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Psychological Well-being within Patriarchal Borders: A Reading of Shashi Despande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Dr. Jyoti Singh

Abstract

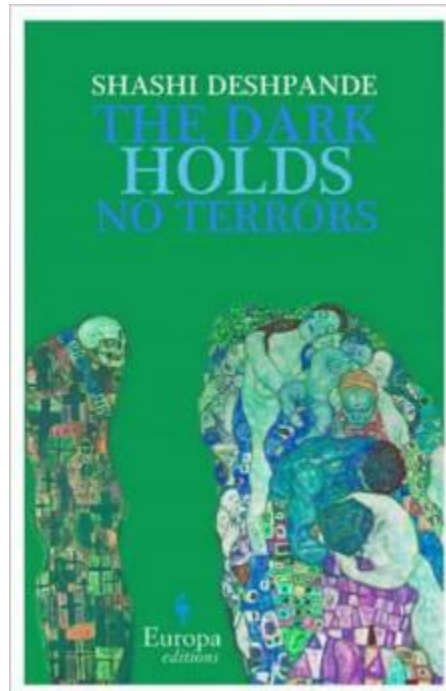
The present paper intends reading Shashi Despande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* with a view to analyse how women are conditioned to acquire femininity in a patriarchal set up and how at times it hinders in attainment of an authentic selfhood. It also proposes to discuss the concept of community as envisaged by the feminist psychologists and to explore if and how the characters in the novels under study react to the community which is associated with the patriarchal discourse and in which women have to perform the role scripted for them.

Sharing Experiences

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Women writers have used fiction to explore and share their experiences. They do not write in a vacuum but hold a mirror to the reality. The myriad conflicts, which they face in everyday lives, are woven into the fictional world of their creation. To probe the psychological wellness of women who form half the population of the world I shall choose two novels by Indian women writers namely *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy to probe their psychic well-being in a patriarchal set up. The experience of women by virtue of their being women is undeniably universal.

The tenets of the stone centre psychologists based at the Stone Centre Wellesley College, USA would form the tools to probe how women confront the dichotomy/ dilemma of what the community wants them to be and what they want to be. Endeavour would be to analyse whether this tension causes conflicts and crises in their lives or hinders or damages their feeling of well-being.

Woman-Centred Psychology -- A General Survey

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For more than a quarter century, the Stone Centre at Wellesley College, USA has been a driving force promoting a positive change for women. Most of the members of the Stone Centre like Judith Jordan, Alexandra G. Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene P. Stiver, Janet L. Surrey, Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan share common notions and concepts which are central to their works -- women's relational sense of self, the relational path of women's development, and the importance of empathy or responsiveness in relationships.

The Stone Centre psychologists analyse the centrality of connection in the development of the women's sense of self and its effect on women's ways of approaching relational conflicts and crises. Their works articulate the experiences of women, enlarging and enhancing the understanding of women's psychology.

Imparting Feminine Values in Patriarchal Order

In a Patriarchal set up stress is laid on girls imbibing the so-called feminine virtues, whereas for boys to perform the activities women do is a risk being thought of as un-masculine. Thus, the part assigned to women has been devalued and treated unimportant. This devaluation generates within women a sense of inferiority and dejection. If a society devalues women's work or status, how can it make them feel its valuable members? This is what these psychologists are questioning to reach a better understanding of women.

“The True Womanhood” Constraints in Patriarchal Order

The 'true womanhood' on which the identity of women stands, defines women as nurturers and caretakers who help in the development of others. (Miller 1976:17) As a result without an equal opportunity and right to develop them, they find this situation oppressive, creating a feeling of discontent. This gives rise to conflict. Some mask it under the facade of tolerance and some openly express it. If they wage war, refusing to adopt the existing value system of male dominance, they are labelled as misfits, 'femme fatales,' sadists who are on the way to diminish the masculinity of the men around.

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Risk of abandonment and condemnation do not let women seek their goals. It initiates a strong negative reaction from the other side, because “for women to act and react out of their own being is to fly in the face of their appointed definition and their prescribed way of living”. (Miller 1976:113-14) When women start realizing their own interests and self-growth, men feel intuitively threatened by the danger of the loss of “essentials that women have been carrying for the total society”. (Ibid: 120) Their discontent or conflict with their lives is seen as ‘unfeminine’ for they are to be the “quintessential accommodators, mediators, the adaptors and soothers”. (Ibid: 125)

Traditional Bias of Ideal Woman

The compatibility and non-compatibility of women to the traditional bias of ideal womanhood in both cases is hurtful. If they keep silent about the injustice, they smoulder silently and if they rebel they are threatened by separation or condemnation. It has been considered a duty for women not to attempt a thing that hurts others, and be responsible for the growth and well being of her people. Though women attempt good they feel bad internally, for their intrinsic goodness is not only overlooked, but is also not given what is its proper due. These strengths are not rewarded but become tools of exploitation.

Role of Affiliations

Women’s desire for affiliations is a “fundamental strength,” which helps in advancing the humanity and making the world a better place to live (Miller 1976:89). Maintaining affiliations against all odds becomes the source of many problems for, “while women have reached for and already found a psychic basis for a more advanced social existence, they are not able to act fully and directly on this valuable basis in a way that would allow it to flourish. Accordingly they have not been able to cherish or even recognize this strength. On the contrary when women act on the basis of this underlying psychological motive, they are usually led into subservience. That is, the only forms of affiliation that have been available to women are subservient affiliations” (Ibid). A woman who has long been apprenticed in the gender role, internalises the feminine virtues;

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therefore it would not be easy for one to relinquish the idea of disruption of affiliation, which may make her fall victim to a number of psychological problems which may manifest in different ways.

Validating Membership in a Community

To validate one's membership to a particular community, an individual has to accept and adhere to certain principles it lays down. Generally the myth is maintained that women do not need power, do not and should not have power, whereas women have long been using their power to nurture, care and love to foster the growth of the others, effectively. They use their powers to empower the others, increasing the others' resources, capabilities, effectiveness and the ability to act.

Community above the Individual

The ethics of the Indian society places the community above the individual and its membership is more of a duty to everyone. Traditions colour and contour the Indian womanhood and its power and hold on the collective Indian psyche demands conformity to the 'feminine mystique' syndrome. In the Indian social structure the legacy of cultural codes and tradition depict woman as a symbol of reverence, a 'Devi' and is desired to conform to all that the mythical 'Devis' like *Sita*, *Gandhari*, *Savitri*, *Parvati* symbolise. This does not mean that in such a country where women are deified and revered feministic demands are needless. Reality comes limping when women suffer due to their blind conformity and complacency to these stultifying archetypal principles and their basic virtues are denigrated.

External Validation Based on Traditional Feminine Quality

For external validation of one's self, women adhere to the self-image based on the traditional feminine quality of 'goodness' rooted in self-abnegation and self-sacrifice is strictly demanded by the patriarchal community. This social role of deferring and attending to the

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emotional and physical needs of the others negating the needs of one's own self hinders an 'authentic selfhood.' Reconciliation with the traditional feminine becomes conflicting and problematic though most of the women follow the set social pattern of taking on responsibility to the exclusion of self and adopt the feminine convention of self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

To position themselves as worthy members of the community most women look towards external validation of their selves. In a patriarchal set-up this hinders development of autonomy in them. The other set of women, in pursuit of an autonomous self and especially, when they measure themselves against culturally valued masculine norms, turns to inner validation.

Unfortunately, in both cases discontentment is their lot. In the second case it is because community does not lend social support to non-traditional, assertive or competent women. To live in relationship is a basic human urge, hence community's ostracizing and ridicule of women in self-pursuit, renders them unhappy. Conflict becomes a taboo for women. Women's pursuit for development and initiation to bring about change to meet their requirements causes the people to think of it as "abandonment of responsibility in relationships" (Gilligan 1982:130).

Impact of Self-Image

In this section my endeavour would be to focus on how the various female characters respond and relate to their self-development in a community, which is basically patriarchal and study the impact of self-image based upon the morality of care.

The Dark Holds No Terrors

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru exhibits rare boldness to pursue her career as a doctor, in order to validate her claims. Her mother who is successfully conditioned in the patriarchal notions becomes its agent, displaying not only partial behaviour towards her, favouring her son, but also opposes her wish to continue her studies. Saru's assertion to pursue her career comes as a shock to her mother, because she views it as socially undesirable in girls.

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Eva Figes in *Patriarchal Attitudes* correctly points out that “when a woman is required to choose between marriage and a career it does of course amount to repression on a large scale”. (1970:13) Saru goes a long way to become a successful doctor but the price paid is heavy on the emotional side. She is punished by disruption of an effective relationship with her mother. Mother’s rancour is further aggravated by Saru choosing to marry a man outside of her community and the reprisal is severe this time. Kamala declares that she never had any daughter and Saru is as good as dead to her. Though Saru is the sole decision-maker of her own life, she still remains unhappy. It is because she craves for external validation. She is dependent on her mother’s assessment of her marriage and constantly endeavours to prove her wrong. So she is not undergoing any therapeutic or cleansing experience. What Saru did —choosing her career and life partner — is not wrong, seen through the rightful claims of the self. But the community does not socially support such independent behaviour in girls and her mother, backed by such notions, punishes her in her own way. Her guilt accompanies her and is redeemed with her professing to take hold of her life towards the end of the novel.

Saru’s conjugal life is fraught with the male superiority complex. Placed on a higher plane than Manu professionally, Saru’s life becomes a nightmare and she thinks:

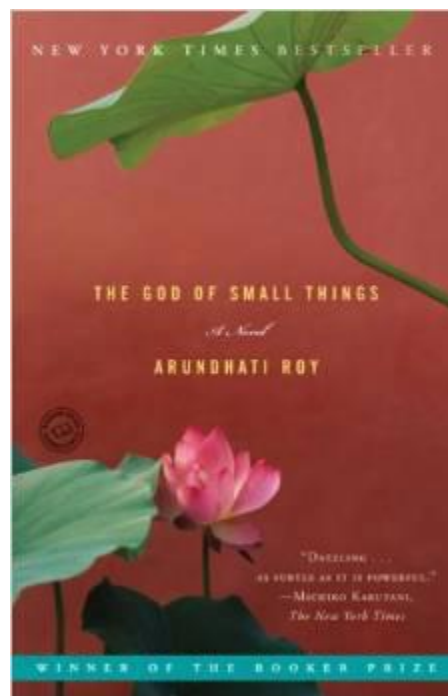
... the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps the same thing that made me inches taller, made him inches shorter ... $a + b$ they told us in mathematics is equal to $b + a$. But here $a + b$ was not, definitely not equal to $b + a$. (42) A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he’s an M.A, you should be a B.A. If he’s 5’4” tall, you shouldn’t be more than 5’3” tall. If he’s earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees (137).

To make her marriage work and restore happiness she even suggests wanting to “stop working. I want to give it all up ... my practice, the hospital, everything” (79) and “stay at home and look after the children. Cook and clean, “ like a mother “ in an ad, in a movie, dressed in a

crispy starched, ironed sari. Wife and mother, loving and beloved, - a picture of grace, harmony and happiness". (80)

Her success on the professional front jeopardises her marital life and becomes a cause of her victimization. "Both men and women are products of their culture and victims of the institution of marriage. It is as difficult for women to outgrow the images and roles allotted to them by their society as it is for men." (Palker 1991:131)

The God of Small Things



Similarly in *The God of Small Things* Pappachi is jealous of his wife who is a successful businesswoman. Mammachi, a traditional wife silently suffers physical and emotional violence, both inflicted by her jealous husband. Saru mutely suffers the rapist husband, even though marital rape is punishable by law. Sacrifice and tolerance are the two virtues expected in an ideal woman. These very virtues become instrumental in her suffering.

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Saru's ruptured marital life, an unforgiving mother who died carrying bitter feelings for Saru in her heart, result in a pessimistic attitude and withdrawal of self. It is only towards the end of the novel, when in retrospection she reflects on her past and makes up her mind to bravely face it, recasting her life. Though an open-ended novel it ends on an optimistic note, showing Saru rushing to her neighbour's ailing child, which is a sign of her merging with the community and seeking self-fulfilment. Susan Willis rightly asserts that "selfhood is not defined negatively as separateness from others, nor it is defined narrowly by the individual dyad — the child and its mother — but on the larger scale as the ability to recognise one's continuity with the larger community" (1987:159) This act of holding primacy in connections exposes Saru's individual efforts to participate in the collective life.

Ammu of *The God of Small Things* is more sinned against than sinning. Her childhood marks a long bout of suffering and torture at the hands of her father. Over a period of time "she developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big" (181-82). Like a rebel she tries to shatter the patriarchal power structure. For a woman the road to assert or construct her person, or 'identity' or attain autonomy in a gender based power structure, is not impediment free. In a community, especially Indian, rules of morality are strict for a woman as compared to a man. It imposes on her the responsibility of care and if she deviates, nemesis befalls her. Basically, Ammu is a seeker. She longs for a loving relationship and marries for love, but her dream is shattered. She continues living with her idle, drunkard husband until his unjust selfish request to satiate the sexual urge of his white boss, makes her walk out of her marriage. This lends Ammu the charm of a heroine, but the orthodox community fails to applaud. Self-respecting Ammu with all her limitations, takes a strong stand against injustice. On returning to her mother she is an unwelcome guest for "Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property" and she thanked sarcastically the "wonderful male chauvinist society". (57) Even men are shown to suffer in a cast-ridden, traditional community. Velutha meets a tragic end and his wife rejects Chako, which speaks of the residue of colonial consciousness.

Chacko's male chauvinism is obvious when he sidelines his mother, who is actually the motivating hand behind the pickle factory, and calls her pickle factory "my factory" whereas Ammu who works equally, does not have any share in it. (57) The pressures of community make, "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits" and watches wide-eyed to check transgression (3). Due to their mixed parentage Estha and Rahel are deprived of both patrimony and claim on their maternal ancestors' property. Divorced mother's dilemma, to give them a surname surfaces, when Ammu helplessly feels that "choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of a choice". (37) Her affair with Velutha is kept secret to maintain harmony. She knows community would oppose it and survival would be difficult. It is done to maintain a balance between rights of self and care for responsibilities. This shows her partial surrender to the patriarchal pressures. The institutionalised tyranny punishes both the lovers. She is unable to be a whole person, but pays a heavy price in her attempt to be one. Their affair is taken as immoral, even the police officer at the Kottayam Police Station brands her a 'Veshya'. (8) On the other hand no body uses a substitute for Chako who is ever lusting after the female workers. Chacko's relation with the female factory workers is overlooked as 'men's needs' by his mother, who disregards Ammu's desires and thinks of her as "a bitch in heat". (258) She is so cruelly treated by the community that she has a recurrent dream "in which policemen approached her with snicking scissors, wanting to hack off her hair". (161) Mammachi and Kochamma both become the propagators of the ideology of the dominant class. They lock Ammu "like the family lunatic" for breaking social laws of long standing authority. (252) The society takes merciless retribution and her children also suffer. The community that rejected their mother did not embrace them. After Sophie's death Ammu is thrown out of her house.

Non-conformity Results in Tragedy

Ammu's non-conformity to the extremely traditional community's social code results in tragedy for the pair of lovers. In the eyes of the rigidly conservative society Ammu had dared to subvert or challenge its values by falling in love with an untouchable. Velutha's death in police custody fills her with feelings of guilt and depression, "fear made her garrulous" and she had

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“feverish glitter in her eyes” (160-61). She lost her job due to her illness. Later she died at the age of 31. The church refused to bury Ammu on “several counts”. (162) The reprisals taken are a warning to “a community against an outbreak” (309) and “a history lesson for future offenders” (336). The community had punished those who transgressed the “love laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much”. (328) Ammu’s story shows the terrible consequences of the refusal to abide by age-old traditions of the established laws of the gender-based society. It validly reflects a woman’s experience and psychological development in patriarchal conditions.

Two Kinds of Women

In the gallery of women characters portrayed, we encounter two kinds of women, one who submit to the dominant discourse for validation and the second who favour inner validation in search of a free self. The first set adopt the community’s charted path while some filled with a sense of inadequacy, especially, when they measure themselves against culturally valued masculine norms turn to inner validation. Unfortunately, in both cases unhappiness is the lot. In the second it is because the community does not lend social support and it is a basic human urge to be in relation. Women like Mammachi, succumb to external validation of their selves and fall victim to the patriarchal pressures to survive. Baby Kochamma shrugs off all ties except one that was with her beloved Father Mulligan who she remembers ardently even after his death. This inescapable tragic situation makes her numb to the suffering of others. She rejects everything to achieve individual freedom, but unhappiness is her lot for she fails to fuse with the community. Saru reach a wholeness of self when they finally recognise the strength of family bonds. Though Saru shows signs of self-pity and vulnerability, self-evaluation helps her overcome the alienating tendencies which lend her an aura of liberated woman in the true sense of the term. Such women feel a heightened sense of authenticity, validation through self-realisation which results when powerlessness is replaced by the experience of relation and power.

Important to Study the Attitude of Community towards Women

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In order to study women in community and understand women as community, it is necessary to study the attitude of the community towards women. This is particularly exigent in the Indian context as the hold of the traditional stereotypical image of woman still has a strong hold on the Indian psyche and present-day Indo-centric approach to literature takes due cognisance of Indian social matrix, to deal with the representation of values in Indian literature. To grow up as a girl is different compared to growing up as a boy and it reflects the attitude of the society towards the female child.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* becomes “more important than Dhruva” only during the ceremony of ‘Haldi-Kumkum. (56) She feels jealous of Dhruva; Her father’s inattentiveness towards Saru makes her see Dhruva as her rival. She once tries “to take his attention away from Dhruva sitting on his lap” but fails. (32) Similarly, in GST, being a son, Chako “was permitted excesses and eccentricities nobody else was”. (38) However, sometimes this marked affection for male children create in a girl child low self-esteem, depression and feeling of worthlessness, besides the feelings of being wronged and hurt. The discrimination and feeling less loved and cared for, which is detrimental to a woman’s development of self worth and generates conflict. The female experience of growing up in a patriarchal community which encourages them to uphold the spirit of kinship, arrange their activities and lives centring around others, without equal opportunity to develop their selves unlike the males, has a tremendous impact on their psyche and growth.

In the vicious cycle of devaluation of a girl child, one main reason for being unwelcome in a family is the dowry system, which literally impoverishes the parents. Having to “spend for her wedding” - Saru is referred to as a “responsibility” which they “can’t even evade” (144). This causes resentment and feelings of unworthiness in Saru. Ammu’s marriage in *The God of Small Things* was delayed since “her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals come Ammu’s way” (38).

Gender Discrimination

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Gender discrimination in imparting education to a girl is conspicuous when Ammu has to discontinue her studies while Chacko, her brother is sent to Oxford for higher education. Her college education was considered “an unnecessary expense” so sitting at home she “helped her mother with the house work”. (38) Saru’s further admission in the medical college is also seen as unnecessary by her mother who is keen on getting her married.

Cultural Stereotypes

Due to the cultural conditioning, both men and women bear the cultural stereotypes in minds. This is the reason why men find it hard to accept the reversed roles women embrace and women too feel guilty if their new role does not merge well with her primary role as a mother or wife. They start believing in the absolute tenet that a woman’s place is home. “The demand that women act as repositories of the whole culture’s values compels them to endure a passivity that verges on paralysing annihilation”. (Chawla 1999:351)

Saru concentrating on her self-development climbs the ladder of success step by step, despite all hindrance, but cannot escape the ridicule hurled at her by the male community. Some men look down upon the working women and try in every way to find fault with their performance, highlighting their inability to prove professionally better. Boozie, Saru’s boss in a biased cynical tone declares, “I don’t want incompetent, clumsy, uninterested females cluttering up this place. Go home and play with your rolling pins and knitting needles”. (89) His reaction comes when Saru rushes with the lumber puncture for “Manu waiting for me at home”, (90) who when once she reached home late due to an emergency sat “with a brooding expression on his face making her heart give painful quivering little jumps”(78).

Like Saru women have to juggle the dual responsibilities of career and home which is one cause for their stress and breakdown. And like her many women often become guilt ridden for having to leave behind their children with maids or grandparents. Women “experience considerable conflict between their sense of self at work and their sense of self in their personal lives”. (Stiver 1991:224) For men “work has always been an important source of self-esteem” but

it is different with women. (ibid) Their identity is basically linked with their place at home as homemakers. They have to be wives and mothers first and career comes later. This sometimes earns them the title of ‘unprofessional’ as in the case of Saru. Due to this, women rarely seek opportunities for advancement and often feel them burdensome if they get any, for the conflict to maintain balance between the home and career pops up and they struggle to minimize it at times by ignoring their competitive wishes.

Surrender Complacently

Often bogged down by their effort to maintain affiliations, to avoid ostracizing, some like Mammachi surrender complacently though the psychological pain and suffering batters them. Now and then they voice their protests, but do not openly rebel like Ammu, who walk out of their oppressive marriages. These women protest against the traditionally oppressive stereotype image and dissolve their victimizing marriages. Though they boldly reject the institution of marriage, society especially Indian, does not desire nor acknowledges a woman’s protests or rejection of the given identity and persecutes them for non-conformity.

Women often continue in an unhappy marital relationship to avoid the stigma that descends upon a divorcee or a separated woman. To escape marital violence Saru thinks of divorce, which appears “frightening” to her, so she heads for her father’s home (70). In *The God of Small Things* the word divorce is pronounced as ‘dievorce’ as if it is a form of death.

Community and Family

Community is an extension of a family and what goes on the macro-level is perceptible at the micro level. Within the family the girls are conditioned to imbibe the virtues of care, nurturance, tolerance, compliance, adjustment and self-sacrifice. These are the virtues expected by the society to be inculcated especially by the females. These very qualities become a source of their exploitation. Rebellion rises within, in the form of conflict and often gives rise to the feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, non-involvement, depression and passivity. Saru, unable to voice her suffering silently smoulders. She becomes a “terrified animal” and

“psychotic” preferring to “rather die” than suffer the sexual sadism inflicted by Manu but due to her children she does not commit suicide.

Mammachi too suffers without voicing her anger unlike Ammu who expresses it and such women are likely to be branded as “unfeminine” or ‘immoral’ for challenging the societal codes. By oppressing the women, society itself is victimized for the virtues on which it stood for so long crumble, when women in their rage shun them.

The community should respond to the women with compassion and recognize their contribution. Whenever women raise questions concerning their lives and reflecting issues, which matter a lot to them, they are ignored as trivial matters. If they complain they are criticized for complaining, as it is not an ingredient of ‘ideal womanhood’. The strengths which women carry to advance the society – nurture, care etc – are not given due recognition and are devalued. This gives rise to numerous problems for “if society deems women’s areas less valuable, it cannot also tell a woman that she can, or should feel herself to be a fully valued person” and such feelings of inferiority lead to feelings of vulnerability. (Miller 1976:75)

The Utopian dream of a society which is not segregated by the sexist bias, where women have equal rights to advance and develop their selves, where the virtues of care, nurture, tolerance are not devalued so that women may not relinquish them in favour of ‘masculine’ values, where these values are not to be only acquired by women but become a ‘human norm’ to raise the world to greater heights of peace, security and ecstasy; “where the real self is the existential consciousness of oneself as an intentional, acting subject, rather than as object merging with the established ‘shoulds’,” can be achieved along with the concurrence and cooperation of men (Bande 2000:39). What woman needs for self-validation, is self-introspection and an ability to look at her life from a distance.

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Dr. Jyoti Singh
Head of the Department
Department of Post Graduate Studies
Regional Institute of English
Chandigarh Administration
Sector 32 C
Chandigarh
India
jyo_sing441@yahoo.in

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