

## THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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### Abstract

This paper presents the depiction of women in select novels of Shashi Deshpande. Deshpande's novels generally centred on family relationships particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the latter's dilemmas and conflicts. According to Deshpande everyone has to live within relationships and there is no other way. Her novels are about women: their travails and privations, tensions and irritations, pains and anguishes. Her stories suggest that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run of the middle class in India. Incapable to ignore social conventions or traditional morality, the middle class women themselves are entangled by desires and despairs, hopes and fears, loves and hates, retraction and alienation, repression and oppression, marital discord and male chauvinism.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, identity, independence, sexuality, victim.

### Introduction

Assault against women is a burning issue in the world. This is not a new problem. This conflict occurred in one form or another. One of the famous psychologists Rehana Ghadially rightly observes:

[Though] violence against women is often seen as an assault against her body...more importantly it is a negation of her integrity and personhood (Ghadially: 1988, 149).

Indian Women, dissimilar their western cognates, have always been psychologically and socially enslaved, sexually colonized and genetically conquered against a male-chauvinistic social set-up. Every attempt by a woman to rise above the repressive forces rooted in the middle class people has either been restrained mercilessly or ignored in the name of social dignity. Deshpande, with her ever expanding creative horizon always makes it a point to provide a separate space for her women characters.

The Present-day Woman primarily distinguishes the spirit of rebelliousness. Fundamentally a woman's refusal of the inherent revulsion to the idealism associated with normal physical functions of the body such as menstruation and pregnancy. This always acts as stimulants for sexual colonialism. The adhocence to the practice of wanting the male child, the disrespect for the girl child is a common phenomenon in India. The social taboos concerning the

human body are some of the challenging issues that Deshpande picks up to show how the Contemporary Woman conducts herself. This paper attempts to analyse the progression of women from passive resistance to self-discovery in some of her selected novels.

Shashi Deshpande has realistically described the violence against women in various forms. Because of her body, a woman has to suffer a lot and Shashi Deshpande has clearly mentioned various types of physical harassment and how her female protagonists come out as an individual from this molestation.

Shashi Deshpande`s novel *The Dark Holds No Errors* is totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man`s unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues(Paul Premila, 30) Remarkable for the analysis of the inner landscape, it unravels the many questions haunting the female mind. It forecasts the post-modern conflict of a woman who forcible hates the onslaught on her identity and individuality. Saru, the protagonist in the novel, is a symbol of a dynamic woman who tries to exercise her influence over whatever she does, wherever she goes. She always prefers to take the road less travelled. She doesn`t like women friends who mould themselves into the traditional customs and remain the silent, nameless waiter at the dining table. On the obstinate she has great respect for the dignified, self-reliant teacher-friend Nalu, who despises all compromises and remains single to lead a meaningful life of convictions.

In her childhood Saru often controlled her brother and views her mother as an opponent in the game of power. Her mother opposed all the progressive moves she undertook. She had an abundant love for her son. She reacts in the same aggressive tone when she attains puberty. Her mother tells her that she is a woman now. Saru doesn`t want to be placed in the class of her mother. She thinks economic independence as an insurance against any subordination. Later she wants to join medical college to be economically independent. She also marries Manu against the wish of her parents, particularly her mother, severs the umbilical cord as an act of defiance, proving her strength, power and self-reliance. She leaves her parental home to start her life on her own, putting the first foot towards freedom. Her marital life again is not happy. Saru`s husband Manohar, was the master of the family before she got recognition as a doctor. Earlier she was familiar as the wife of Manohar. But after the explosion in the factory Manohar was identified as the doctor`s husband by the people. Saru, took this opportunity to assure her worth and assert herself. But Manohar thinks it is a failure. This incident shocks their family life. When a woman is more intelligent, energetic, attractive and successful in her profession, her husband is most likely to develop an inferiority complex. As a man, he finds it painful to live with it. To suppress it, he pretends to be superior and tries to show his physical strength by beating or abusing his wife. Husbands cannot accept their wives earning more than themselves. Though these prejudices are changing, the rate of change is so slow that women under these circumstances are mentally and economically suffering great deal.

*If I Die Today* (1982), the second published novel of Shashi Deshpande, presents the predicament of women in such a way as would voice her concerns for problems and perils of

those of her sex. In this novel, she depicts what happens to women after marriage. They have a relatively happy married life with their not so bad husbands and are blessed with children in most cases. Yet, there is something lacking, something wanting and rotten in the state of their domestic and married life, for which to a considerable extent their spouses are somehow responsible. Education, economic independence and motherhood are to some extent responsible for disturbing the existing equation.

Manju, the narrator of the story, is a lecturer in a Bombay college. Whatever she says is either favoured or rejuvenated by Guru who is the pivotal character in the novel. Manju has been a loving, affectionate understanding wife before she turned into a hysterical pretzel. Now she is neither content nor confident. She is in a rather miserable state and unable to see that her feelings of misery are not due to her faults.

Vijay, her husband is a pathologist in the hospital. Their first child Sonu was born after three years of their marriage. After three years, they have planned for a second child. But there is a twist in their life. The entry of Guru brings change in their life. There is a gap in their relationship so much so that she does not know when and where her husband is going to leave: Vijay leaving? And why had he never told me? And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But, this ...two people who have shut them off in two separate glass jars? (Deshpande: 1982, 24). Manju's pregnancy also becomes a barrier in the path of her freedom. As she said: Motherhood, I thought it's a trap. Keeping you in a cage until you lose the desire for independence; until you forget what the word "freedom" means (Deshpande: 1982, 47).

But at last, she turns into a woman with full determination. After that dreadful night, the morning comes as a ray of hope for her. From that morning, she has become determined and wanted to live life as an individual. The title of the novel *Roots and Shadows* symbolically represented the argumentative nature of man and woman relationship for a power.

Indu, the woman protagonist in the novel, is like a link between the 'Roots' and 'Shadows'. When the shadows start appearing at the death of Akka, it is the roots that start decaying.

The novel "*Roots and Shadows*" is a figurative description of the controversial nature of man and woman. They set against each other in material terms for power struggle. "Roots" stands for tradition and "shadows" indicates the marginal culture. The deteriorating tradition is soon to become shadows against a backdrop of apocalyptic change. Also it conveys that over the root is removed; life is deprived of the necessary force given way to new possibilities.

Indu is an invincible feminist and a self-reliant person. She insulates against the family influence. She doesn't like the control that Akka exercises over the other members of the family. She detests all the superstitious traditions, class and caste consciousness which the family firmly encouraged. Indu does not even hesitate to hate her father who abandoned her when she was an infant.

As a young girl, just like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, she freed herself from the impinging and destructive influence of the family by running away from home as her ancestral home represented an authoritative male voice. She resented and challenged Akka's domination.

Everyone at home, except Indu, admired Akka very much because of her leadership qualities and assuring happiness for everybody. But Indu revolted against Akka and decolonized herself by marrying Jayant, a man of different caste, speaking a different language. Unfortunately her marital life doesn't follow the path she expects. She is not supposed to dance to the tune of her husband.

Through Indu, Shashi Deshpande has exposed the double standards prevailing in our society. Only men can take liberty of seeking sexual pleasure and a wife cannot. A vicious husband must be worshipped but bad wife may at any time be superseded by another wife. Though the widow is enjoined to remain faithful to her husband's memories, a husband having lost his wife may marry again and again. In such a society, the sexual emancipation on the part of Indu is evidently an assertion of her individuality, the newly emerged identity. In this way, she rejects the idea of woman's inferiority to man and gives a new interpretation of 'love'.

Another important female character is Akka who becomes the victim of child marriage and the oppression of her husband. Her character exposes what kind of childhood a young girl of thirteen could have had when she is married off to a fully grown, uncaring man double her age. At a tender age, she has to submit to his often violent sexual advances. At an age, where she barely understands the meaning of sex, she is subjected to such brutality that she begins to regard sex as 'punishment'. Child marriage stifles her childhood which expounds to her the real trauma of being a girl. Her soul of a child withers when she has to tolerate the scathing and bestial sexual advances of her husband. Through the character of Akka, Shashi Deshpande has highlighted the dual standards prevailing in Indian society where the woman is used to provide sexual pleasure to the man without her own needs being fulfilled. A change in Akka's personality appears after the death of her mother – in – law and her husband's paralytic stroke. Then she grabs freedom. As she is trained from childhood to be an ideal and faithful wife, she cannot desert her paralyzed husband, though he has abused her a lot. She looks after him with great care like a traditional Indian woman but neither permits the woman with whom her husband has extra – marital relationship to see him nor submits before her husband's desire to meet her. The situation has brought a change in her position. With this act, she tries to regain her dignity and self respect after long years of mute submission. By asserting herself, Akka regains her lost self – esteem and confidence. Earlier Akka was feeble, fragile, and timid but now her husband becomes dependent on the mercy of Akka.

That Long Silence (1988) is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. Jaya, the female protagonist of the novel is a modern woman, an aged housewife living in Bombay who suffers from an inner conflict which leads her to the quest for the self or identity. In short, That Long Silence (1988) is a journey of Jaya from silence to the self – worth. As Adele King opines: Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is (King: 1988, 97).

Jaya's husband Mohan involved in a case of corruption at work is hiding out with Jaya in a small suburban flat in Bombay. This limbo of waiting and anxiety gives Jaya the time and

opportunity to reflect on her life and particularly upon her roles as a woman – a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and daughter – in – law, friend, mistress and writer of genteel ‘feminine’ newspaper article.

Jaya is a ‘conservative, educated middle class smiling placid, motherly woman’ (15 -16) who learns to suppress her own wishes and acts according to her husband’s wishes. She cannot dare to protest. As she says, “I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence” (143). But finally, she has learnt to refuse to be led by nose and affirms with confidence “I’m not afraid any more” (199).

There is neither a natural nor harmonious relationship between Jaya and Mohan. Their physical relationship always ends up with Mohan’s question whether he has hurt her. It obviously shows a forced relationship between them. Mohan, an engineer, only cares for money, status and material comforts and does not bother about the feelings of Jaya. For Mohan, sex seems to exist in isolation. He fails to understand that a woman’s sexuality is a complex phenomenon made up of physical as well as emotional factors. Jaya hints at this when she says – First there is love, then there’s sex – that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan, I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round (Deshpande; 1988, 95).

Marriage is considered as an instrument to fulfil the lust. In *That Long Silence* (1988), marriage is like children’s game of playing ‘tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor’ (91) which have now been substituted by labels like “doctor, engineer, government official, college lecturer” (91). Jaya also sees stagnation and helplessness in marital life as she thinks marriage makes a woman “circumspect” and also that “marriage never end, they cannot – they are a state of being” (127). The result is that the marriage becomes meaningless and loses its status. Sex alone seems to sustain the man – woman relationship as observed earlier. It is quite a shocking idea but it traces and highlights throughout Shashi Deshpande’s novels.

Kamat, Jaya’s friend, had been her neighbour in the dingy flat at Dadar where she and Mohan had lived in their early married life. Her relationship with Kamat makes her aware that a woman is not a sex object only.

Kamat is deeply interested in Jaya’s development as a human being and encourages her to express herself. Jaya’s association with Kamat develops into a deep friendship based on communication. She shares her thoughts and memories of her father with Kamat. Kamat also advises her and helps her to discover her talent as a writer but in this process, she attracts him. Kamat’s physical contacts revive desires in Jaya and remind her of suppressed sexuality.

In this way, she does not think marriage as the only option for sexual satisfaction. She seeks emotional anchoring with Kamat. *A Matter of Time* (1996) focuses on the issue of the Indian woman as a silent sufferer in the patriarchal society. In the prevalent society, a woman is expected to subordinate every wish and desire. This novel revolves round four generations of women. Manorama, a dead one who is a grandmother of Sumitra, Kalyani – the mother of Sumitra, Sumitra herself and her three daughters – Aru, Charu and Seema. Women of these generations face exploitation in life. They articulate the anguish, agony and conflict of the

modern, educated Indian women who are caught between tradition and modernity and struggle for self – expression and individuality. Among them Sumitra emerges as a powerful individual.

It is a story of the problem of women belonging to a middle class family. Manorama, the woman of the first generation, marries to the rich Vithalrao. But she grows insecure when she is not able to bear a male heir to the family. She has the fear that her family may eliminate her. This insecurity affects her life and as a result she fails to forge a meaningful relationship even with her only daughter Kalyani who is an intelligent girl with a promising future. Her disappointment leads her to the loveless marriage of Kalyani with her unwilling maternal uncle and Manorama's brother Shripati as the property would go to them. Sumi suffers a lot as her husband Gopal leaves her without any reason. He always criticizes this society commented upon and taken for one or other type of sexual harassment. Here, as usual, Shashi Deshpande has given expression to Sumi's pain, suffering and endurance in marriage. Sumi's fascination with the mythical story of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, makes her question the negation of female sexuality in the patriarchal Indian society. As she says:

Female sexuality, we're ashamed of owing it, we can't speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not. She spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it – it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about ( Deshpande : 1996, 191 ).

Sumi understands the physical needs of a woman as she herself longs for the assuring presence of Gopal. Being alone with him again, when she visits his room, she is overcome by a desire to re – establish their old relationship again. But their separation has already brought a distance between them. At last, she comes out with a new understanding to move ahead in life without any bitterness for the man who has been the cause of her humiliation and suffering. She starts her new life as a teacher and a creative writer. But unluckily, she dies in a road accident. Shashi Deshpande insists a woman's sexuality as a normal aspect of a human being's life. She focuses on the duality in the social system.

The very first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) is built round metaphors of 'the dark' and 'the light'. Sarita, the protagonist, is afraid of 'the dark' at night as 'the darkness' is responsible for her pathetic life and she longs to see 'the light' to have relaxation and to emerge out of the boredom and exhaustion. Another metaphor is 'death' which is reflected in many of her novels. Death is a natural process of life and separation. Death of Akka, of Atya's husband, Indu's mother, Urmi's daughter Anu, Sumi's death, Naren's mother, Manjari's parents, Devayani's parents etc. are all deaths which are viewed as happenings which have occurred in the past. Some of them lead to widowhood, others to orphanhood.

Language does not give women the right to speak directly against the patriarchal culture. A woman writer writes in this way because she is not allowed to use language fully. And gynocentric theory gives importance to women's language through which the female characters assert their individuality.

Shashi Deshpande in her novels tells the tale of women for herself or the whole of womankind. It brings out the idea of woman explicating herself and emerging out of the cocoon of self pity to spread her wings of self – confidence, as present in some silent writings of

Shashi Deshpande. Even Indira Goswami observes:

The Creative process probably is the same for both, man and woman, but suddenly, somewhere, sometimes I come across experiences, or some incidents which make me realize with a jerk that I am a woman ( Goswami: 1990, 1 ).

Deshpande's protagonists Indu, Saru, Jaya, Mira, Urmi, Sumi, Madhu, Manjari and Devayani move of in their lives through the process of word – making, questioning, telling and retelling. All these female protagonists find their memories in retreat, silence and finally telling. However, Manjari in *Moving On* (2004) learns about herself from her father's diary, sees herself so different from what she had thought and she had created and in getting to know her parents, meets herself. There is a need for women to come forward and tell their tales so that a more realistic picture may emerge.

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