grand-mother's name is Sumati.

The story portrays a fear of a woman that her name i.e. identity will wipe out from the memory of coming generation. According to Adhikari,

“Obliquely, Shashi Deshpande provides the reader with an insight to probe into a social condition that condemns a woman to die unnoticed, unremembered and muted as an individual.”⁵

The dying mother's wish is fulfilled when her grand daughter- Karuna is taught that grandmother's name is Sumati. For Akka, at least there is no identity crisis. The act of daughters saves Sumati's (Akka's) name from being wiped out from the memory of the grand-daughter. Deshpande here suggests that it becomes easier for woman with the help of each other to find their own identity.

Death of A Child runs around the mother who is educated and cultured. The woman, her husband and unborn aborted child are the characters in the story. The mother takes a stand against the traditional norms of motherhood. Protagonist in this story by asserting a woman's right to be an individual, affirms her selfhood and rejects the definition of motherhood pronounced by the males for their convenience. The struggle is between the role of mother advocated by the patriarchal society and a desire for self-identity.

The mother in the story wants to get rid of her child, third in four years. The motherhood forced upon her makes her feel like animal trapped and confined. She feels that marriage and child-birth destroy the reserve, secretiveness and innocence in a woman. She does not want to destroy herself. She wants to preserve at least some part of her self and her life. She can not imagine that the main purpose of her life is only to breed. So she wants to abort the child. But her husband tells her that they will manage it somehow. To a father an unborn child rarely has the same reality as it has to a mother. Though the child is her own product she has no right on that at all. After listening wife's decision her husband asks her, "your life- is that all that matters to you? How can a mother be so selfish? " (62) Like any other Hindu male he wants another son. The mother in the story had already played her role satisfactorily by having two children and nourishing them with love and care. In all these

situations many questions are articulated: Is the mother only a breeder? Can not a woman ask to reserve some part of herself, her life? Why should a woman be made feel guilty if she decides to deconstruct the stereotype image of a mother to preserve her identity and the welfare of her unborn child? At last the mother aborts the child but she feels extremely guilty for sacrificed the unborn baby's life for avoiding the pain involved in bringing it up. She expresses her feelings as, "I feel heaviness in my breasts. There is a hollow feeling within me. I am filled with strange thoughts. Where have I heard that, after an amputation, a person continues to feel the amputated limb, my child seems to cling on me. Now when he does not exist, he asserts himself. I am conscious of a piercing pain in the place he had filled. Grief becomes real."(68) When her husband and she leave the hospital she feels fear. She thinks that she is not alone, the ghost of her dead child walks with her.

According to Adhikari,

*"In Death of A Child Deshpande takes a revolutionary stand against the conventional norms of child-bearing and motherhood."*⁶

Deshpande shows that a woman is always expected to sacrifice almost every thing for her husband, children and others. And if she tries to reserve something for herself it is not a selfish act. At the same time, Deshpande brings out the pain of a woman originated from the unnatural act of abortion. The pain is the cost; a woman has to pay for preserving her self identity.

Another story *I want...* is about Alka, an un-married girl of twenty seven years. She is worried about her fiancée who does not think about what she wants? And her father too does not feel it is necessary to

ask her what she wants? For the sake of so called security in life, Alka sacrifices her career. A woman is forced to sacrifice a part of her.

Alka has a good job. Her parents decide to arrange her marriage with a young man who is having good job and salary and is from good family. But Alka does not want to get married with the young man because she is neglected while choosing her fiancée and she does not want to leave the job. But her parents tell her that she is growing older and she has to get married as early as possible and she will get security in her life. Her fiancée behaves with her in an authoritarian manner. He wants his wife should behave like an ordinary and traditional Indian lady. Her parents go on insisting for the marriage and she has to accept the situation.

In the Indian patriarchal society women are treated as an object. Men never consider women's point of view and dictate terms. Men have to do nothing with the expectations of women. Alka and her parents are made to feel ashamed of because she is unmarried even at twenty seven. Alka tells herself, "I was twenty seven. My face had lost its youth. It had personality, I told myself. But I knew I regretted what I had lost." (143). Alka feels uneasiness, helplessness at the time of arranging her marriage. She says "The woman in me is outraged and protested. I crushed her. She had no place there. Not at all." (145). She feels like she has no her identity. As if she is capable of taking any shape. No one feels it is necessary to ask Alka what she wants? She feels that she is never there at all.

Her fiancée takes Alka granted and behaves in an authoritarian manner. He wants a wife who should be able to manage everything, stay at home when he returns, she must like people. His wife should be able to get on with everyone. Alka's fiancé is a man of selfish, self-assertive type. He wants her to resign her job and confine herself to home. Her

father too wipes out her reluctance by stating her position as a girl who crossed her marriageable age and has no chance of getting married. Alka is a woman of consciousness and wants to discover her integral identity. She does not want husband of four figure salary, bungalow, a car, she wants a man who can hear her voice when she speaks and understands her even when she does not. But she is sure that people will call her crazy. It does not matter against a good job, family and no bad habits.

In the end Alka accepts the reassurance of her father. She sacrifices her economical independence and become a slave of the patriarchy. Geetha T.N. says,

“Alka thus becomes a wife by
compromise, not by choice.”⁷

The problem of Alka is the problem of many Indian girls. There is no value to their opinion.

In this story, Deshpande has tried to explicit the struggle of a young and educated Indian girl for coming out of the situation created under the influence of traditional way of thinking in India.

The Awakening is a story of young girl, Alka. She compromises with the situation after the death of her father. Alka sacrifices her own wishes, life, ambitions for the betterment of her family.

Alka is a girl of ambitions. She wants to take higher education and to get a job of good salary. But because of her father's poor economical condition, she has to sacrifice her dream of getting higher education in abroad. She wants to come out of the chawl and to live a luxurious life. She does not like her sister Rekha's attitude to accept the life as it is. Alka does not want to become a clerk like her father. Alka has to take up a job of a typist after her father's death. She has to sacrifice her dream for family. She hates her father because there are only incomplete

duties behind him. She thinks his life and death both are failure. On reading the letters of dead father she feels her father's love for her, his faith in her abilities. He is sure that Alka will become successful in her life. The letter awakens the feeling of responsibility and her ability to achieve her aim. She feels that she can achieve her aim now. She can realize her dreams. Kaushik points out,

“The letter restores her faith and gives her courage to continue working not only to share her fathers burdens and responsibilities but also to realize her own dreams”⁸.

Thus, her confidence in achieving self identity strengthens because of the letter of her father.

There are three characters in the story, *A Man and A Woman* Lalita a youthful and beautiful widow of thirty, her brother-in-law and Manu her dead husband's friend. Lalita's education is not enough to secure a job. She is banned to participate in any social program. She has to control her emotional and physical needs. Various questions come to her mind related to existence and self-identity. She wish to fulfill the sexual need arises in her search of identity. She satisfies her sexual hunger by keeping illicit relationship with her seventeen year brother-in-law, Ajit. She feels guilty for this act. Lalita feels loss of morality and loss of respect in the society. She confesses her guilt to Manu. She says that it is madness. She is disgusted with herself. She says, “ So I have to live, with his weakness. A slave to my body. I disgust myself, I am dirty abnormal” (212) Sex is a natural desire like hunger and thrust. One should satisfy his basic needs. But society does not think it is necessary to a widow too as she is a human.

Self identity becomes inevitable for her. Manu relieves her of his guilt. He says to Lalita, "You can keep an animal in cage till it dies, but you can not blame it for trying to escape."(208). Manu proposes Lalita to marry him. But Lalita rejects it by saying, "what will people say?" Though she is willing to marry she rejects his proposal for the false sense of prestige of the Jayanta's family. She thus, sacrifices her happiness, her individual identity.

Shashi Deshpande portrays a realistic picture of Indian woman's life. According to Adele, King,

"Deshpande's strength lies in portraying uncertainties and doubts of women, who can not see themselves as heroic but who want to make life possible."⁹

Deshpande shows that the woman has to play the dual role, as a breadwinner and as a traditional wife, mother and so on. The woman can be happy and will give happiness to other if she maintains the proper balance between the two roles. Deshpande stresses that self-respect for a woman is essential to give happiness to her and to other. She also intends to say that the loss of self-identity in a woman causes many problems.

She shows that even in modern days, the social status of Indian woman has not changed considerably, in India. However, Deshpande shows how woman struggles for self identity in ancient and in modern days. Deshpande, in almost all her stories, describes the struggle for self identity. It is shown through the acts of suicide, agitation against the arranged marriage, insistence on remembering the name after the death, giving preference to go abroad to leading an ordinary life, abortion, rejecting the ordinary jobs like typist and remarriage.

It seems that women in India have to struggle for self identity. Normally, people do not allow them to grow healthy. They do not want to give importance to women infant. Woman is the most important part of the life so she should not be neglected. Shashi Deshpande tries to focus this point through her short stories. Her depiction of the present status of a woman is so terrible that a woman can not tolerate this thing. Deshpande always expresses deep concern over the status of women in the contemporary middle class Indian society.

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