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Mapping the Threshold: Spatial Subversion and Female Agency in the Selected Fiction of Shashi Deshpande

Dr. Vandana Kuldeep*

Assistant Professor, Vedic Kanya P.G. Mahavidyalaya, Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: vandana98kuldeep@gmail.com

Abstract

In South Asian literary criticism, domestic spaces are fixed/unbreakable confinement of patriarchy and abolition of female voice. The present paper explores the spatial organization of modern Indian middle-class. In the writings of South Asian women authors, the domestic space is primarily a site of patriarchal oppression, the paper relies on Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of the domestic, Henri Lefebvre's critique of social production of space, and Bell Hooks' conceptualization of the homeplace to demonstrate how in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande, the main characters negotiate their domestic environment to liberate themselves and actualize their selves. By rereading the key scenes and passages of her novels, "That Long Silence(1989)", "The Dark Holds No Terrors(1980)". This paper aims to illustrate how the protagonists utilize thresholds, verandahs, balconies, staircases, doorways to renegotiate their domesticity and turn it into their empowering endeavor.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Spatial Politics, Liminality, Domesticity, Feminist Agency, Physical Architecture, Re-definition.

Introduction

In middle-class Indian society, social expansion has long been divided into the ideological axis of **Ghar** (the domestic interior) and **Bahar** (the public outside). In traditional gender roles, embedded with morality, women were tasked home as a world of protection, modesty and cultural and social preservation. Besides, as feminist critic Jasbir Jain says, domesticity in postcolonial Indian fiction rarely remains a passive container; it is an active arena where gender identity is continuously contested.

Shashi Deshpande's work throws light on educated, middle-class women who feel they are trapped into such spatial settings. Deshpande's characters work on the physical boundaries of their close surroundings; rather than creating a dramatic scene. They do not get hyper-reactive of the resolution. They do not break the boundaries, they alter what those boundaries mean. In "**That long Silence**" and

"The Dark Holds No Terrors", we see how kitchens, back rooms, stairways and windows function. We can closely look at the redesigning of domestic space through female agency.

Research Gap

While there is an extensive critical literature on how Shashi Deshpande depicts female psychology, patriarchy, marital dullness and existential angst, I believe critical attention has not focused sufficiently on the role of the physical geometry in her novels.

The Primary Gap- Contemporary scholars tend to depict the setting in Deshpande's novels as either uninteresting backdrop or an all-encompassing prison. However, there is not much written on how Deshpande's female characters use thresholds, doorways, verandahs, window sills, staircases, balconies to their advantage. This paper aims to explore this gap and reveal the critical role these architectural nuances play in her fiction.

Research Objective

- **Primary Objective-** To examine how Shashi Deshpande uses the physical as well as liminal domestic landscapes as a medium to express female agency, and achieve psychoanalytic self-discovery in **"That Long Silence"** and **"The Dark Holds No Terrors"**.

Secondary Objective

- To evaluate how the interior (the kitchen, the storeroom, the ancestral bedroom, the small flat) is transformed from a space of suffocation into a realm of self-discovery, artistic transformation and revolt.
- To examine the metaphorical and architectural significance of the threshold (the balcony, the verandah, the doorway, the stairs) as a place where decisions are made.
- To evaluate the role of these interiors and their thresholds in enabling the female protagonist to renegotiate her place within society without necessarily renouncing her family and social ties.

Analysis: Spatial Subversion and Domestic Interiors

- **The Shift from Suburban Flat to Dadar Crucible (That Long Silence)**

At the very beginning of the novel *That Long Silence*, Jaya is living in suburban Bombay in an apartment decorated to reflect her husband Mohan's new social status. In this house, she is tied to her husband's career, following the pattern of the middle-class wife. Jaya writes a serialized article in the Wednesday issue of the *Times of India* under the pseudonym 'Seeta'. However, as soon as Mohan is accused of corruption, the couple moves to the old family flat in Dadar. The shift is supposed to accommodate written visitors. Initially, the move makes Jaya feel

imprisoned as she faces the cramped conditions. However, she soon realigns her perception of place, finding a proper life should take place. With no visitors to entertain, she finds herself in a "homespace" that allows her to re-examine her existence according to Bell Hooks' understanding. Still, in the unfamiliar environment, she manages to escape her routine, realize her suppressed ambitions, & write creatively for the first time in her life.

The apartment in Bombay has been tailored to emphasize her husband's achievements, & Jaya's desires are circumscribed by his needs. She is expected to follow the disciplined silence of the middle-class women. However, the move to their old Dadar family flat in Dadar triggers Jaya's desire for a different lifestyle. The couple must move back to their previous home because the accusations against Mohan have attracted undesirable press, & his parents' friends refuse to host them. Jaya is initially disappointed as she thought her column under the pseudonym Seeta & her writing for the Times have brought them recognition & status.

Yet, as she spends more time in the new place, she understands that it allows her to write without catering to the expectations of others. As she sits in the new house (or prison, as she calls it), she abandons the fiction pieces full of the praise of her husband's achievements that she had been publishing under a pseudonym. Instead, she starts recording her real thoughts & feelings.

As Deshpande writes, "I sat there, looking at the blank paper, knowing that this time I couldn't trade truth for comfort." (Deshpande, 1989, p. 142).

The cramped Dadar flat couldn't become a hiding place; instead, it becomes an intellectual space where Jaya requires her real literary voice, which stood for authenticity.

- **Confronting Spatial Memory in the Ancestral Home (The Dark Holds No Terrors)**

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita (Saru) leaves her marital home because her husband, Manu, has been regularly raping her. She goes to her father's house in Pattankot, but the place is filled with ghosts. Her mother's ghost haunts the house, blaming Sarita for her brother Dhruva's drowning when they were children:

"Why didn't you die instead?" (Deshpande, 1980, p. 34)

The physical setting of the plot, including the dark hallways, courtyard, & her old bedroom, fills her with painful memories & psychological torment. But by confronting these items as an adult & a professional medical worker, Saru defeats the guilt that has tormented her for so long. She manages to use her bedroom to recontextualize the source of her suffering. Through the ancestral home, Saru deprives her childhood trauma of its power over her adult life.

- **The Politics of the Threshold: Balconies, Hallways, & Stairwells**

In traditional Indian domestic architecture, thresholds such as balconies, window sills, stairs, & doorways are where an interior domestic space meets the exterior world. The characters in Deshpande's stories interact with these thresholds. Her characters retreat as if they were in a state of transition.

- **Balconies as Strategic Observatories**

In *That Long Silence*, the Dadar balcony is Jaya's only link to the world outside. She looks down upon the street from the relative safety & detachment of the balcony. From up here, on this threshold, she feels she can examine her marriage without becoming consumed by it. Jaya is at once removed & yet close enough to evaluate the life she spends inside the confines of the kitchen. The balcony is her solitary escape from the duties of her domestic prison.

- **Staircases & Hesitation as Agency**

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's glances on the staircase & at doorways are acts of agency. In Deshpande's fictional universe, agency rarely takes the form of dramatic gestures or impulsive actions but is rather found in the hesitation before crossing thresholds. By hesitating before opening doors, Saru gains the opportunity to think through her options & decide how to navigate her complex relationships with her father & husband.

Research Findings

- **Spatial Transformation of Domestic Interiors**

From Claustrophobia to Self-Reflection: The analysis indicates that confined domestic spaces were initially associated with patriarchy, as the interior is where the kitchen, the back room, and ancestral bedrooms reside. In *That Long Silence*, the domestic interior is the place that imposes routine and erases identity, whereas *The Dark Holds No Terrors* suggests that the ancestral bedroom is linked to childhood trauma and maternal guilt.

Domesticity as Resistance: However, this does not mean that interiors are places where women are permanently confined. As soon as the domestic space stops being a home (Jaya's move to the Dadar flat) or as soon as the routine is interrupted (Saru leaving Pattankot in search of her son), the interior turns into a "homeplace" as defined by bell hooks. One is free to reorder interior spaces and revisit the emotional issues that had been previously ignored. It is in the sanctity of their homes that the female protagonists can finally exercise their creative power and confront repressed traumas.

- **Architectural and Symbolic Function of Threshold Spaces**

- **Liminality and Distance:** Architectural physical boundaries such as balconies, verandahs, doorways, and staircases are presented as liminal

by nature since they create a division between the domestic space (Ghar) and the exterior world (Bahar).

- **Observation without Exposure:** In this regard, the balcony in the Dadar appears to symbolize Jaya's position in society as she can observe the world from a safe distance.
- **Moments of Agency:** Likewise, moments of hesitation and decision-making in the narrative are also associated with thresholds, including the staircases and doorways in Saru's apartment. This suggests that the physical boundaries in the characters' lives enable them to step back from the immediate situation, observe, and make calculated decisions before re-entering their domestic space.
- **Spatial Movement and Strategic Agency Without Rupture**
- **Internal Re-Mapping vs. Radical Flight:** Unlike Western feminist models that relate freedom to radical flight or opposition to the established order, the characters in the stories create a post colonial womanhood that enables them to achieve a certain measure of agency within the confines of the domestic-industrial space.
- **Negotiating Boundaries:** Through strategic withdrawal into domestic interiors, tactical pauses at thresholds, and the transformation of private chambers into sites of innovation, the protagonists skillfully negotiate patriarchal authority without dismantling the family institution. The characters' very being and self-perception are reoriented inward, enabling their subversive creativity and agency to thrive.

Conclusion

- **Domestic Space as a Plot of Re-definition** – In Deshpande's novels, the domestic space is not a dead end, & if navigated correctly, can enable women to dismantle the status quo around them & construct their own independence.
- **The Strategic Use of Architectural Thresholds** – Balconies, staircases, & doorways are employed as places to pause, strategize, & move on with renewed determination, without losing one's social ties.
- **The Middle-class Indian Women's Desire for Liberation** – For the middle-class Indian woman in post-colonial India, liberation is not always a matter of walking away from home; it can also be found in negotiating domestic space to gain intellectual independence.

Through an analysis of the spatial re-reading of 'That Long Silence' & 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', our attention is drawn to the fact that Shashi Deshpande does not depict powerless female protagonists who suffer at the mercy of

domesticity. By reimagining the room, the balcony, & the threshold as sites of their own making, the female protagonists rewrite their domestic environment.

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