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## THE IDEA OF MODERN WOMAN IN IN TIMES OF SIEGE AND THAT LONG SILENCE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Fiction, very popular in contemporary world, came into existence with the notion that literature should deal with the facts of human experience in the realistic manner. Since eighteenth century to today it has been a prominent form that subjects commonplace events for literary excellence. In the contemporary world the form has emerged as a platform to address a number of cultural, social, and political issues. It has been making the people aware with many new and unconventional issues. The present paper is an attempt to observe one such issue, the idea of modern woman in Githa Hariharan's In Times of Siege (2003) and That Long Silence (1989) by Shashi Deshpande. The objective is to illustrate the changed position of woman in the society from earlier stereotyped one.*

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Fiction, very popular in contemporary world, came into existence with the notion that literature should deal with the facts of human experience in the realistic manner. Since eighteenth century to today it has been a prominent form that subjects commonplace events for literary excellence. In the contemporary world the form has emerged as a platform to address a number of cultural, social, and political issues. It has been making the people aware with many new and unconventional issues. The present paper is an attempt to observe one such issue, the idea of modern woman in Githa Hariharan's In Times of Siege (2003) and That Long Silence (1989) by Shashi Deshpande. The objective is to illustrate the changed position of woman in the society from earlier stereotyped one.

One with good observation may easily observe a great change between the positions of women in ancient and modern world. In ancient times women were governed by male expectations. In a patriarchal society they were supposed to be submissive and dependent on their father, brother, husband, and son. They did not have their individuality but were defined by others. They were not allowed to go against the wishes of their family and had no legal claim over property. Moreover, they were even deprived of the education. From the time immemorial, women have been subjected to male domination. Thus there is a long history of victimization of women across time and place. There are plenty of examples of their dependence on men in the entire course of history. Our religion and literature also have played crucial role in promoting this idea. It is believed that the fall of Adam from the Paradise, in the Bible, happens only because of Eve. Only she is responsible for the original sin and suffering of human being. The great Indian epics viz. the Ramayana and the Mahabharata also are examples of this very sensibility. In the Mahabharata Gandhari and Draupadi are shown as a chaste and pativrata woman (a woman who is devoted to her husband). Though they have power, courage, and intelligence, yet they cannot think to make their husbands unhappy because their first and foremost duty is to appease them. While after

marriage Gandhari starts wearing blindfold to share her husband's blindness, Draupadi accompanies her husbands in the hardships of forest life. Sita and Savitri's identities are also seen in relation to their husbands'. All these examples of great women and ideas regarding them show that for a long time they have been getting place only after men. The story of plight of women does not end with ancient time only but it continues in the succeeding ages also. The male domination in this age became more apparent and uglier. In middle age women were deprived of education and even health care. They were confined to walls of the house only. They had nothing creative to do except domestic work. They were an object for men to gratify their lust, and had to wear *purdha* (veil) to cover them so that they can avoid the hunger of men. Moreover, in the famous epic *Ramacharitmanas*, Tulsidas overtly states that drum, illiterate, lowest class people, animal and woman all are subject to punishment and humiliation (396).

This situation of women across the world continued to the early decades of the twentieth century. Even the Victorian age England held that women were created only for looking-after children and household. This tendency towards them is very much evident in the novels of Jane Austen where all the women characters are engaged in gossiping, sewing, match-making, and love-affairs. They do not do any creative work. Tennyson, the representative poet of the age, seems a staunch supporter of this ideology. According to him a woman should be a good housewife and should enjoy the blessed life at home. In his poem "The Princess", he writes:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:  
Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
Man with head and woman with the heart:  
Man to command woman to obey;  
All else confusion. (V. 447-51)

But after the two World Wars the world took a shift that caused birth to a strong feminist movement. Feminism, an ideology that goes against the tendency of the subordination of women, is defined as "the belief and aim that women should have same rights and opportunities as men" (Oxford Advanced Learner's 7<sup>th</sup> ed. 565). It took its birth from John Stuart Mill's writings, who believed that every individual should have all the liberty and benefits of development. From its birth to the present day it has been playing a very significant role in voicing the injustice and inequality against women. It has unearthed the marginalized position of women that has been existing for long time. It supports the social, legal, political and economical rights of women. Moreover, as Sushila Singh writes, "today feminists protest against the way the social institution, supported by cultural values and normative expectations, forces women into an unreasonably narrow role" (20); and today it has become, what Toril Moi says, "political [label] indicating support for the aims of the new woman's movement which emerged in the late 1960s" (qtd. Singh 21).

Therefore, the effort of feminism has enabled modern women to claim their rights. They are no longer follower of stereotypes; instead they have developed a sense of individuality. Now they take their own decisions and are setting priorities of their life. Today they have greater concern for intelligence than beauty. Therefore, Manoj Kumar Mishra is right in his observation when he says that "the new woman gives more importance to her intelligence because this is what she thinks she requires now to live meaningfully and gracefully" (149). Comparing their earlier situation with today's Shubha Tripathi observes that "when feminism was in its infancy in India, women were viewed as two stereotypes: the one docile, domesticated, draped in gold and gaudiness, devoted to household, selfless and servile; the other, bare and brazen, straying and sensual. But today they are no longer caught in old clichés: wife or whore, virgin or vamp, moral or moll" (146). Instead, they are overcoming their stereotypical role. Thus, feminism have liberated the women and made them assertive, independent, and confident.

Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, resents against the social taboos. In the novel *In Times of Siege* the novelist endeavours to portray attributes of the new women. She presents two female characters viz., Rekha and Meena. They both belong to modern age and its spirit. Unlike conventional women they are not dependent on their male counterparts. Rekha, wife of Professor Shiv Murthy who teaches History in an open university, is a professional woman. She maintains a delicate balance between her home and profession. Another female character Meena is a research scholar in Sociology. She is also an

independent girl. In order to judge their characters as new women one can use the criteria suggested by Naresh K. Jain as litmus. He suggests four binary-opposites to differentiate the modern women from the traditional. These binary-opposites are: Subordination – Autonomy; Dharma – Personal goals; Sexual purity – Sexual emancipation, and Silence – Speech (9-28). First, since tradition does not expect a woman free and independent, she has to be dependent on her male counterparts. The Laws of Manu, a typical conservative book, states “[i]n childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when husband is dead, under her sons’. She should not have Independence” (Manu V.148). But the female characters of the novels are completely unconventional in this regard. They do not accept male dominance over them, even sometimes they are dominating. The character Rekha performs her both duties very well. Her presence can be seen in each and everything in her household. One may sense her presence in her home whether she is physically present at her home or not. Her husband does not take any decision without her advice. She keeps a sharp eye on every activity in the house and on Shiv’s life. There is a garden in the house which is named as “Rekha’s garden”. About her role in managing the garden Shiv comments that “plant[s] afresh on the blank tablet [are] things of her choosing, things she [can] name, things that depend on her for their survival” (Hariharan 58). She does not simply rely on other’s mercy, but tackle the situation in her own way “a look on her face that he imagines many of the conquerors of Delhi have shared: a gleam that assesses the struggle of the enemy, and the spoils to be won. The kind of hungry look that wants to colonize as far as the eye can see clear and rearrange spaces and lives. (Hariharan 57-58)

Like Rekha, Meena also shows the transition of women from subordination to autonomy. She is a research scholar and at the same time confident, independent and intelligent girl. She believes in managing things on her own. She does not want any kind of help from anyone. While she is on crutches she does not sit idly. Along with Kamla, the home attendant, she tries to do the works as much as she can and wants to get rid of her crutches as soon as possible:

Meena’s exercise to reactive her leg, her desire to discard the hated single crutch, her impatience to be done with it all, to get on with her life, to get back to it. . . . With her determination to push convalescence into fast-forward mode. Her single minded wooing of strength and well-being. And most of all, her energetic, obsessive pursuit of independence. (Hariharan 197-98)

In the other novel, Jaya challenges the traditional notion of ideal marriage. She violently projects her resistance to such a tradition as “If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn’t want to know anything” (Deshpande 61). Thus, all the three characters have their own individuality and their identity is not shown in relation to any male counterpart. They make their own decisions and have their unusual opinions about things. Second, since tradition assigns woman’s duties towards her husband, children, and family, The Laws of Manu states, that “[t]he wife is the visible form of what holds together the begetting of children, the caring for them when they are born, and the ordinary business of everyday. Children, the fulfilment of duties, obedience, and the ultimate sexual pleasure depends upon a wife” (Manu IX.27-28). So, a woman has no existence apart from these. But Rekha and Meena do not just follow Manu. Though Rekha performs her duties towards her husband and daughter, yet she is a career woman. She has some other personal goals too. She is a very free kind of person who does not wish to finish herself for the sake of domestic works only, rather than tries to do things which give her pleasure. She tries every creative thing to make her life meaningful. For her, a women’s duty is not only for her husband and family, but towards herself too. The other character Meena, unlike a traditional woman deprived of education, lives independently in a hostel and is pursuing research. She is active and intelligent and has an exact observation about a situation. Shiv notices: “Like Rekha, Meena names things with ferocious certainty. Communist fundamentalist. These women warriors seem to know exactly which cities they want to raze to the ground, which they want to raise in their place” (Hariharan 58). Though she is young, yet her actions and approach towards life surprise Shiv. He is amazed at her confidence, and says: “She is just twenty-four. At and when she should be looking at love for the first time, trembling with wonder and confusion at the mysteries of human heart. The human body, her own body. A man’s body” (Hariharan 111). The character Jaya, unlike other stereotype women, instead of

blaming her husband for every failure of her she resolves to try to be more introspective and find out means to live life fully. She says, “[She] hadn’t stopped writing because of Mohan; I could not possibly make Mohan the scapegoat for my failures” (Deshpande 145). She realizes that everyone should fight his/her own battle, through a balance between ego and self. Thus, instead of following the dictated rules of society they have their priorities to personal goals. They work for self-fulfilment which ultimately leads to satisfaction and happiness.

Third, in patriarchal society male enjoys more freedom in sexual matters than female. A male can get remarried or have more than one wife. But as far as a woman is concerned, sex is a dogma for her. She is even prohibited to think of any other man except her husband (Tulsidas 322-23). In tradition, Sita, Savitri, Gandhari, and Damyanti etc. are seen as the prototypes of chaste and pure woman. They are respected for their chastity, and this covertly suggests that a woman should be chaste. But unlike them the modern women are not dogmatic regarding sex. They are overcoming the old concepts of purity and chastity. Now a day women are regaining the claim of their own body and are choosing their partner herself. In the novel, Meena, a twenty-four years girl, does not hesitate to have physical relationship with a middle-aged man, Shiv. Her sexual relation with Shiv shows her own individual choice and freedom.

Fourth, with the advent of Postcolonialism, speech and silence have become connotations for colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless respectively. Since a traditional woman is supposed to be coy, submissive and obedient, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” states that since subaltern [i.e. women] cannot speak for themselves, female intellectual have the responsibility to speak for them (66-111). But in the present novel one finds female characters that are quite confident and bold. They are not just passive receivers, but are active participants in the society. They represent the class of women that takes part in the decision making and share the power with males in both domestic and social relationships. As in Rekha’s home she takes decisions regarding household. She has a garden in her house which she manages very carefully and is found curious to know what would be happening in her absence. She does not leave things completely on Shiv’s responsibility. She keeps on asking him whether “mali” comes regularly for gardening or not. She is not sure of it and does not want everything to be dried up. Although she is out of station, yet she dictates a list of her choices to her husband and asks him to do it. The other character Meena also plays an important role in giving strength and support to Shiv when he is entrapped by fundamentalist for his writings on twelfth century poet and saint Basava. His situation becomes very chaotic due to several media interviews, hate mails, and even threats against his wife and daughter who are out of station. Meena suggests him to take help from his colleagues against the organization called “Manch” and the fundamentalists along with their head, who have been asking for Shiv’s resignation. Unlike the traditional women who are only subordinated to their better half, these women have their own voice. Moreover, they have not only their own voices but also help others to speak. Therefore, they share the power as well as shoulder the responsibilities with their male counterparts.

Thus, after judging these female characters, on the scale suggested by Naresh K. Jain, it can be declared that in the portrayal of all the three characters, the paper has successfully embodied the concept of modern woman. Her both characters represent the spirit of modern woman who wants to manage the things on her own. The characters are conscious about their identity and take their own decisions. Moreover, they are also concerned for their familial and social responsibilities. They equally participate in every aspects of life with their male counterparts and prove themselves complimentary with them for a good, balanced and just society. Along with it they also express their opinions about age old social customs and sometimes challenge them. In the novels, Hariharan and Deshpande have successfully presented the issues of women rights and their role in the society in very realistic manner.

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