



## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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### **Abstract**

*Shashi Deshpande's seven novels are apparently alarmed with feminist issues. She depicts contemporary, educated and career-oriented married woman, who are sensitive to the changing times and situations. Shashi Deshpande, the famous Indian novelist born in Karnataka depicts the inner feelings and emotions of Indian women through her novels. The plight of middle class educated and working women, the marital adjustments and the quest for identity forms the major theme of her novels. Her novels show how carefully she expresses the frustration and disappointment of women who experience in the social and cultural oppression in the male dominated society. Her fiction concentrates on the status of the women in the traditional bound male-dominated middle class society of the contemporary India.*

### **Introduction**

Indian women writers like Shashi Deshpande have projected the women's emotional turbulence prevalent in Indian traditional families even after the post independence era common among professional women too. The Indian women believe in traditional values and compromise for the sake of the maintenance of harmony rather than rebel, which might effect in the distraction of family relationship. They continue to support the ritualistic tradition – bound life. To the contrary, the modern women tend to recognize the structural inequalities between man and woman and the cultural conventions which have assigned woman a secondary status. The woman in the present century is strongly aware of the sociological inequalities piled on her and unlike her counterpart. She does not believe that woman is an inferior being who must remain unreceptive and submissive. *The Manu Smirti*, The Hindu Laws of Manu, a text laying down the rules of social behaviour declares the roles of women as: "Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. Her father protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence". According to the *Manusmiriti* also known as *Manav Dharam shastra*, the women are left to live in submissive manner. They are not permitted to express their views and thoughts with her family and outside.

Though women constitute roughly half of the world's population, their contribution in various fields of activity has been totally inconsistent to their numerical strength. Labelled as the weaker sex they have been denied full justice - social, economic and political. Women have landed up as the ultimate victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination first as daughter, later as wife and a mother and later a grandmother. She plays different submissive roles like preparing food for all the family members, looking after the children, waiting for the husband foregoing her food throughout her life time even at times of hunger. Social disparity has enormous influence in conditioning the female's psyche which begins early in the childhood. Gender inequality is differentiated right from the child's birth and therefore it is a social and cultural creation. It is clear from the ancient days that the girl child is taught to withhold, conceal and suppress her true life. The female child is left to subordination, exploitation, violence, domination and ensnared in patriarchal cultural ideals and paradigms. The development of a girl especially in Indian society is primarily in relation to her approach and her duty towards her family. This identity depends upon the subtle balance that the girl maintains between submission and revolt.

Shashi Deshpande represents her women as an embryonic woman of the present industrial age, who yearns to achieve individuality and the real self- identity without changing the cultural and traditional conventions of the society. Eventually they find themselves against the well-established social inactivity. Even the broad-minded educated women with an unmanageable longing to break from time honoured crippling and iniquitous social law, do often lose their strength and locate them in embarrassing situations. Yet the educated, economically independent women too, have not been able to come out of the overwhelming difficulties created by the tradition and beliefs that has been preserved in the conventional Indian Society.



From ancient times man has been portrayed as a prominent member of the society. Women have been and continue to be oppressed, subjugated, marginalised and silenced. Their experiences are often muted in almost all the literary works of the past. The emergence of a few women novelists like Kamala Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955), *Possession* (1963), Ruth Pravar Jhabwala in *To Whom She will* (1955), Shoba De in *Second Thoughts* (1996) significantly influenced the change in approach. Deshpande discloses the gradual process of oppression and gender discrimination in the family and in the male oriented society. Deshpande shows enormous sympathy and cautions awareness for the young female to execute her future status for the society. The causes that influence her include cultural aspects, social and psychological ways such as her status in family structure, marriage, and relationships. The woman she portrays neither represents the old, conventional image, nor a recent westernized one. She is the very woman hard to rise above tradition but is unwillingly trapped into it.

### **Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande**

In the novel "*The Dark Holds No Terror*", Saru, the representative of middle class workingwomen in modern India, rebels against traditions, but ultimately tries to compromise with the existing reality. When Saru, the doctor, takes great interest in her profession, in her patients. And her professional success casts a dark, negative shadow on her married life; she undergoes a trauma, but very bravely stands up to the situation. After a long painful experience, she realizes, that escapism is never a solution and that she is her own refuge. Through Saru, Deshpande endeavors to establish woman as an individual, who breaks loose from the traditional constraints and refines one's identity in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times. And at the same time, she can have some significant control over their relationships and professions. Coming back to their natal home, though provides nothing like a womb-like security, yet helps them to raise questions, which they had never dared to ask themselves. Sarita a medical doctor, married a low-cued Manohar, against her parent's wishes, had walked out on her parents. But, now, using her mother's death as excuse, she goes back to her father's home, hoping to find solace away from her husband's frightening and inexplicable sadism. Unable to adjust to the social demands, Saru withdraws within, to probe into her inner psyche and attempts to understand her hidden strength and potentials, in a way, she rediscovers her personality and digs up her hidden skills and learns not to suppress her talents. She very well understands her inner strength to overcome the hurdles of her life. She is anxious, eager, ambitions...Confused, hopeless, dull, and almost thoughtless and a recluse run-away. Sarita needs this temporary withdrawal to resolve her doubts about her life and relationships. She attains her inner strength and tells her father, to request Manohar to wait. Her withdrawal is not an escapist but a withdrawal, which is essential for her re-integration into society. She is able to break the illusions that she had created and face's life courageously.

Even in this postcolonial period when women are said to have equal rights and opportunities with men, marriage and motherhood remain the main goals of the girl's life, however liberated she may be. Her personal achievement, however great, pales down before her marital status implying her dependence on man. Marriage is the most powerful means that society uses to ensure female subjugation and the institution of marriage, is cleverly camouflaged by sanctity only to ensure male domination and to prevent any questioning by women. The image of woman in Indo-English novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which showed woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. The post colonial writers of Indo-English novels equipped with a new education and sociability have different perspective of the images of woman. In the post colonial period liberal thought was brought in to our country and it was also propagated by western education. The woman novelists were responsible for the new image of woman struggling against the oppressive social norms of the male dominated society. The image of the woman in the postcolonial fiction is a crystallized form of the two different cultures. The image of woman as a custodian of extraordinary moral virtues incorporated with devotion and sacrifice has become an archetype. The image of woman in quest of her identity has emerged from the archetype.

In this respect there occurred changes in theme, emphasis and design in the literature of the twentieth century. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changing world view and the questioning



attitude thereby developed by it. Let us restrict our view to the section of novels alone with the list of great novelists like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Manohar Malgonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kushwant Singh, Nayanthara Sahgal, Anitha Kumar and Shashi Deshpande besides the unmentioned numerous others.

These Indian novelists deal with the society in its rich and varied customs and view the predicament of women in different dimensions. The attitude to women has changed in recent times. Their writings are based not only on observations of external behaviour but also on the internal journey in the psychological realm of the feminine sensibilities. A few women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande make straight journey into the psyche of their women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray her in their novels.

However, easy resolutions are what some of the interpretations are looking for. “Many of the critics who have written about the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s novels, do so, while eliminating all traces of the other women who are present in the novels” (Madhu Jain 220). This generalizing tendency is reflected in their analyses too:

The woman’s emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife, in the end is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife – one who has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. She is a wife reconceptualised as woman and an individual – a marked contrast to the older generation of woman around her with their uncomplaining, unresisting fatalistic attitude. Hers is the dilemma of the new woman that could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and society. (Rajeshwari 204)

Reading the novel contrapuntally, where the postcolonial arguments are juxtaposed with these interpretations, one gains a different perspective into the novel. One can read Saru, not as a rebellious daughter who is searching for her self-identity, for her freedom, not as an egoist who cannot understand the inferiority complex of her husband, not as the guilty sister who was responsible for the death of her brother, not as a daughter who was never forgiven by the mother, not as a traveler who goes on to a spiritual quest that ends in no resolution, but as a woman who possesses “white, soft and clean hands in the beginning of the narration” (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 36), “and roughened palms towards its conclusion” (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 165).

In “**Roots and shadows**”, Indu, in her quest to be independent and complete, realizes that there is beauty and security in life through reconciliation. Indu, is a journalist, and a writer, the novelist, seems to believe that, it is the educated and the creative woman, who will liberate herself first and contribute to women’s liberation, both, actively as well as through her exemplary behavior. Indus’s predicament is representative of the larger predicament of women in general in contemporary Indian society, passing through a transition from the old cultural modes to the new socio-economic forces impinging effectively on the patterns of human lives. Indu is presented as a woman torn between age-old traditions and individual views. Her awareness of the sanctity of the familial bonds, she restrains herself from the precipitous action of feeling from the domestic scene. Though these bonds appears to be unreasonable in the beginning, gradually she learns to be bound by them as a typical traditional Indian Women, she knows that transgressing them will certainly rupture the family ties. Indu is able to free herself from the shadows that bind her to the past, only after Akka’s death. Forced by Akka’s will to do the mantle of the family matriarch, she displays maturity and strength in executing her duties. She realizes that Jayant, her husband, need not determine or limit her sphere of activity, Indus’s decision not to submit herself to anyone’s dictates, not to get influenced by her husband in career matters shows that she is making independent decisions, and matures into an individual who chooses to live life in accordance with her own wishes, in a bold and challenging woman of determination. She negates all feminine limitations and also acquires the power to change others.



Jaya, in “**That Long Silence**”, though a modern women, is rooted in tradition, experiences an impulsive urge to be empowered, and at the same time with an instinctive urge to be traditional and conservative. Jaya, apart from being a housewife, she is a creative writer too. At the beginning of the novel, Deshpande’s protagonists always have a certain shock; here, Jaya’s husband is accused of corruption and is forced to remain in hiding for a few days. Jayanand Mohan shift temporarily to their Dadar flat. Jaya, through the patchwork of her life written, realizes that she alone is responsible for both her achievements and failures. Jaya is in a state of turmoil, when Mohan walks out of their Dadar flat. She is alone at home with her neighbour Mukta and Nanda who her nurse her back to normalcy out of her delirium and fever. Jaya is physically alienated from her family-temporarily. The next two days, Jaya writes continuously, pouring out all that she had attempted to suppress all these years together. In this novel, Deshpande presents the problems, that women writers have to face. Jaya attempts to break not only her own silence but also that of women, especially women writers, down the ages. Jaya’s imaginative writing is not appreciated and her desire for identity and self-expression, a natural gift for creative writers, gets smothered by her husband Mohan who asks, “How could you, how could you have done it...? How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?”. (P22) . Hence, in order to fit herself into the role of a perfect good wife, she sacrifices her creative writing skill and finds herself content with writing the innocuous middle under the pen name Seetha. She begins to write what people wants to read and not what she wants to write. It is here, exactly that the writer brings out the constraints under which a woman writer tries to express themselves. Her acceptance of her pen name „Seetha” indicates her desire for conformity the traditional Indian woman who treads the expected path of a dutiful wife. She gets smothered under the weight of her own silence and curbing her creative genius. It is only at the end, she slowly begins to realize that her very compromise shatters her individuality, and have allowed to be victimized. She decides that she will live without sacrificing her identity or individuality, she makes some adjustment of her own volition, taking care to see that she does not lapse into servility. Her decision to have her own way gives a new confidence to her and this confidence makes Jaya face the realities of life and decides to break her silences by speaking out.

*The Binding Vine* diversifies from the self-realization theme to widen the scope and includes the community of women with a common heritage of oppression and a whole host of complex issues. For the first time, there is an attempt to understand the male psychology and Gopal who deserts his wife and children, is not condemned without hearing. Sumi reasons out that the metaphysical question of the ultimate truth of human life and the persistent human search for meaning in existence is Gopal’s reasons. The novel weaves an intricate pattern of relationships within an extended family spanning across generations. Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru belong to four generations of the same family, each representing a specific mode of experience Manorama is a typical product of patriarchal value system, for she resented the birth of Kalyani, her daughter, as she wanted a son. She forces a marriage between two unwilling partners, her daughter Kalyani and her younger brother Shripati and she even holds Kalyani responsible for all her sorrows and calls her an enemy. But it is Kalyani who represents the survival power, of women, which tides her across her mother’s ill treatment and her husband rejection. The novelist observer “... The real miracle is Kalyani herself, who has survived intact, in spite of what Shripati did to her. Kalyani who has survived Manorama’s myriad acts of cruelty” ( 151) There is clear change from Manorama to Kalyani, and she says to Aru “My mother did not care for my children either. Daughters again, she said.... I am luckier than my mother. She is the one unlucky who didn’t know how to enjoy her children and grand children” (226) when Gopal walks out on Sumi, it appears to Kalyani like a reenactment of her own life, but unlike her mother, she gives emotional support to her daughter. But it is in Sumi, the struggle to learn to live alone and assert oneself against the tide of tragedy, Sumi is trying to work out a strategy to withstand the shock and the emptiness left behind by Gopal, and create a life for herself and her daughters, Aru is full of the sense of injustice and protest against her father, If Sumi is trying to retain self-identity, Aru fights for the rights of women. There is a metaphysical question of the meaning of life runs as an undercurrent in the narrative. It is the emptiness of life that induces Gopal to leave his family. The narrator philosophizes that there is a great deal to be said for a belief in many lives. To think that we have only one life given to us, to know that this is all there is, and to understand the implications of this, is to be stricken by paralysis. The narrator reminds us the truth of Krishna’s message to Arjun that „we are mere instruments”. Death is seen as the final reality and the death of



Sumi and Shripati endorse the belief. The novelist sums up, "If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even this remains-that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength"(246). The words have definitely a specific significance in the context of the feminine discourse, which the novelist tries to place in the wider context. Her project is to reinstate women's experience to its proper place in history. She projects and focuses on the strategies of readjustments her female protagonists undertake in order to forge an identity of their own. They struggle to learn to become, "ones own refuge" and value the fellowship of other women. She recreates very sensitively the female world and through modes of women's experience, she gives and places it in the mainstream position. She refuses to isolate women's experience even as her fiction consciously creates feminine sensibility and specificity and is at times, even successful in creating a language of her own. The novel *A Matter of Time* extends the limits of the novel form to foreground aspects of women's experiences in the Indian context hitherto unexplored and creates values and power that demand recognition. Shashi Deshpande's "*Small Remedies*", brings out the novelists professional endeavors, articulated woman's aspirations, and her relationship with her husband, and the changed expectations of motherhood. Deshpande evolves a balance between traditional demands and modern compulsions and renegotiate the power relations in an attempt to resolve the crisis. Both the novels *A Matter of Time* (1996) and *Small Remedies* (2000) transcend the mundane and ultimately reconcile with the ultimate reality. The novelist poses a problem, question it, fights it and then works towards acceptance and reconciliation. She says that there is no easy answer to life's existential problem and the choice before us is limited. Both the novels *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*, have the historical and cultural ethos of Maharashtra and Karnataka, in the novel *A Matter of Time*, the rhetoric builds around the history of a family that settles in Karnataka with Peshwa Madhavrao's entourage. In *Small Remedies*, the cultural ethos is of the orthodox Brahmin Community, Pune, in the late nineteenth and during the early twentieth Century. There is convincing intermingling of the past with the present, which paves a important point to question the revived hegemonic structure.

### Conclusion

The economic freedom which the woman had succeeded in attaining a status had led her life to be in a state of dissolution. In spite of both the husband and wife being educated, the man always yearns to occupy the superior position. On any occasion he considers even the economic growth a family to be his contribution. The mutual acceptance of considering the wife as an equal partner gets deranged even in educated families. Deshpande proves gradually that the central character Saru emerge in spite of the societal disparities wherein many Indian women continue to submerge themselves in that dark world filled with fear, angst, terror, frustration and humiliation etc. A family is an institution in itself-everything begins and everything that happens outside the family mirrors in the family. The domestic atmosphere quite harmonious and sanctified by the standard norms of the society is often seen with dissention, domination and violation. The complex nature of human relationships is analyzed, whether it is within a family or in the broader of social space. The novelist knits her narration around multiple acts of transgression bringing into the conflict of selves, other man, other women, physical, emotional, sexual, ethical, individual and social binaries. Hence, the self-reflexivity, as she locates the self in the labyrinth of her lived experience, the experiential becomes the touchstone in narration. Thus a process of rebuilding and demolishing continues in the novel in a narrative flow.

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