

A study on the characterization of women in novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to find out if Shashi Deshpande's women characters are really empowered women or if they are just wearing a mask of tranquility. The study aims to find out if Shashi Deshpande's women really assert themselves or somewhere in their assertion process conform to endurance. The study wishes to find out if compromise is the key word in Shashi Deshpande's heroines' vocabulary.

Keywords: *Women, empower, protagonists, society*

Introduction

For the purpose of this study, six of her novels have been considered, but the thrust of this research is on three of her major novels viz., *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. These three novels have won awards and have been translated into a number of foreign languages.

This study critically analyses their response to the emerging situation in life so as to fit themselves in the contemporary society. Without probing deeply into the novelist's conviction of what would serve as the ideal panacea for the different kinds of challenges, the study considers the problems of her characters which have had to contend with the given situations. *Come up and Be Dead* and *If I Die Today*, two detective serials of Shashi Deshpande which have been expanded and published as novels are not included for study as the very nature of their themes seems at variance with the topic chosen for this thesis.

Shashi Deshpande's stories are about a woman: her 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 women in India. Unable to defy social conventions or traditional morality, the middle-class women themselves are enmeshed by desires and despairs, fears and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, marital discord and male chauvinism.

Indeed, Shashi Deshpande's chief thematic concern is with a woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as a human being. And accordingly in her novels the operative sensibility is distinctly female and modern.

Shashi Deshpande feels embarrassed to be called a woman writer and she is not very enthusiastic about the label feminist. She considers herself as a feminist in personal life but not a feminist writer. "I write as a writer but am identified as a woman writer. I am nothing more than a novelist and a short-story writer but people seek more glorified titles to elevate you to stardom." "If critics and reviewers insist on calling me a woman writer, then 'man' should be prefixed to male writers as well".

"Women writers are expected to write for women's magazines and be read by women readers only. Males generally do not want to read women writers." Such statements flowed in abundance, perhaps personifying her womanhood. It made a lot of sense particularly in the run-up to the International Women's Day celebrations.

With much ease Shashi Deshpande debunked myths that overwhelm the Indian intelligentsia. The prickly issues of language and writing, the widening divide between the non-resident Indian authors writing in English and the writers writing in English in India, the importance of readers and a writer's obligation to self-censorship, globalization of literature and the impact of feminism on marginalized women - the rich repertoire of debatable points that have always troubled her and continue to do so. She laments the divide between writers as a group on the basis of caste, gender and language and this, she says, prevents writers from playing a meaningful role in society and their inability to take on and write on public issues.

But the free-spirited Shashi Deshpande is only making her voice more distinctive with every new publication. Writing from the margin is also written with felicity to evoke emotions. However much she may deny the influence of feminism in her novels, it is the core of her novels. And it becomes quite obvious, that the women she has created are feminists, even if she is not one.

The works of shashi deshpande

Roots and Shadows won for the author the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize for the best novel written and published in India for the year 1982-83. Her collection of short stories, *The Legacy*, has had the single distinction of being used as textbook in Columbia University for a course in Modern Literature. And almost all her books have been well received by the reading public, though seldom acclaimed by academics, or anthologized. For her, writing is a vocation, not a profession, and so she seems to have been untouched by the reception accorded to her work.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Shashi Deshpande uses irony in the majority of her

stories and novels to satirize the morals and manners of our society although she is not an ironist. She employs situational, attitudinal and verbal irony to telling effect. Her language is simple, direct and terse; close to the speaking voice.

Sometimes, instead of full and long sentences, she uses words elliptically and minimally and this makes for force. Six of her major novels, *Roots and Shadows* to *Small Remedies* in the chronological order are chosen for this thesis. The focus in these novels is on heroines or the major women characters. Her heroines are sensitive to the changing times and situations, they revolt against the traditions in their search for freedom. They succeed in achieving self-identity and independence and choose their partners in life to live with in pursuance of their felt need to lead a family life. They establish the role that they play in the family — a daughter, a wife, a mother and also a career woman.

Standing at cross-roads of tradition they do seek a change, but within the cultural norms so as to enable themselves to live with dignity and self-respect. Indu, the protagonist in *Roots and Shadows*, her first novel, emerges successfully as a woman of determination and does not yield to the dictates of the patriarchal society. She exemplifies a woman in the transitional period that is torn between age-old traditions and individual views. It records how she defies the worn-out traditions, pushes aside all her fears about her imagined inadequacies and asserts herself as an individual.

Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, seeks freedom without impinging on her obligations and responsibilities and achieves harmony in life. It shows how she undergoes a trauma when her professional success has cast a shadow on her married life and how boldly she stands up to the situation and audaciously accepts the challenges of her own protegee.

Jaya of *That Long Silence* gradually emerges as a confident individual fully in control of herself and refuses to be led by nose. A stereotyped housewife initially nervous and needing male help and support all the time, she understands that she also has contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own strategy. It also shows how with this new confidence Jaya becomes emancipated without rejecting outright the cultural and social background.

Urmila of *The Binding Vine* is depicted as an advanced version over the earlier women protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's novels as she goes a step further and helps the poor and the downtrodden. She fights for another woman's cause while the others have fought their own battles. It shows how she exhibits her interest and capacity to purge the society of its evils.

Sumi, a deserted wife in *A Matter of Time* is dauntless in her adversity —she evolves herself from utter desolation and bitterness linked up with invisible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities. It records how with courage, dignity, responsibility and independent spirit, even after desertion by her husband, she has reached a stage of self-sufficiency and self-fulfillment.

Madhu in *Small Remedies*, her latest novel, writes the biography of Savitribai Indorekar, the aging doyenne of Hindustani music, who avoids marriage and a home to pursue her genius. She has led the most unconventional of lives, and undergoes great mental trauma due to the opposition by a society that practices double standards — one for men and the other for women. Even as a child she was a victim of gross

discrimination. Besides, Madhu narrates her own life story and also those of her aunt Leela and Savitribai's daughter, Munni.

Shashi Deshpande's novels

Shashi Deshpande's six novels have been critically analysed with a view to understand and appreciate the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity and the responses to the emerging situations in life in the contemporary society. Different kinds of challenges faced by her characters are studied in detail here. The novels have been analysed individually and commented upon in detail.

Roots and Shadows

The woman protagonist in *Roots and Shadows* is the new woman Indu. Indu, an educated young woman, is highly sensitive. She starts aspiring to become independent and complete in herself. She brushes aside all the age-old beliefs and superstitions prevalent in the society. As a motherless child, she was tended by the members of the joint family who never denied her any amount of care and affection. Old Uncle, Kaka, Atya and other family members always cushioned her position in the family. But now she finds the dominant Akita, a senior member and a mother surrogate in the novel, and even the family to be a hindrance in achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness.

Indu develops an aversion to the natural biological functions of the female as mother and has apathy towards bearing a child. She develops a vague sense of guilt and feels that her womanhood closes so many doors for her. Defying the traditional role she is expected to play, Indu seeks fulfillment in education and a career. She works as a journalist for a woman's magazine but gives it up out of disgust for writing only about women and their problems and starts working for another magazine.

According to Shashi Deshpande, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, and many women in her other novels had their roots in the same place. Shashi Deshpande herself says: Life as I saw it in a small town as a child, as a growing girl. Life as I saw it in Mumbai as a woman. And I saw it, the sharp, clean line dividing the world of men from the world of women. As a child I could cross over easily from one world into the other. Often I was the bridge. But as I grew up, I realized the bridge wasn't there anymore. I had ceased to be one myself. I was trapped into a world of my own. But, still, for some reason, outside the claustrophobic world of women.

The dark holds no terrors

Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* undergoes a similar trauma like Indu in *Roots and Shadows*. She confronts reality and in the end realises that the dark she feared really holds no terrors. Saru is a 'two-in-one woman.' A doctor in the day time and a trapped animal at night. She wants to be free and have an identity of her own. She longs to break away from the rigid traditional norms. She hates her parental home, yet the novel begins with Saru visiting her father after a gap of fifteen years.

On hearing through a friend about her mother's death a month ago, Saru wants to visit her father's house from where she had left as a young woman. Defying her parents to marry the man Manohar (known as diminutive Mann, a name no doubt carrying overtones of the legendary patriarchal law-giver who saw the world from a male centered perspective) whom she loved. She now returned to it as a well-established doctor and a

mother of two children more out of an urge to escape from the hell of life she is passing through. She appears to be confused, hopeless, dull almost thoughtless and a recluse.

Though the novel deals with an uncertain situation, Shashi Deshpande makes use of effective concrete images to drive home the reality and gravity of the problem. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* presents the inner drama of Saru that has a lot to do with the past. Hence narration is introspective sliding across the past and the present through effective "quick cuts."

Occasionally, Shashi Deshpande sidetracks into a bit of philosophizing on human life, grief, happiness, pain, man's aloneness and so on, and these digressions make the novel a bit too wordy. She never leaves anything unsaid to evoke rich suggestions. Some Indian elements like the son's importance in the family, girls getting importance only during haldi-kumkums, a woman possessed by Devi, find a natural place in the novel that deals with a woman's status and the dichotomy within her personality.

That long silence

That Long Silence, this Sahitya Academy award-winning novel tells a haunting tale of how Jaya, who is disillusioned with her marriage and her life, rediscovers herself. 69 Who is Jaya? She is Mohan's wife. She is Rahul's and Rati's mother. She was a writer who had given up serious writing, and had taken up writing a weekly column on Seeta, a plump, good-humored, pea brained but shrewd and devious woman.

Deshpande's Jaya was a woman who did not ask questions, because she had learnt early in her life that when women ask questions - particularly questions like, "Why, why this injustice?" they would simply hang heavily around in the air, refusing to go away, causing eyebrows around her to raise at her audacity in asking such questions. Jaya was related to mad Kusum who had killed herself by jumping into a well, and had died not by drowning but of broken neck as there was no water in the well. Jaya was sure of her sanity as long as Kusum had lived, because if Kusum was mad, then Jaya must have been "normal".

After Kusum's suicide, Jaya does not know any more who she is. Is she just Mohan's wife who had fragmented herself, who had cut off the bits that had refused to be Mohan's wife?

Deshpande uses this story to paint vividly how the life of a woman like Jaya is. She says that their life's basis can be summarized as, "Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and you're safe." For all outside appearances hers was a happy family, her husband was in a top position, they had two children - one boy -and one girl - and she was yet another wife and mother whose life centered around her family and her home - nothing more.

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