



## WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: A CRITIQUE

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Indian women novelists in English have dealt with the place and position of women in Indian society and their problems and plights from time to time. They have analysed the sociocultural modes and values that have given Indian women their role and image along with their efforts to achieve a harmonious relationship with their surroundings. They aimed at portraying realistically Indian women's sense of frustration and their alienation. Their characters are shown very often as torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her characters are modern, educated young women, crushed under the male-dominated and tradition bound society. Though Shashi Deshpande objects to her being labeled a feminist novelist, yet the attitudes and reactions of her protagonists to various issues related to women who are caught between tradition and modernity to provide ample material for treatment from a feminist angle.

Deshpande's women characters have a strength of their own, and inspite of challenges and hostilities, remain uncrushed. For example, Urmila in the *The Binding Vine*, declares :

*"I am not going to break".*

Deshpande has created authentic female characters—flesh-and-blood characters. She has successfully delineated their problems and plights, yearnings and aspirations, failures and foibles in the Indian context. Most of her novels present a middle - class housewife's life. Many of her characters are persons who are frustrated either sexually or professionally. Her novels generally center around family relationships—particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the latter's dilemmas and conflicts.

Urmila, the protagonist of *The Binding Vine*, is a middle class housewife who works as a lecturer in a college and thus, financially independent, self-reliant and highly self-confident. She has an identity different from that of her husband whereas her other heroines are wrapped up in their own concerns, Urmila is the only one who tries her best to help other women who had been wronged, be it Kalpana or her long dead mother - in - law Mira.

In the novel, Shashi Deshpande, takes up the issue of marital rape. What Mira had suffered from is generally not acknowledged by our culture as rape, but the legitimate right of the husband to possess his wife sexually, with or without her consent. Mira's husband had exercised this right against her will, against her strong aversion to him, what had sustained Mira is the claustrophobic atmosphere of her marriage was her writing.

In the novel there is another rape victim, Kalpana. Her mother Shakutai belongs to the lower stratum of society. The women of this class are more vulnerable to domestic violence. Shakutai's suffering also begins with her-marriage. After the births of three children, Shakutai takes it upon herself to work and support her family inspite of doing all kinds of work, her husband deserts her for another woman. It is really unfair that inspite of putting up with such a worthless husband and inspite of struggling alone to fend for her children, fingers are pointed at her when anything goes wrong in the family.

Deshpande portrays the India of the eighties. There is a kind of realism in her novels. As Veena shashadri remarks that she believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be. And like Jaya of *That Long Silence*, many Indian wives keep on :

*"Perennially groping about their fate, But unwilling to do anything that could result in their being tossed out of their comfortable ruts and into the big bad world of reality, to fend for themselves."*

The narrator in *If I Die Today* declares that these are:

*"not characters created by Agatha Christie but real people."*

For her portrayal of the predicament of middle-class educated Indian women, their inner conflict, quest for identity, issues pertaining parent - child relationship, Deshpande may be called a feminist.

Feminism, primarily, in the critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking which aims at the domination of the male and the subordination of the female. This patriarchal ideology teaches woman to internalize this concept in the process of their socialization. Very often what has been termed great literature is solely preoccupied with the androcentric ideology

which focuses on the male protagonist, providing the female secondary roles. Feminism in Indian literature is a by product of the Western feminist movement. Shashi Deshpande's main concern in her novels is to explore the root cause of fragmentation and dichotomy of her character to find out what happens in the psyche of these women in the process of individuation. But she knows that radical feminist stand will not be in tune with the times and it is only with the passage of time that a total change is possible.

Deshpande's protagonists are women struggling to find their own voice and continuously in search to define themselves. But they :

*"...become fluid, with no shape, no form of ... their own."*<sup>4</sup>

Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, undertakes a futile search for herself but :

*"The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces."*<sup>5</sup>

The experiences of Indu are not different. She bewails: "This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. She thinks that she has found in Jayant, the other part of her own self but she comes to realize that it was an illusion and a perfect understanding can never exist.

As a writer, Shashi Deshpande highlights the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation which is inevitable in an oppressive male-dominated society. She has tried to analyse the condition of the present day woman who is intelligent, articulate and aware of her capabilities. Even then she is thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism. With the opening of more job opportunities to women, their financial status has increased. Their new professional and social status calls for a change and a redefinition of man -woman or husband-wife equation. But in spite of the change witnessed in the past few decades, the general attitude towards women has not changed. In the institution of marriage the same old rules regarding the accepted behavior of husband and wife, prevail.

In all Shashi Deshpande's novels, except *Come up and Be Dead*, the protagonists are married women. Manju in, *If I Die Today*, summarises the common predicament succinctly:

*"A marriage. You start off expecting so many things, And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But... two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jars. Who can see each other but can't communicate. Is this a marriage?"*

This is undoubtedly not an enviable situation. In India, a wife finds it impossible to relate to the world without husband, for it is held.

*"A husband is like a sheltering tree."*

But in *A matter of time*, we see that marriage:

*". . . is not for everyone. The demand it makes—a Life time of commitment—is not possible for all of us."*

In *Roots and Shadows*, the central character observes:

*"...what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after a cold -blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue."*

To Urmila of *The Binding Vine*, the back of the bride's neck, nervously awaiting the first-night onslaught, looks,

*"like a lamb's, waiting for the butcher's knife to come down upon it."*

In the novel, Deshpande makes a bold attempt to tackle the subject of marital rape through the character of Mira, she focuses attention on all those women who are doomed to silently suffer nightly assaults by their husbands because the very idea of a woman protesting against her husband's sexual advances is unheard in our society. Love and passion are viewed as a male right, women are supposed to fall in line and oblige. Mira's life illustrates the traumatic aspect of a loveless marriage and of one-sided love.

Even the paraphernalia associated with marriage has become meaningless. Shakutai, who had often wished to have her mangalsutra made of gold, finally realizes the futility of the endeavor :

*"The man himself is so worthless, why should I bother to have this thing made in precious gold?"*

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru finds her marital condition unbearable. Her grandmother, who was deserted by her husband never complained and had accepted her plight as her fate believing that it was written on her forehead. And Saru's mother did not have a room of her own, silence had become a habit between her and her husband.

Deshpande in *The Binding Vine* writes about the change in the approach to sex in the context of husband-wife relationship. The heroines are conscious of their body's physical needs and accept them as natural. Still, for a woman sex is never an end in itself. For them it is necessary that emotional involvement accompanies gratification of sexual urges. Urmila is married to Kishore who spends most of his time away from home since he is an officer in the

Merchant Navy, Urmila's yearning for her husband should not be interpreted as a craving for sex because:

*"Sex is only a temporary answer"*

Urmila wants emotional involvement with her husband but Kishore always remains a little aloof. Kishore's aloofness, perhaps, is due to his reluctance to get emotionally involved for it entails great pain and suffering. Urmila does not deny the pleasure of sexual gratification but for her emotional involvement is essential to experience and enjoy the totality of husband-wife relationship.

Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, resents her womanhood and as a woman feels:

*"hedged in by my sex"*

In a male dominated society a woman is expected to be passive and unresponsive, for it shocks people like Jayant to find passion in woman. In this repressive atmosphere Indu finds:

*"A woman who loves her husband too much, too passionately and is ashamed of it."*

Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, is painfully conscious of the fact that her life revolves around her husband's needs and desires. She says:

*"We seemed to be left with nothing but our bodies, and after we had dealt with them we faced blankness. The nothingness of what had seemed a busy and full life was frightening."*

Later she finds even a touch so soothing that she claims that:

*"Physical touching is for me a momentous thing...it was never a casual or light-hearted thing."*

In *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande presents three generations of women in the same family living under the same roof. They have their own values and mindsets. The novel begins with Gopal's walking away from home. A major part of the novel is devoted to the attempt of the relatives to find out why Gopal deserted his family so irresponsibly. This incident evokes different reactions from the three important women in the novel—Kalyani, Sumi and Aru.

Kalyani is the most important character who is presented as a weak, feeble creature, who returned to her parents, home as a deserted wife and a disgrace to her family. Kalyani's marriage with Shripati, her maternal uncle, was arranged purely on the account of expediency to prevent the property going away. After their marriage, Manorma, Kalyani's mother felt

secure that the property would remain in the family. Kalyani was forced by her dreaded mother to accept her uncle as her husband. All this was responsible for:

*"the hopelessness that lay within the relationship, that doomed it from the start."*

She would never like the tragedy of her life to resurface in the case of her daughter. She takes the entire responsibility of sumi's carelessness on herself. She says:

*"But...how could she have known what being a good wife means when she never saw her mother being one? I taught her nothing. It's my fault Gopala, forgive me and don't punish her for it."*

Kalyani's character is a faithful representation of self-sacrificing Indian woman of the old generation. To them marriage is the most important happening in a woman's life. It is both a problem and a solution of many problems. Kalyani is keen on getting a good match for her granddaughter, Aru, though she is amazed by her unusual interest in marriage, which was responsible for her own misfortunes:

*"How can she, of all people, think of marriage with enthusiasm?"*

Kalyani's daughter Sumi appears to be an epitome of silent suffering and passive resistance, but she has a good opinion of herself. She does not want pity. Right from her childhood, she has been beautiful and graceful. And even in the crisis, she can leave the impression of her grace, courage and her old vivacity. What is even more beautiful in her is a series of rare qualities which she possesses. She has no trace of vanity though she is proud of her quickness and her memory. After desertion by her husband she shows boundless patience. Her sister Premi speaks eloquently about Sumi's superiority over her:

*"She was ahead of me and I was forever trailing behind, never able to catch up with her."*

Aru as an observer of the drama, affects the entire family. She is ready to go ahead Aru's empathy makes her the most sensitive character in the novel who silently reaches out to others and feels their predicament keenly.

One of the most distinguishing quality of Aru is her rebelliousness. The desire to rebel is deeply ingrained in her. According to her, Gopal's walking away from his family is not just a tragedy but it is both a shame and a disgrace. She is pained by the disintegration of the family, but her self-respect would not let her stoop to self-pity. Even after the death of her mother and grandfather she is not prepared to seek any help from Gopal. She moves away from her father's arms and says:

*"Yes, Papa, you go we'll be all right, we'll be quite all right, don't worry about us."*

She consoles kalyani saying that she will be with her as her 'son' who is regarded as the protector in the Indian context.

Marriage, which is considered to be the most important relationship, does not have a place in Aru's scheme of things. She declares that she would not marry, she is convinced of the futility of such human relationships.

Probably the most important point about Aru is her finely individualized unconventional relationship with her grandmother, kalyani. Aru had troubled relationship with Kalyani, however, with the passage of time, she changes:

*"It has suddenly become evident to all of them that Aru and Kalyani have, at some time without their having noticed it, forged a partnership"*

Towards the end of the novel, Gopal notices a curious resemblance between Aru and Kalyani. The novel portrays the network of human bonds and affiliations obtaining between several persons in general.

The novelist does not believe in offering readymade solutions. Deshpande's protagonists finally try their best to conform to their roles, and the novels end with an optimistic note with the possibility to some positive action in future. The realistic treatment of human predicament in Deshpande's fiction along with the contemporary angst in an existentialist manner might appear to be depressing but the final impression of her works is far from being gloomy or depressing. Significantly, her leading women characters learn in due course how to arrive at a compromise and find a sense of balance in life.

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