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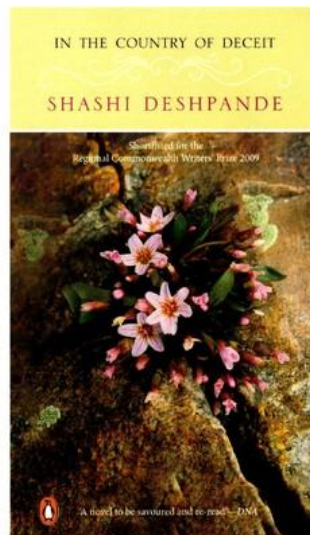
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Sociological Aspect of Body in Shashi Deshpande's Novel *In the Country of Deceit*

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Abstract

This article aims at depicting the female body as a key site of political, social, cultural and economic forces. It illustrates that Shashi Deshpande as a modern woman writer gives relevance to female body in her writings. She reverses the dominant male gaze and moves the female body from the margin of the page to the center of the text, Deshpande destabilizes binary oppositions that are the root cause of oppression against women. She uses deconstruction method of ideological critique to comment at patriarchal thoughts and institutions. Female is still viewed as body and her body and sexuality is controlled by men. She takes up the theme of body to show that in modern times the power equation and ideology is re-defined and patriarchy is questioned and women obsessed with social victimhood are craving for sexual autonomy. Women are challenging the cultural norms to re-draw the patriarchal map. The author theorizes women's resistance and proves that women are capable of asserting their subjectivities and claiming ownership over their bodies.

Our Body and Our Culture

I do not care about country's problems. My country is my body and a revolution against it has taken place.-Mary Melfi, *Infertility Rites* (1991)

The body is the bearer of the human being and at the same time the expression of his/her existential condition. Individual and social biographies are represented in the body as the social and cultural circumstances in which it has developed. The body is a crucial site of political, social, cultural and economic intervention and a contested site on which struggles over control and resistance are fought out in contemporary society. Patriarchy and capitalism have many tools which create and maintain gender roles and relations in our societies. Women's bodies constitute one of the most formidable tools for this purpose. Culture inscribes rules, images, symbols and even hierarchies which give shape and character to the female body. Culture, the law and the systems of education, all contribute in structuring women's sexuality and desire through the engravings they carve on their bodies. Through the reproductive and sexual control of women's bodies their subordination and continued exploitation is guaranteed.

Stifling Female Sexuality

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For civilized society to develop, it is allegedly necessary or at least helpful for female sexuality to be stifled. Countless women have grown up and lived their lives with far less sexual pleasure than they would have enjoyed in the absence of this large-scale suppression. Socializing influences such as parents, schools, peer groups, and legal forces have cooperated to alienate woman from her own sexual desires. Society refuses to tolerate woman's exercise of her agency, her choice and preference.

Sexual Agency and Indian Women Novelists

The Indian women novelists, particularly of the 1980's onward have articulated woman's aspirations and the changed perceptions of sexuality. There has been a significant shift in representation of women in recent years, such that rather than being presented as passive object of the male gaze, they are now frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful. Sexual agency becomes a form of regulation in these writings that requires the re-moulding of feminine subjectivity to fit the current post-feminist, neoliberal moment. Authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Namita Gokhle, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De and even the diasporic writers like Bharti Mukherjee, Shona Ramaya and others have presented various modes of resistance to patriarchal norms.

Body to the Centre of the Text – Important Questions Raised

By moving the living body from the margin of the page to the center of the text, by valuing the female body, and by exploring subjectivity in light of the physical, sexual and psychological consequences of body, contemporary women writers have begun a feminist tradition of de-stabilizing binary oppositions that are one of the roots of the systematic oppression against women.

These writers use women's body as a conceptual tool to examine certain discursively constructed social determinants that deprive a woman of right over her body. They explore the labyrinth of a woman's bodily\sexual experiences in order to decode the many tropes of violation that effect the body's materiality as well as its psyche. By raising important questions such as whether the body of a woman belongs to her, and whether it is possible to visualize her body as an instrument to fight the establishment, these writers negotiate the ideological discourses

produced not only by the patriarchal institution of marriage but also by the family, the state, the religion and the law in order to explore the embodied experiences of woman. Their aim is to identify the female body as the locus of masculinist power in different social, economic and historical settings. Their works provide innumerable instances of traditionally orchestrated institutional discourses and practices that maintain the oppression and regulation of female body. By identifying links between various forms of oppression, and locating patterns of domination, these writers assertively challenge patriarchal discourses and renounce the hierarchical authoritarian mindset therein.

Write Yourself!

To acknowledge the female body means to acknowledge the lived experiences of woman. Calling attention to the relationship between the body and woman's position and subjectivity is an important part of this study. What many women writers have aspired to do may be evaluated in the light of Raman Seldon's clarion call: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then all the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth ... Since writing is the place where subversive thought can germinate ... Women must uncensor herself, recover her goods, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. She must throw off her guilt."(23).

Shashi Deshpande's Novels

Contemporary Indian writer Shashi Deshpande's novels are marked by a continuous preoccupation with the body: the body as the product of social signifying practices, the body as the site of desires, fears and anxieties, the body as source of experience, the body as creator and created. In brief the body is treated as the center of existence, consciousness and identity. Yet, the body is constantly called into doubt in the writers' novels, which depict protagonists trapped between asserting their identity and submitting to cultural dictates of society. Her writings do call attention to woman's body and how they impact woman's lived experiences. At the same time she does not limit womanhood to a certain body but embraces a more inclusive notion of womanhood while still calling attention to the real phenomena that are acted out on and in because of woman's body.

***In the Country of Deceit* – Making the Private Public**

Shashi Deshpande's in her latest novel *In the Country of Deceit* makes the private public, and the unspeakable speakable by naming and representing graphically woman's experiences that our society confines to the sphere of embarrassment and shame. The writer focuses on body matters in her novel, trying to find out answers to questions - Is the sexed body a potent site of political interrogation? In other words, do bodies matter? Whose bodies matter? How do they matter? To what extent do women own their bodies? Does consent matter anymore when a woman enters an intimate relationship? Can she experience her own sexuality as a pleasurable one, autonomously decided, that is to be able to express it when, how and with whom?

Shashi Deshpande's experiment in writing the body shows some affinity with Cixous's *écriture féminine*, a call for women to return to the body as a source of female discourse. She believes in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assertion that women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves.

Deshpande locates the protagonist's body in the intersection of oppressive socio-cultural practices to depict its vulnerability; nonetheless, she does not project the body of a woman as absolutely repressed and docile. She creates a theoretical space for articulation of the protagonist's subject position and agency. The protagonist's capacity for freedom and autonomous actions are limited, however, by appealing to the silenced truth of her everyday experiences, she projects the protagonist's body with considerable agency to resist patriarchal power, and to negotiate her position within the institutions of oppression.

Body's Self-expression

Sexuality is the main force or the driving energy behind the body's self-expression. Although in India overt sexuality is considered as an act of shame for a woman, sexuality nonetheless is an important aspect of both male and female psyche. The novel can be read as an extended discourse on sexual desire, the discourse unfolding itself on the one hand through Devi's experiences of her body and on the other hand through her aunt Sindhu's letters in which she writes about her own life and, though at first inadvertently, comments on or complements Devi's experiences. Sindhu emphasizes the need of sexual fulfillment in life, "Life is lived

through the body. Body is important and so the demands of the body. And yet do you know that there is a line in the Upanishads which say that generating organ is the center of all pleasures. And they use the word Ananda. Remember, this is a very natural feeling, a very natural desire and you have a right to expect your life to contain this Ananda as well” (42-43).

The Life of Devayani

In the Country of Deceit presents woman not as an object of male desire but as a desiring subject as it explores the life of Devayani, convent educated, law graduate, twenty-seven years old unmarried woman. The stage is set for a new beginning; “I felt as if I was waiting for the curtain to go up, waiting for something to happen” (8). One day she happens to witness a football match with her cousin Gundu and she sees Ashok Chinnapa, the new D.S.P of Rajnaur and is fascinated by the energy surging through his body as he lifts his hands to celebrate the victory of his team: “It was the extremeness of the gesture, its flamboyance, may be, declaring a small moment of supreme happiness, announcing the pinnacle of achievement. I want a needlepoint of that extreme happiness, I want a moment in my life which makes me feel I am touching the sky” (24). The extreme happiness is the fulfillment of the bodily desire which she has ignored till now due to restrictions of the society which does not allow woman to fulfill this natural desire without marriage. Devayani meets Ashok at Rani’s house in a party and is haunted by his magnetic personality: “It was like a Picasso painting– eyebrows, cheekbones, ears, hair, nose, mouth, eyes, yes his eyes looking at me, resting on me...I lay in bed wide awake, conscious of my body in its nightdress, thinking, that’s the point of marriage. Sex without guilt. Sex without any strings attached. Sex without fear” (77). The desire for the union of her female body with Ashok becomes intense and uncontrollable, “It’s only the body’s response to desire. I knew that I know the desire for a man, the longing to be held by a man, to feel his body against mine” (89). Devayani becomes aware of her ‘body consciousness’ - feeling one’s emotions and desires, being in contact with bodily processes, listening to body’s needs. Devayani says: “I cannot tell Savi that this time I am frightened, not of the man but of myself, of my desire to run, not away from him. But in his arms” (94).

Ashok declares his love for her, love without any commitment and promise of durable relationship. It is the love between two bodies craving for the fulfillment of bodily hunger. She

gets a letter from Ashok inviting her for a clandestine meeting with him at a resort. She ignores the dictates of her mind, and succumbs to the desires of her flesh. To extinguish the fire of the body she throws herself in the arms of Ashok. In utter silence they communicate through the language of the bodies. Devayani, first time in contact with the body of a man experiences utter contentment and sheer, unadulterated joy suffusing her entire being. She says: “He began to trace my features with his fingers- my eyebrows, my nose, my chin, my lips. I could never have imagined that such a gentle touch so light that I could feel it, could evoke such a strong response from my body” (132). She is a woman who cannot betray the desires and demands of her body. Her sexual relationship with Ashok cannot be considered otherwise, for she is in full command of the situation as she is claiming her body for herself. “It was not just the passion, the immense tenderness, the joyousness with which he loved me. It was the exuberance, the flamboyance with which he expressed his love, letting down my hair, and holding it up again so that he could plant innumerable kisses on nape of the neck” (159). The union is followed by other bodily unions and she experiences her own sexuality as a pleasurable one, autonomously decided. Devi confesses:

Nobody, but nobody has the words for what sex with your beloved is like. It’s the same with music. You have to hear it, you can’t describe it. Only this man could give me such ecstasy, only he could give me such joy with his lovemaking. Ananda, Sindhu had called it. Yes, more than joy. Bliss. And he could give it to me with a touch, with a word. It was this man, not the sex. This man’s love, not the sex. And yet, the sex too (193).

Stigma and Condemnation

The female sexuality experiences outside of marriage are especially condemned as stigma. The societal and psychological constraint inherent in our ‘fundamental pattern’ does not allow Devayani to confess her affair and her embodied personality is split. There is disintegration between her mind and body. The body cannot steer itself clear of temptation and mind disapproves this act as it is conditioned by the norms of society. Antagonism to the body stem solely from external constraints designed to foster social obedience. The burden of sensual self-abnegation imposed on women by double standard is not undertaken in a willful spirit. It is passively accepted. She feels: “I had entered the country of Deceit. I could no longer be open

with people I loved. I had to deceive them” (147). She is riddled with guilt and fear of becoming a floozy and whore. Constantly swinging between euphoria and despair, she learns to live with guilt. The guilt again empowers her embodied self when Arjun becomes critical with pneumonia. She holds herself responsible for his acute illness as she thinks she has gone against the dictates of the society by committing adultery. She pray:, “Let Arjun be alright, I will give up Ashok, I am doing wrong, this is a punishment, but I’ll give up Ashok, I promise” (177).

Societal Imposition of Sexual Control

Women’s bodies, sexualities and gender identities are sites where cultural notions of normality and indeed social respectability are contested. Control of female sexuality is legitimized, even effectively mystified under the name of, tradition. Chastity, virtue and above all purity are extolled as great feminine virtues embodying the honor of the family and community. A woman’s experience of her body is largely that of shame as she is seen as transgressing family and social moral norms. In a sense woman’s body often is no longer her body but is taken over by the community. Savi and Shree are furious when they come to know about her relations with Ashok. Savi says: “You should have said you want to get married to get sex instead of doing a dirty thing just for sex” (184). Shree accuses her of committing adultery and trying to destroy Ashok’s marriage, which is not the task of respectable woman. Her act of adultery makes her vulnerable to all. Shree thinks she has stigmatized the family: “I was very angry. I thought of our families, yours and mine, of Aba and Mai, I thought of your name and reputation. How could you, Devayani, I thought how could you!” (196). Sindhu comments: “But there is one question that I keep asking, not you, but myself: Why did Putta do such a thing?” (257). She herself contemplates: “The word love can’t change anything. It is not a detergent that can wash out the stains. The wrong remains a wrong” (236).

Conflict – Internal and External

Conflict is central to women’s bodies, whether or not woman is able to give expression to her desires and views. Both within and outside the family, women’s bodies engage in the twin process of compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion, silence and speech. As a woman, she is expected to control her conduct in order to protect her and her family honor. Thus her body subconsciously recognizes the existence of a power hierarchy that hides a politically

correct message and that involves the acceptance and respect of those above her. Furthermore, she is fully aware that the resistance of them will end in failure and disownment.

Though unwilling, Devayani agrees to keep herself away from Ashok under the pressure of family and society. But she does not regret her relationship, she celebrates it: “Yes, I would never have known the joy, the experience of loving, of being loved, of becoming me with another human being. I wonder this union is what we long for all our lives. And you and I were lucky to have it. But we can’t go on, that is the truth, however precious it is to us, we can’t go on... Our mating, it was a miracle, a disaster” (256-257). Devayani, the female protagonist does not entirely reject traditional and culture restrictions per se but call for a new message that incorporates the demands of the contemporary world in a constant process of social, political and technological advance.

Forced into Concealing

Women are forced to conceal silently their bodies of sexuality under the monitoring of family and society. The dictates of the rigid society which suppress women’s desire and agency severs the dream like relationship of Devayani. Ashok is transferred to another city and Devayani is left alone. There is no bitter feeling, no treachery as Devayani considers the union to be the union of body and soul and is ready to remember the sweet memories of the passionate, beautiful time spent with her man, Ashok. “Is this what my life is going to be like from now- a constant struggle between trying to forget and wanting to remember?” (259). Silence becomes the reality of women as words are strangled and the body subjugated. The sweet sensation even if felt are consigned to the silence of pain.

Challenge to Patriarchal Mechanism

To conclude, Deshpande presents her protagonist Devayani who celebrates her sexuality and re-appropriates its generative principle through a deliberate inversion of patriarchal morals. Her sexuality is an arena of pleasure and agency in which she is empowered to use her body for herself. She challenges the male dominated and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control. It is not in its inhibiteness and suppression but in privilege and assertion that the new sexual ideology is structured. Deshpande narrates Devayani’s bodily experiences as a journey

wherein female body becomes a site of existential and bodily quest. By treating Devayani's body as the central theme around which her bodily/ sexual experiences get patterned, the author not only theorizes the protagonist's experiences as problematics of female body but also turns the narrative into a discursive debate on female body and sexuality. She looks at the theme of sexual transgression as a site for questioning the norms and values of a highly structured society.

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Shakuntla Bamal, M.A., M. Phil.
Assistant Professor in Sociology
S.M.R.J. Government College
Bhiwani - 127021
Haryana
India
gsaharan@gmail.com