



## Articulation of womanhood in the novels of Shashi Deshpande

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**Abstract:** : *Shashi Deshpande is one such novelist whose novels need to be read with earnest seriousness. She is never after gimmicks and is serious about the story being told and the manner in which it is presented. She admits her novels to be open examination of the experiences of people in specific setting. She has written ten thought provoking novels and five volumes of children stories. Her father, who has won various regional and national awards, is popularly known as “the Bernard Shaw of Kannada Theatre”. Like her father, she has also won many awards. Some prestigious awards for her priceless contribution are Thirumathi Rangammal Prize, Sahitya Akademi Award (1990), and Padma Shri (2009). The intention of this paper is to show how Shashi Deshpande’s novels depict the women’s struggle against all odds. Deshpande’s major concern as a creative writer is her women characters, their pain, their sufferings and their own solutions to the problems created by the world where they flourish their desires and dreams but to face disillusionment makes them bold enough to face the fact.*

**Key words:** *feminism, predicament, patriarchal, identity crisis, anti-male.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

The significance of feminist study in our country is manifold. There is acute lack of awareness about questions, pains and agony related to women. Therefore, the significance of such study increases. We have a fixed mindset and we have not freed ourselves from mythology and orthodoxy where women are concerned. The situation is alarming as far as gender equality is concerned. Society is not ready to accept the fact that men and women have to shoulder responsibilities for both sexes. Every year, eight March is observed as International Women’s Day. There is talk on women empowerment all around. Debate is going on for thirty three percent reservations for women in legislative and executive fields but the result seems barren. Shashi Deshpande enjoys a particular place in contemporary Indian writing in English fiction. Deshpande gives realistic touch to the situations of her women characters.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Resurgence of feminism is bolstered with Mary Wallstonecraft’s seminal book “*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” published in 1792. Her argument in this book is that women should be treated equally with men in all spheres. She dismisses the established perception of women subjugation and argues that women can never be good wives, daughters and mothers unless they are properly educated. Another feminist Simon de Beauvoir strengthens feminist movement with her potentially important book “*The Second Sex*” published in 1949. Beauvoir argues that a woman is not born as woman but it is society that constructs a woman as ‘other’. Another advocate of feminist movement is Virginia Woolf who in her book “*A Room of One’s Own*” advocates for a balance between a man’s self-realization and a female’s self-annihilation. Scholars and critics have dwelt in length from time to time upon the women characters of Deshpande. P. Bhatnagar, in the article “Indian Womanhood Fight for Freedom in *Roots and Shadows*” (1991), explores the psychic and moral dilemmas that a modern Indian women encounters.

### 3. METHOD:

This paper has been analyzed with the help of Postcolonial feminist theory. Subject matter of the paper is descriptive, analytical and exploratory in nature. The paper is a literary work using primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources are based on library resources like reference books, scholarly journal



#### 4. DISCUSSION:

Shashi Deshpande occupies an important position among contemporary Indian women writers as a novelist. Deshpande enters the arena of writing as a fresh air and her novels reflect the social realities of Indian Socio-cultural life. She not only propagates feminist ideas but also advises woman to understand their potentials and voice for their rights. Her novels suggest that women should recognize their weaknesses, assert their individuality and be aware of their existence. The themes in her novels are universal and they are transparent views of the status of Indian women. However it will be wrong to say that she is prejudiced against men. Like Virginia Woolf, she feels that women should be given a chance to utilize their talents; parallel to it they should also fulfil their duties towards their family.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the debut novel of Deshpande. It is the story of disillusionment of Sarita, a middle class doctor, who is caught in a web of tradition-bound Indian society. It is about a woman's self quest and struggle to free herself from the restrictions imposed by society. Deshpande's second novel *That Long Silence* (1988) gave her the Sahitya Akademi Award. It projects Jaya's journey in search for self-identity in this patriarchal society. Her third famous novel is *Roots and Shadows* (1983) issued in 1992. Here she portrays objectively a new female experience with a geocentric vision. Her novel *The Binding Vine* (1993) sketches middle class female protagonists predicament in a male-dominated world, where her scopes to give voice to her concerns is muted. *A Matter of Time* (1996) presents three generations in the same family and under the same roof. The narrative contemplates on the issue that men can choose his own path, but the responsibility of his act falls on the shoulders of the women of the family. The story is a continuation of her exploration into many facts of the feminine experience in writing. Madhu in *Small Remedies* (2000), travels in quest of self-discovery and make sense to her life and those around her. Deshpande's feminist ideology stems from her belief in 'self-striven' approach towards women's empowerment or what S.L. Sharma terms as 'empowerment without antagonism' in her article of that title. She refuses to indulge in 'adversarial-orientation' or intemperate expressions towards men. She attributes profession to her protagonists as a 'strategic interest' which enables them to enter the prevailing and andocentric system and to dismantle their politics.

Deshpande's feminism does not look for woman's independence on man rather it shows man's dependence on woman. Deshpande's men subjects exhibit similar dependence over their counterparts. Exhibition of authority is a common predicament by most of Deshpande's protagonists as seen in case of Akka in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru's mother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, so on and so forth.

Deshpande very appropriately exhibits a male's ego about his own intellectual superiority which forms a part of the patriarchal mindset of the society. The dialectic of power within a family, which forms a part of the gender bias, springs mainly from the neglect or non-acknowledgement of a woman's intellectual and aesthetic preoccupations. The glaring example of this is the casual manner of most of her male subjects' looking at the vacation of writing undertaken by their spouses as a mere pastime hobby which once again adhere to the norms of the sexist dichotomies of female intuition. Though none of Deshpande's women writers are aggressively feminist yet the very act of writing is indeed a threat to most of her male subjects. In fact their non-acceptance is nothing but an indirect expression of the fear for the intellectual power of a woman which they try to curb by discouraging the very process of writing. Jaya in *That Long Silence* held her husband Mohan responsible for her identity crisis as a writer. The gradual chasm in their relationship finally reached a breaking point when Jaya held Mohan responsible for her identity crisis as a writer to which he replied thus:

If ever I'd been irresponsible and callous... but I have never been that. I have always put you and the children first, I have been patient with all your whims, I grudged nothing. But the truth is that you despise me because I've failed. As long I had my job and position, it was all right; as long I could give you all the comforts it was all right. But now, because I'm likely to lose it all.... (121)

The prominent point about Deshpande's novels is her delineation of the women's characters; her inner world. Her protagonists are women struggling to find their own voice and space and are continuously in search to define them. But they become fluid, with no shape, no form of their own. Jaya, in *That Long Silence* undertakes a futile search for herself. The expressions of Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* also are not so different. To Shashi Deshpande's mind, no amount of theorizing will solve women's problems especially in Indian context.

She reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings are rooted in the culture in which she lives. Deshpande's feminism is not like other hard-core feminists, her approach is sensible. Deshpande does not believe that the terms mother, sister and wife are illogically thrust upon woman. When Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, being frustrated goes to her parental house to seek mental and emotional support from her father, her father advises her to make reconciliation with her husband. Sarita's father advises: "Don't go without meeting your husband. Talk to him. Tell him what's wrong" (217). Finally Saru realizes that escape is not the solution of her problem. That is why she asks her: "Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I will be back as soon as I can" (221). P.



Venugopalan opines: “Sarita’s growth occurs in three phases, namely the female and the feminine, occurring concurrently, and the feminists” (Venugopalan, 18). Dr. K.R. Srinivas observes: “Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention and so she decides to face her home again. In this unpredictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of self-confidence” (Srinivas 758)

Deshpande reveals the fact that she seems to upgrade the position of women at any cost. She, like Simone de Beauvoir, believes that there must not be any differences between men and women on the basis of so many things; we should think that both men and women are human at first. Shashi Deshpande also strongly believes in the reciprocal relation between men and women. She feels that both men and women should live together to make their lives beautiful and also make the nation great.

The central aspect of her fiction is the issue of gender discrimination which is the burning topic in the modern discourse of literary criticism. Her portrayal of the modern educated career oriented middle class women who are very sensitive to the changing scenario is very interesting and thought provoking. Her presentation of women searching for their identities and struggling for their existence in a patriarchal framework is also very remarkable. She advocates that to realize herself, the woman must be true to her own self. The woman needs to venture out of the familial framework, to discover her potential as an individual and give expression to her inner space and self.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

Deshpande attempts to deconstruct the numerous levels of patriarchal and sexist bias employed towards girls and women in Indian middle-class society, particularly in a marriage or within the family set-up. She is a feminist who shows perception and awareness of the dilemma facing the woman in a society which is predominantly patriarchal. She does not recommend militant feminism because she feels that in the Indian context “aggressive feminism does not ring true” and that for Indian women; selfhood will come only from probing and thinking for oneself.

Deshpande opines that feminism means an improved relationship between man and woman, an erasure of gender discrimination and all oppressive practices against a woman from female foeticide and unequal pay to dowry and rape. Most of her characters and situations are rooted in the values and mores of the Indian middle-class. Her feminism sometimes seems a little ‘uncertain’ because it is not radical or anti-male and anti-marriage stance. However, she is firm in her conviction that in India, particularly, feminism cannot be ‘anti-male’ since both man and woman have to communicate and work towards a better, more meaningful, companionable relationship. Therefore, although the feminist framework employed to analyse her work is conceptually a Western framework, it has been substantially adapted to the Indian socio-cultural milieu to read and analyse Deshpande’s fictional depictions.

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