

## **Feminist Study in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande**

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**Abstract:** *Shashi Deshpande stands apart among the Indian English novelists, for she writes about women with a certain specific concern in her own manner. Indian woman is the centre of her fictional world. Her major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern educated Indian woman caught between patriarchy and tradition on one hand, and self expression, individuality and independence for women on the other. Her fiction explores the search of the women to fulfil herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as a daughter, wife and mother. The women characters of Shashi Deshpande are totally different in the sense that they explode the myth of man's superiority and the myth of woman being the paragon of all virtues. In her endeavour to reveal woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity for herself, the author subtly bares the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by women in our society. This paper tries to study the women characters depicted in the novels of Shashi Deshpande.*

**Keywords:** *Anguish, Conflict, Patriarchy, Self expression, Individuality, Independence, Superiority, Endeavour, Oppression.*

### **Introduction**

Shashi Deshpande is one of the Indian women novelists, in Indian English literature, who are preoccupied with the modern Indian woman's search for self-realization. She doesn't create any female enclaves for her protagonist, as a feminist. She presents the social realities faced by the woman as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, and as a human being. This research paper tries to study and analyse the women characters depicted in the novels of Shashi Deshpande as her novels present the real picture of Indian society with various angles of the womanhood. Indian woman is the centre of her fictional world. She writes about the problems of women, whose desires and emotions are "atrophied through a life time of disuse." (*Roots and Shadows*: 6)

Shashi Deshpande has been a steadily productive writer. Her fiction has won her acclaim and the respect of her peers. Her plots are deftly presented and the characters are very well delineated. The situations she portrays and the characters she breathes life into are familiar ones. Her familiarity with the Indian ethos and culture finds reflection in all her novels. The social upheavals and the disillusionments of modern times are aptly presented in her novels. For her English language is not a hindrance in depicting the nuances of the Indian culture. Rather there is a harmonious blending of English language and Indian culture in her novels.

Shashi Deshpande's novels have a universal appeal. They cut across barriers of culture and time. But they cannot be categorized as realistic fiction. Most of her protagonists are similar. She seems to be reinserting a 'particular' representation. This is highlighted by the use of verbal constructs that are typical of postcolonial literature, - the centre and the periphery, the attempt at decolonizing and the desire to return to 'glorious' past.

Shashi Deshpande's women characters do not quite seem to fit into the traditional established accepted societal mode. There is in them a kind of compromise which enables them to endure a not always pleasant world. In her novels the protagonist is usually an educated middle class married woman and a mother. Her mother figures are not the ones that can be venerated and idealized. In her novels, Shashi Deshpande explores the fragile human relationships, their jealousies and rivalries, yet there is a bond, which defies definition.

In some of Shashi Deshpande's novels, families are ambivalent entities. Savitribai in *Small Remedies* and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terror* are unable to communicate with their families. The novels *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terror* show that marriage can either nurture or thwart the development of an individual. The women must make adjustments in their lives. They must grapple with problems involving the challenges of accommodating the needs of their selves, of their families and communities. The women must make compromises in the world and choose what to lose. The pendulumistic notion of the good-bad-good feelings pervades the various relationships in nearly all the novels of Shashi Deshpande.

In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Sarita (Saru) is married to Manohar (Manu) who becomes violent when he realises that his career has not taken off. His wife has risen professionally and begins to occupy the central position because she is financially more secure and can fend for the family. But Manu (symbolically the Hindu law giver) finds it difficult to occupy a peripheral position. But the dominant position that Saru occupies due to her caste (she is a Brahmin) and money power becomes redundant due to her being a woman. The novel opens with a one and half page of description of her virtual rape in bed by her husband who must prove that in the hierarchy of power structures she will forever be powerless.

In Sahshi Deshpande's marginal women characters we can read post colonial 'differences'. We can use Edward Said's concept of the binary 'here' and 'there', 'centre' and 'ex-centric' in such representations. Homi Bhabha asserts:

*Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational." Culture is transnational because it is "rooted in specific history of cultural displacement..." such as migration to other countries, economic and political displacement (refugees). "The transnational dimensions of cultural transformation - migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation - makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of the tradition. (Bhabha 1999: 172)*

In the novel *That Long Silence*, Jaya's world seems to fall apart when her husband Mohan has been asked to leave his job due to alleged business malpractice. Mohan's confession and his clinging to her and following her movements with his eyes makes Jaya realize that she would have to wait until he is rid of the allegations. Right from her childhood Jaya has been asked to wait:

*wait until you get married...wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married...I was actually relived. Here it was at last-my disaster. no more apprehension, no more rears. (That Long Silence: 54)*

While Mohan pours out of his grief, Jaya remains silent, "The truth was that I did not know what to say, how to react" (61). Between the said and the unsaid lies a depth of meaning. Jaya's silence speaks volumes. As she tries to grapple with the changed scenario, Jaya attempts to remove

*the long silence" from her life. She seeks solace from the Sanskrit words "Yathecchasi tatha kuru...do as you desire...with this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. 'I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire. (192).*

As Jaya receives Mohan's telegram "All well", she notes:

*I will have to erase the silence between us...we don't change overnight...life has always to be made possible. (193)*

In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande explores the unconscious inner struggle of well educated middle class woman Indu. In *That Long Silence*, she portrays the irony of a young woman writer, Jaya. In *Roots and Shadows* Indu is summoned to the bedside of dying Akka, the rich, old family matriarch. Indu takes it as a 'welcome reprieve' to get away from her

unsatisfactory job and to “avoid thinking what was happening to me ... to Jayant and me ... and our life together.” (6)

Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, like Sita, follows her husband, Mohan, who has been accused of misappropriation of office funds, to seek refuge at the flat in Dadar, which belongs to her maternal uncle. Jaya’s exile to Dadar flat and absence of her children gives her enough time to brood on her seventeen years old marriage, which hamstrings her talents as a writer. By her journey into the past, Jaya gets guidance for her future. Deshpande’s protagonists point out how our culture has often kept silence on the subject of women. Their alienation gives them a chance to review the scriptures, traditions, rituals and customs of India, which stultify women from establishing herself as an authentic being. For instance, at one point in the novel, Jaya discovers that her name is not included in the family tree, delineated by her uncle Ramu kaka: “Look Jaya, this is our branch, this is our grandfather - your great grandfather and here is father and then us - Laxman, Vasu and me, and here are the boys - Shridhar, Janu, Dinkar, Ravi ...” Jaya asks, “I am not here!” Ramu kaka instantly says with irritation “How can you be here?” You don’t belong to this family! You are married, you are part of Mohan’s family. You have no place here.” (*That Long Silence*: 142-43)

But it is only half of the truth told by her uncle to avoid conflict, as Jaya’s mother, grandmother, her uncle’s wives find no place in the family tree. The existence of women is totally ignored in her father’s house as well as in her husband’s house. Indu, in one of her conversations with Mini, her cousin, she points out:

*ever since we were small, we were told ... ‘You will be going away one day to your own home.’ They said it to you and me, never to Hemant or Sumant or Sharad or Sunil. (Roots and Shadows: 125)*

Indu resents the role of a daughter and look forward to the role of a wife with a hope that her new role will give her security, love and freedom. Indu finds her alter ego in Jayant.

*I had thought, I had found my alter ego in Jayant. I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And in Jayant, I had thought I had found the other. Part of my whole self. Not only that, but total understanding perfect communication. (114-15)*

Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, marries Jayant in order to get freedom from her parents house, but it brings submission in the name of love. “As a child, they told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. Why? I had asked. ‘Because you are a female’.” She laughs at them and swears that she will never pretend to be what she is not. Then she meets Jayant and finds out that he too expects her to submit. “No, not expected. He took it for granted that I would. And I did it, because, I told myself, I loved him.”(158)

In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande perfectly delineates the predicament of a writer in a hypocritical society. Indu, as a journalist interviews a woman, who has been given an award and an important office in recognition of her social services, especially for her services in the cause of the upliftment of women. Before she publishes the interview report Indu comes to know the other side of the same woman, who in pursuit of fame, power and money, unscrupulously exploits poor and needy. When Indu expresses her desire to speak the truth about this woman, her editor is aghast and scoffs at her desire to speak the truth, as the woman is influential in the society. He warns her not to bother about the poor “no foolishness, mind you, Indu. I won’t do. God, if we were to publish all the dirt about all the dogs and bitches around ...” (17). But even more to her is Jayant’s response to her dilemma:

*That’s life! What can a person do against the whole system! No point making a spectacle of your futile gestures. We need the money don’t we? Don’t forget, we have a long way to go. (17)*

Though she isn’t satisfied with her writing, with her job, she goes back to her work “Hating it, hating myself. Waking up each day and think ... I can’t go on. Feeling trapped, seeing myself endlessly chained to the long dust road that lay ahead of me.” (17)

In *That Long Silence* Deshpande portrays the inner conflict in the mind of the narrator. Jaya has to struggle a lot for her role as a writer and as a housewife. She in her anxiety to fulfil her role as a wife does injustice to her talents. As a writer for a magazine, she makes a good beginning by producing a story, which wins the first prize. But Mohan, her husband, assumes that the story is about their personal life and feels dispirited at the thought that the people of his acquaintance may take him as the person portrayed in the story. To safeguard her relationship with her husband, she takes her writings light-mindedly and produces stereotyped women in her works.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu comes back to her parents’ home at the call of Akka. Akka’s house gives her an ample opportunity to understand her needs and to analyze her. Referring to *Roots and Shadows*, S.P. Swain very aptly highlights how her homecoming helps her for self-analysis:

*The home she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace and consolation. It is Akka’s house that offers her ample opportunities to know herself. It is here that she is able to discover her roots as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer. (Swain: 95)*

She stays there till the house is disposed off. Akka dies leaving her property and responsibilities to Indu, as her shoulders are strong. In her revisit to Akka's house Indu learns more about Akka, her past, her concern and her suffering.

Indu struggles hard to understand the life in reality. She realizes that love "is a big fraud, a hoax that's what it is. They tell you it's greatest thing, the only thing in life. And you believe them and fall into trap ..." (Roots and Shadows: 157). She understands the basic truth of life. "The sexual instinct ... that's true. The maternal instinct ... that's true too. Self-interest, self-love ... they're the basic truth" (158). She learns to see herself independent of Jayant. When Jayant comes to know that Indu is going to become sole inheritor of Akka's property, he asks Indu to come away with the property, leaving all other family members to their fate. But Indu rejects his proposal. She recognizes the responsibilities and burdens put on her by Akka. She decides to lead the family:

*A family ... It's like any other group. There are the strong and the weak. And the strong have to dominate the weak. It's inevitable, and Akka thought I was one of the strong one. That's why she put the burden on me. And now, it is an obligation. I have to carry the burden. And so to do that I have to be hard. If I'm soft, I'll just cave in ... (159)*

She decides to pay to Mini's wedding. She considers Akka's old house as bondage and as a trap. She decides to demolish the house, much against the wishes of the other members of the family as they feel that the demolition of the house means the demolition of the family. But Indu sees the house as vestige of the past. She wants to release from the bondage of past.

Indu decides to go back to her home, to Jayant, "yes home. The one I lived in with Jayant. That was my only home. To think otherwise would be to take the cowards again. I would pull all this behind me and go back to Jayant ... to see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty" (187). She decides to break her silence and tell Jayant about her future plans:

*I was resigning from my job. That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing. That I wouldn't, couldn't enrich myself with Akka's money. (187)*

She doesn't know whether Jayant accepts her plans or not. She decides to get on with them. She learns the truth about herself, dismissing all the shadows that she had thought to be her real self. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists perform journey from self-alienation to self identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. They learn to liberate themselves from the shackles of tradition and exercise their rights for the manifestation of their individual capabilities. They realize their feminine selves through identity assertion and self-affirmation.

In *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande explores the lives of two women Savitri Indorkar and Leela. Savitribai, a reputed singer, marries her accompanist Ghulam Saab, a Muslim. Leela who is a passionate believer in Communism, devotes her life to the party and works for the welfare of the factory worker of Bombay. Fifty years after, Madhu who is Leela's niece comes to Bhavanipur to write Savitribai's biography. While analysing Savitribai's life and the lives of those around her Madhu tries to find a way out of her grief.

Madhu's childhood has been spent at Neemgaon where Savitribai was her neighbour but Savitribai makes no such reference when she meets Madhu. For Madhu what she remembers of Savitribai's lifestyle at Neemgaon and what she sees at Bhavanipur are diametrically opposite. Deshpande's novels present the ambivalent binaries of speech and silence. Between savitribai's narration and madhu's observation the said and the unsaid can be gleaned. The silence, the unsaid can be noticed in the turn of a head, gestures of the hands, the flash of anger in the eyes etc. "The balancing act is between the 'said' and the 'unsaid', the narrator believing that it is better to say 'not enough' than to say 'too much'" (*Small Remedies*: 54).

Deshpande seems to assert that the woman is both the victimizer as well as the victim. Savitribai is victimizer of Hasina and Madhu wonders whether "this nasty tyrannical creature (is) going to be part of my book?" (61). To the present reader *Small Remedies* illustrates Bhabha's concept of hybridity and cultural difference. Lives of Joe, Leela, Pula and Madhu, Som and Madhu and Tony, Yogi and Maya, Hari and Lata illustrate cultural differences and hybridization.

### **Conclusion**

Shashi Deshpande's novels progress in the same manner as her female protagonists progress in her novels. In her novels, all her female protagonists- Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terror*), Jaya (*That Long Silence*), Madhu (*Small Remedies*), are shown to be in a state of confusion at the beginning. Slowly, as the novel unfolds, they go through a process of self-introspection, self-analysis and self-realization. At the end, they emerge as more confident, more under control of themselves, and significantly more hopeful towards a bright and positive future.

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