

## WOMEN OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: ART AND CHARACTERIZATION

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<p><b>Article Ref. No.:</b> 19072618N1WNFM</p> <p><b>Article History:</b> Submitted on 26 July 2019 Accepted on 23 Sept 2019 Published online on 03 Oct 2019</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Patriarchal System; Social-Determinism; Culture; Society; Ethos; Womanhood; Dominance</p>	<p><b>Abstract:</b> A psychoanalytical and critical study of the novels of Shashi Deshpande substantiates her art to be a potent and powerful symbiosis with women characters allowing a dive into hidden world of women-inner-self. To her, the art of characterization is a replica of life, society and beyond it, unmitigated by its emotion. A naturally flat and static presentation of women characters in her novels has been an exemplary mechanism to convey her symbolical and mythical messages, with keen visions and voices. Her chef d'oeuvres mirror with a wider appeal, and exceptionally articulates her bounteous ideas, attitudes and beliefs in an even livelier and dynamic way. If truth be spoken, most of her protagonists, autobiographical in nature, are similar to class, gender, location, and education seems to be reinserting a particular representation.</p>
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Shashi Deshpande has been a steadily productive writer. Her fiction has won her acclaim and respect from 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 similarity with the Indian ethos and culture finds reflection in all her novels. Social upheavals and the disillusionment 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. In an interview Shashi Deshpande talked about her parents. Her father was a renowned

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Kannada scholar and she said, "I've translated my father's plays from Kannada to English and I've also translated my father's memories into English."

Before I proceed to analyze a few of Deshpande's novels, let me state that post colonialism lacks a coherent definition and vitality. It contains within it both historical and geographical notions. Most of the Indian societies which emerge phoenix- like after the British invasion generally make references to their pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial stages. All postcolonial experiences are nearly the same regardless of history. To conquer, subjugate, occupy and to dominate another being are inherent characteristics of a human being. Man is also acquisitive by nature and acquires things at the cost of fellow human beings. The colonizer and the colonized have evolved survival strategies.

Any discussion of post-colonial literature is usually formulated against such issues as identity, hybridity, cultural differences and conflict. In these senses Shashi Deshpande disclaims being a postcolonial writer but her novels do things that postcolonial texts "do". Her novels are "located" in post-independence India, an India that the present reader can identify with. While reading the novels of Shashi Deshpande, one realizes that Deshpande defies categorization. She is modern in her fictional techniques. But at times she appears unconcerned with the contemporary moment, so that with minor dislocations, her stories could just as well have taken place in the 1950s and 1960s. In novel after novel she knits her stories around the tangled lives of parents, children, grandchildren, aunts and uncles and everything else that illumines domesticity. In her novels she explores togetherness and separation, presence and absence, recurrence and reunion; in fact, everything that is related to the psychodynamics of relationships.

The novels of Deshpande have universal appeal. They cut across barriers of culture and time. But they cannot be categorized as 'realist fiction'. Most of her protagonists are similar in class, gender, location and education. She seems to be reemphasizing a particular representation. This is highlighted by the use of verbal constructs that are typical of postcolonial literature – the centre and the periphery, the dominant and the marginalized, the oppressor and the oppressed, the attempt at decolonizing and the desire to return to a 'glorious' past.

The women characters of Shashi Deshpande do not quite seem to fit into the accepted societal mode. There, in them is a kind of compromise which enables them always to endure an unpleasant 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 novel after novel Deshpande explores the fragile human relationships, their jealousies and rivalries; yet there is a bond which defies definition.

In some of Deshpande's novels, families are ambivalent entities. Savitribai in *Small Remedies* and Sharitain in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* are at times unable to communicate with their families. The novels *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 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 to the needs of their families and communities. The women must learn to discover the nature of their personal freedom. The women must make compromises in this world and choose what to lose. The pendulum-like movement of the good-bad-good feelings pervades the various relationships in nearly all the novels of Shashi Deshpande.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita is married to Manohar (Manu) who becomes violent when he realizes that his career has not taken off. His wife has risen professionally 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 (in this case Brahmin) and money power becomes redundant due to her being a woman. The novel opens with one and a half page 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 *Small Remedies* Deshpande explores the lives of two women Savitribai 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 workers of Bombay. Fifty years later Madhu who is Leela's niece comes to Bhavanipur to write Savitribai's biography. Madhu has lost her only son Aditya and she has yet to recover from this loss. While analysing the life of Savitribai and the lives of those around her Madhu tries to find a way out of her grief.

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 gets rid of the allegations. Right from her childhood Jaya has been asked to wait, "Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-law's home. Wait until you have kids... No more waiting, no more apprehension, no more fears". (*That Long Silence*, p.30). While Mohan pours out his grief, Jaya remains silent, "The truth was that I did not know what to say, how to react" (p.32). 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, "this long silence" from her life. She seeks solace from the Sanskrit words "Yathecchasitatha Kuru" ... 'Do as you desire'!(p.192) As Jaya receives Mohan's telegrams "All Well", Jaya notes, "I will have to erase the silence... Life has always to be made possible"(pp.192-193). In *The Binding Vine* we can see Gayatri Spivak's idea of the "subaltern woman"- a woman forced to marry against her wish, a girl is raped, the sufferings of the working women and Rumble grieving over the death of her baby daughter Anu, finds identification in the poetry of her long dead mother-in-law Mira written when she was a young woman subjected to rape in her marriage.

Characters in her novels can be broadly grouped into two categories. In one category fall the characters that play a minor role in the advancement of the story-line and are more of type characters who do not move much out of their limited spheres. Moreover, these characters, in most cases, tend to submit themselves to the controlling forces. They seem to lack the knowledge and strength required to resist and revolt. For instance, Vanitamami in *That Long Silence* has internalized the code of patriarchy so deeply that she cannot discard it. She accepts her subservient role as allotted to a woman by the male-dominated society and continues to worship her husband even when she knows that he is cheating her. The same kind of submissiveness and servile attitude of women is presented through the character of Vanaain in *The Binding Vine*. She is unable to assert herself before her husband even in the matters where she must assert. Both these women are victims of social determinism with patriarchy being the agency deciding their lives.

Almost all the men presented by Deshpande serve as tools in the hands of patriarchal system, taught to dominate and supersede women in every sphere of life by every means possible. Manu in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* exerts his authority over Saru by his sheer physical power. Mohan in *That Long Silence* and Jayant in *Roots and Shadows* try to dictate over the likes and dislikes of Jaya and Indu respectively in their professional as well as personal lives.

But from a narrower look the men gender in novels of Deshpande reveal the fact that they are also dictated and directed by various internal and external forces. Men in her novels are presented both as agents as well as victims. On the one hand, they remain as a chief social agency of dominion ship over women where they too fail to liberate themselves from the monopoly and genuineness of a “man”, defined by patriarchy. Thus, their psyche is merely a myopic and egoistic image as fostered by society. In this process, just like women folk, they also suffer and experience distortion of self as presented in their roles prescribed by society, which they have internalized through years and years of conditioning and have become self-limiting and self-oppressive. Evidently Manu in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* expends his entire energy subjugating his women rather than working for better on his own part and social status. Due to his obsession, he fails to pay attention to the ways and means of his own fulfilment. Similarly, Shripati in *A Matter of Time* punishes his wife in order to give her a lesson for losing their mentally disturbed son and stops communicating with her. But in the process, it is not only his wife, Kalyani, who is at the losing end he himself also gets isolated and lonely and is thus cut off from his daughters as well. To fit into the role of a male as described by the social norms and culture, the main aim of which is to suppress and control women in their lives, men have to stifle their own desires and aspirations too. On the other hand, all the major female protagonists in novels are unlike the minor characters and they are penetratingly defined and settled in the minds of the readers. They are properly delineated, multifaceted people who progress, change, grow, evolve or deteriorate with the passage of time. For instance, in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru is a modern, economically independent woman who passes through a bad phase in her married life. She is a professionally successful doctor

and stands higher above her husband in social and economic stature. This embitters her marriage and her husband's ego receives a fatal blow. Being a sensitive person, Saru feels guilty for being responsible for all this. She begins to consider herself a failure as a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother. The guilt feelings of Saru are relieved only when she shares her feelings with her father. He reassures her by asking: "Why do you torture yourself with others? Are you not sufficient for yourself? It's your life, isn't it?" (*The Dark Holds No Terror*, p.217). She, motivated by her father's words, sheds all her misconceptions about herself and resolves to begin a new life. Here, Deshpande has nicely projected the emotions and experiences of a woman as a wife, mother and as an individual facing psychological and sociological problems as well as her plight as a modern woman to understand herself and preserve her own identity.

In her recent novel, *In the Country of Deceit*, Deshpande has built the story around the conflicting mental state of an individual where she is torn between her individual wishes and desires and social restrictions and obligations. The novel is about a young woman Deviyani or Devi who lives alone in a small town, Rajnur. She is a spinster in her late twenties. She spends most of her time in gardening, teaching English and befriending Rani, a former Hindi film actress. But, incidentally, she meets the new district superintendent of police, Ashok Chinnapa, who is much older to her and also married. She falls in love with him and embarks on a relationship without a future. Initially, she was a little hesitant about this relationship as she had a clear-eyed knowledge of the wrong she was to be in this relationship. After initial phase of internal conflict between her rational self and instinctive self, she surrenders to the demands and of the instincts of the body. But the conflict doesn't end here. In her mind, she always carries the guilt of a socially unacceptable relationship and also of doing wrong to Ashok's wife and daughter. In the case of Devi, Deshpande presents an example of 'mind-body problem' according to which mind and body are two fundamentally different parts of an organism. Even though they coexist, they remain distinct in nature. Here, Devi also encounters the mind-body debate. On one side is her enormous love for Ashok and on the other is her moral consciousness. She remains in a state of turmoil till the end of the novel and then she ultimately decides to part ways with Ashok. This decision is not a result of any kind of societal pressure or the guilt feeling caused by an immoral act, but it is taken by a mature and high-principled self. Devi refuses to feel guilty or ashamed of her relationship with Ashok and she says,

"Pictures of Ashok's face looking at me, loving, wanting, enjoying me, Ashok kneeling before me, his face humble, supplicating, Ashok on the beach, holding out his arms to me, Ashok folding me in his arms. These images are etched on my mind; they will stay with me forever." (*In the Country of Deceit*, p.258)

She recognizes the demands of society, family and friends, but it is a decision of her own rational self.

All her female protagonists are presented as a product of society and history and their life is shaped by these forces. But, at the same time, these women are sensitive and self-conscious; the qualities which make them resist the dominance of these controlling agencies. Though a product of society, they all strive to resist its patriarchal codes and structures. Saru from *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Indu in *Roots and Shadows* serve as apt examples to prove this point. They are in constant struggle with the social norms and culture and try to assert their individual selves.

Marriage becomes the central point of analysis not only in Deshpande's work as well in many other writers duly commuted by Adrienne Rich (1986) in her brilliant analysis of motherhood which she narrates that one renders into the definition of femaleness if she has borne and reared a child is to have gone through it which patriarchy joins with psychology to render her into. Rigid codes of 'appropriate' behaviour circumscribe her. The regulating framework the woman is governed by self-sacrifice putting her with several miseries and abuses within marriage. The ways in which a woman is controlled by the institution of marriage becomes a central theme in many writers.

The character Rukmani, in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, is overwhelmed by the fact that she has never spoken by name to her husband. Similarly Dimple realizes in Bharati Mukherjee's (1975) *Wife*, that she devoted her life in pleasing others, and not herself. In Anita Desai's (1982) *Fire on the Mountain*, Nanda Kaul is disillusioned with the idea of care-giving, "a vocation that one day went dull and drought-struck as though its life-spring had dried up" (p.30). Urmi of Deshpande in *The Binding Vine* is unequivocal about the care-giver role: "Sometimes I think ...they brainwash us into this motherhood thing. They make it seem so mystical and emotional when the truth is that it's all just a myth." (p.76) The image of being 'brainwashed' into the motherhood role in Deshpande's passage is an echo of Adrienne Rich's comment that the woman "has always known herself both as daughter and as potential mother." (Rich, 1986; p.118). In Shashi Deshpande's fiction, marriage destroys the woman completely. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* the wife who is socially and financially more successful is subject to constant abuse by her husband. Marriage signals the end of independence – if they were ever independent in their father's house for women. Hence Deshpande in *The Binding Vine*:

"Tell me, is getting married so important to a woman? ...One always hopes one's children will get more out of life than one has ... Security. You're safe from other men. It usually gives them that guarantee of safety. It makes much greater courage to dispense with a man's protection" (pp.87-88).

Marriage and its rituals are often described as restrictive and oppressive, and never just or fair towards women. Symbols of marital status symbolize the violence and oppression in many postcolonial writers.

Amongst Indian writers, Kamala Das (1996) was one of the first to move towards a feminist mode, daring– in a conservative and patriarchal society– to discuss sexuality. Her autobiographical work, *My Story*, showcased the conditions under which a girl grows up, experiences her sexuality, the risks involved in daring to express the same, and the norms of sexual behaviour that marriage presupposes. In a particularly savage passage, she questions the sexual aspect of marriage when she asks whether marriage involved turning into “a clown in bed, a circus performer”(p.70). Kamala Das described herself in her famous poem, *An Introduction: “Every Woman Who seeks love.”*(pp.26-27). Kamala Das describes herself in the following words:

I am sinner,  
I am saint, I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no  
Ache which are not yours. I too call myself. (Das, 1996; pp.56-59)

Kamala Das (1996) expresses her inclination to free herself from the prison of her husband’s house and the loveless life of domesticity which she had been leading there. She says that her husband is physically a strong man, and that a strong man always uses the same technique which is to keep his wife physically and sexually satisfied but denying to her the love which she desperately needs and the denial of which has the effect of killing her slowly:

... he serves his love in lethal doses,  
For, love is Narcissus at the water’s edge, haunted  
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last  
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors  
To shatter and the kind night to *erase the water*.  
(*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, pp.30-34)

Shashi Deshpande has critiqued a society and culture that denies the woman to describe herself, and has, instead, taught her to be ashamed of her body. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita, the doctor–heroine, articulates the criticism of Deshpande:

‘Backache, headache, leucorrhoea, menorrhagea, dysmenorrhoea, loss of appetite, burning feet, an itch “there” ...all the indignities of a woman’s life, borne silently and as long as possible, because “how do you tell anyone amount these things?” Everything secret, their very womanhood was merely a source of deep shame to them. Stupid, silly martyrs, she thought, idiotic heroines’. (p.107)

Her novels are primarily a revelation of the inner consciousness of a character. For this purpose, she has mainly used the technique of stream of consciousness as the mode of narration in her novels. Urmila, in *The Binding Vine*, gives the reader her observations and perceptions about life, as her mind keeps shifting between the present and the past. Through long passages of self-introspection, a record of what passes through her psyche is revealed. In *A Matter*

*of Time*, the conflict and indecisiveness in Gopal's Mind is presented by Deshpande by the use of interior monologue. This technique is again used in *Small Remedies* when Madhu realizes the transient nature of man's life and the certainty of death. While witnessing a naming ceremony of a child, the thoughts of her son's death and futility of life are continuously flowing through her mind. Her mind oscillates between the present and the past.

Deshpande uses very terse and condensed similes derived from everyday life. Cage and lamb are a part of our common place knowledge, but these ordinary and common imageries are excellently used by her to express the predicament of a woman. Woman's reduction to a mere object with no subjectivity or voice of her own is clearly emphasized through these striking images. They tend to create a deep visual impact going straight not only to the reader's heart and mind but also to his social and human consciousness.

Thus, we can safely conclude that the novels demonstrate the ways in which Shashi Deshpande negotiates, often contradictorily, the capillary relationships between the modern nation, traditional culture and middle-class women. Her novels operate at not the macro but the micro-political level to interrogate the dialogic relationship of the past and the largely oppressive, physical presence of Indian women. She addresses head-on the contradictions in the articulation of middle-class Indian womanhood caught between the demands of tradition and modernity, yet locates at least part of her critique outside the terrain of the postcolonial nation-state. By eschewing allegory Deshpande enables us to read women not as mirrors or containers of the nation (or its limits) but in the nation, in search of agency.

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