

## Shashi Deshpande: Shaping Her Creative Sensibility

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### Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly the most significant of the contemporary Indian woman writers in English. Possessing a rare insight into the entire panorama of women's plight in the present day custom bound Indian society, she presents in her works the subtle factors and influences which have contributed to the none too happy position of womanhood in Indian society. She draws her women from the urban middle class and portrays them as sensitive, intelligent, educated and career oriented thinking women, presenting them as individuals capable of breaking away from the traditional constraints to redefine their identities in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times. Her approach is different from that of all other feminists. Like others she also deals with the excesses committed upon the female lot for centuries and their deep but quiet suffering leading to an attitude of passive resignation. But rather than adopting a hostile approach she has consideration for a home – of peace and love – that can give a feeling of security to the women. Her women are not passive sufferers. They revolt against the established customs and try to search their own identity in the hostile world of male Chauvinism. In fact in her fictional world there is a fine blend of all three aspects of our lives i.e. political, social and psychological, though in her writings too there is an emphasis on the psychological realism of individual psyche, however, her characters are not neurotic characters, neither are they withdrawn from their day to day lives.

**Keywords:** *Political, Womanhood, Feminism, Indian Society, Peace, Love and Chauvinism*

**Introduction**

Though Deshpande's woman too faces various dilemmas and is torn between the pulls of traditional female archetypal values and her individualistic values, however, she wonderfully manages to come out of her turmoil and makes a balance between these conflicting values. She emerged in the Indian fictional scenario in the late 70s. She has created a niche for herself by her significant contribution to the Indian English literature. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle class woman who finds herself standing at the cross-roads of tradition and modernity and is caught in the dilemma of choosing either of the two.

Born in 1938, Deshpande grew up in a house which had harmonious mixture of languages. Her father, Adya Rangachar better known as Sriranga, taught Sanskrit in a college and wrote plays of ideas in Kannada, but opted to send his daughters to study in English- medium convent school. From her father nevertheless she must have acquired an intellectual bent of mind and a keen love for reading and scholarship which won her various academic degrees. At the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, graduated in economics, then obtained a degree in law, a post-graduate degree in English literature and a Diploma in journalism. At present she lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband and two sons.

**Theme**

Deshpande's works reflect a realistic picture of contemporary middle-class Indian woman. She deals very minutely with women's issues and depicts the plight of today's educated, middle-class Indian woman. Deshpande shows how the new woman is struggling hard to adjust herself in the conservative and tradition-bound society rather than to get free from it. She is trying to find and preserve a room of her own within the orbit of its society. It is for the courageous and sensitive treatment outstanding contribution in contemporary Indian English fiction. She sensitively portrays the lot of Indian woman and her much convoluted self-abnegation that she practices in the process of becoming an ideal daughter, ideal sister, ideal wife and ideal mother.

Deshpande confines herself to the 'experience with in the four walls' and most of her creative writings present a typical middle class house-wife's life. Her main concern is to find oneself, to create space for oneself, to grow on one's own.

Another striking thing about her writing is the reoccurrence of certain themes as some themes of her longer works are the enlargement of her short stories. However, the predicament of women-especially those who are educated and belong to the middle-class has been most prominently dealt with. The strong point about her writings is the delineation of women's inner world, which is quite authentic and unique as there is no exaggeration of things.

She concentrates on the psychological and emotional turmoil of today's educated, self-aware and highly sensitive woman and the emotional and sexual confusion suffered by the new woman in a tradition-bound society. However, in no way does she create any utopia for women, at no place she talks of making any 'female enclaves'. In fact she does not create the world rather she presents the world as it is, how it looks from a woman's point of view and in this way she poses certain serious questions regarding the lot and conditions of woman in our country. This is the main concern of the novelist as she herself declares it:

My main preoccupation has been with women and their difficult situations. In all my novels the protagonist is always a woman..... Being a woman, it was very natural for me to write about the special awareness which I looked at the world in which suffered and struggled as they did. Being a woman I could appreciate their predicament better (Interview, Ranjana Harish).

The above mentioned statement of the writer would sufficiently explain her serious efforts to venture into fresh fields and pastures new. Though other women writers also deal with the issue of women however there remains a difference between their approach and that of Deshpande, perhaps her being brought up in India only and remaining here gives her works a more authentic and realistic note therefore in her works we find no exaggeration, neither any vain glorification of the women characters.

The statement by the renowned critic proves that Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly a writer of feminine sensibility if not a feminist. Though Deshpande's main concern is to bring forth the real plight of the Indian women, she is reluctant to such claims that declare her to be a feminist. She very strongly refuses any such label though at the same time she does not refuse that she raises women's issue in her novels.

A study of protagonists of her novels and short stories reveals the variety of women she has been able to portray within the limitation of Indian middle class. Indu, in her Deshpande's

first published novel *Roots and Shadows* is an individual who, in her quest to be independent and complete realizes that there is beauty and security in life through reconciliation. Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is representative of middle class working women in modern India, rebelling against traditions but ultimately trying to compromise with existing reality. She realizes that escapism is never a solution and that she is her own refuge and that woman as individuals can have significant control over their relationships and professions.

Urmila of *The Binding Vine* is ahead of these women through her endeavours to help other women the poor and the downtrodden. She strongly believes that the women should have the courage to express themselves and expose the evils of the society fearlessly. She demonstrates strength and maturity even in adversity and has the generosity to gracefully free her husband from marital bounds without venting ill- feelings.

In fact she believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be. Her women are introspective, self-aware, inward probing and representative of girls in post-independence India. A time when most parents strove hard to provide their daughters with English education and when there is an exposure to western modes of living and thinking. In this way they develop a duality in their nature. For her portrayal of this predicament of middle class educated Indian women, their inner conflict and quest for identity, issues pertaining to parent-child relationship, marriage and sex and women's exploitation and disillusionment.

Deshpande's fictional achievement should not be seen in terms of her subscription or non-subscriptions to feminism because a writer of substance is committed to human issues and situation and not necessarily to any particular ideology. She chooses the path of conciliation without yielding either to absolute acceptance or to the temptations of embracing the militant feminist mould. Her works mediate between these two extreme. Her introspection and psychological probe make her second to none in revealing the subconscious and unconscious psyche of her heroines and other minor characters.

Broadly speaking the protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's fiction can be roughly categorized on the basis of various roles or situations they exist in. Women in her fiction are portrayed in all their myriad roles as mothers to their children, as a daughter, as a wife or as a woman in relationship with a man or simply as an individual in her own right. She has also portrayed some mythological characters in her stories, peeping into their inner selves and giving in the process, a refreshingly new meaning to their personalities. However, whatever the conditions they operate in, through her characters, Shashi Deshpande shows the new Indian woman and

her dilemma. She concerns herself with the plight of modern woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and above all as a human being.

Deshpande shows great sensitivity and awareness of the ways and means through which a woman is conditioned to accept her position in the society as one of subservience to men. Woman's perception of herself in various roles is conditioned by the thought patterns handed down to her by moral, intellectual and social order which has been formed by men. They are confined to their homes, oppressed, suppressed and marginalized and denied the opportunities for fulfillment of their lives. Even In the modern, changed ambience, her position is precariously unenviable. Today's woman, standing on the threshold of social change, has an intense awareness of her social, economic and political exploitation, but in an attempt to give voice to her feelings of protest she has to reckon with the prospect of social ostracism for daring to question the sanctity of time honoured and time tested traditions."

Thus in her fiction, Shashi Deshpande dramatizes some of the important relationships and questions some of the fundamental issues in the power structure and role divisions in the family. On the surface she may seem to be concerned more with 'female isolation' than with female achievement, but the fact that her women characters are indignant and capable of rational thinking sets them apart as women who are not average but capable of standing against the general current. By allowing her character to be different, Deshpande allows them to overcome the traditional pattern of womanhood. She takes a great interest in the social conditions that provoke tensions in the lives of contemporary women.

If the yearning to exist as an individual can be dismissed as something external to the female goal of life and motherhood then what is needed is social reconstruction and not individual correction. Deshpande stresses the socially and culturally binding norms that still disproportionately affect the lives of women and the intrinsic capacity of women to confront them with will power and confidence without being completely destroyed. In Shashi Deshpande's fictions, another discernible feature is the portrayal of home as a place of extra mobility and female resistance.

Her protagonists are able to achieve a dispassionate distance from their respective predicaments and make a realistic assessment of their immediate situation. So whether it is Sarita or Indu in her novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows* or Jayu in *It Was the Nightingale*, the mother in *Why Robin and And Then*, or the daughter in *Lucid Moments* and *Memorabilia*, for all of them displacement and relocation in their parental home allows them not only an honest perception of their immediate situation but also

provides final answers to many of their questions. One interesting feature of Deshpande's writing is the most of her character review their lives in a first person retrospective. By adopting this device the author manages to steer clear of lengthy descriptions or characterizations through interactions.

The first person narrative also ensures the reader's direct access to the protagonist. In the stories entitled *Death of a Child*, *The First Lady* and *A Liberated Woman*, Deshpande relies on a three dimensional blending of perspective, namely that of the protagonist and her inner monologue in the first person and that of the authorial interference in the third person. The same technique of first person narration is employed by Deshpande in all her stories. It is interesting to consider the specific form of individuality which the female figure is made to develop entirely through her monologues and without receiving a feedback by the people of her close surroundings. This applies for instance to the mother figure in *Why a Robin* whose language renders a vivid and authentic description of the contradiction between her willingness to be a victim of self confinement due to her 'plainness' and her inability to talk directly to her husband or daughter.

The experience presented in the story is so exclusive and so specific that it is difficult to imagine her to be provided with any other sympathetic and companionable listener except for the reader. Her daughter is too young and ignorant and her husband too unsympathetic, and involving any other outsider would entail a breach of privacy.

However, this thematic and linguistic experiment does not make allowance for a rich variety in character. This exclusive projection of female experiences does not leave any place for heroes in her fictional world. Husbands, fathers and lovers in her stories are either pale caricatures or form a part of the central female perspective. These people do not appear as characters acting in their own right but are seen through the eyes of their spouses or daughters. This is a characteristic feature of Deshpande's fiction and can be seen in almost all her stories like *The Intrusion*, *The Valley in Shadow*, *My Beloved Charioteer*, *It was the Nightingale*, *An Antidote to Boredom*, *Why a Robin*, *A Liberated Woman*, *Can You Hear Silence*, *The First Lady*, *Death of a Child*, *It was Dark*, and others. The men in all these stories are passive participators in action. In some of Deshpande's stories the characters remain anonymous.

The namelessness of these characters renders them a universality and allows them to perform the function of the 'spokeswomen' of the new tradition of womanhood. As the female struggle has assisted in liberating woman for her tradition logged and time honoured images,

the artistic implantation of this struggle in fiction assumes greater importance. As a result the journey of selfhood and freedom and the female experience and self-exploration becomes a central motive. Rather than focusing on romance in its many variations or on social surroundings, as far as the thematic aspect is concerned, Deshpande is primarily interested in the individual with a predominant concern for the women-centred issues.

Hence what is clearly discernible in Deshpande's fiction is a desire to portray the complexity and sophistication of the modern woman and deliberate moving away from tradition of fiction as romance to a more meaningful and realistic representation of reality. As a result, the women she portrays in her fiction are bright, thinking individuals capable of rebellion, who are no longer ready to accept infinite suffering as their heritage.

Deshpande is specifically concerned with the exploration of the mind of her characters. There is a shift in her writing from the external world to the inner world of the individual. Her focus of interest lies in the portrayal of states of mind rather than in holding up the mirror to society. This probably explains the language given to the protagonists by her. Facilitated by the first person narrative, it creates a sense of authenticity and understanding between the heroine and her readers. The self indignation with a subtle touch of hopelessness that characterizes the voice of her protagonists very convincingly evolves into the final note of philosophical acceptance whether it is in the story *Travel Plans* or in *Retrospective*.

The well organized unity between the narrative form and the contents is achieved by means of inner monologues on part of the protagonists bringing to life the loneliness of the heroine. Through the perception and sharing of the fears and feelings of her women characters Deshpande raises the predicament of the Indian woman by indirectly destroying the popular image common in Indian fiction till now, of the simple but sophisticated which is evident in the story *The Intrusion*.

The inner monologues of the protagonist reflect the two layers of consciousness which offer a rational analysis of her predicament which opposes resistance of: any kind. The contradiction inherent in the heroine's person is reflected in her language which expresses on the one hand trauma of having to give in her rights to her own body and privacy to a stranger, and concretizes the impossibility of an escape from her situation due to social reasons, on the other. This female suffering, manifested in the heroine's selflessness is made more intense through the awareness of her inability to change her predicament and it is central to the story's theme.



The story projects the ambivalence of the modern urban middle class woman. It grants a lot more space to the female protagonist while simultaneously emphasizing those factors (like fear of social ostracism, bad name to the family reaction of society and of parents etc.) that stand in her way to freedom. Through the manner in which she projects the issue of suffering in her protagonists, Shashi Deshpande stresses the socially and culturally binding norms that still disproportionately affect the lives of women and the intrinsic capacity of women to confront them with will power and confidence without being completely destroyed.

The determination of her protagonists not to allow themselves to be crushed by their suffering shows that they have the potential to develop further as individuals. Though her fiction, Shashi Deshpande documents female resistance against the patriarchally defined concept of ideal womanhood. In her works therefore, the passive female surrenders her place to an intelligent sensitive woman who asks endlessly questions of life in order to elicit meaning of experience.

The conflict between self-fulfillment and duty is an important aspect of the female experience portrayed by her and it is symbolical of the opposition to the traditional prototypes. Her women are prepared to fight in order to find a way to retain their identities even while they are confined within the conventional moulds of marriage and homeliness. If resigned acceptance of heritage is taken to be failure in her protagonists then her women may present a tragic picture of failure but their success lies in their potential to fight for their survival. Her women like Jayu in *It was a Nightingale* and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* could be described as women who have gained control over their lives and have combined marriage and career successfully.

Deshpande's works deal not only with ordinary women in ordinary urban situations but in some of her stories in the collection "The Stone Women" she portrays women from myths, legends and epics in a new light, shattering in the process their hegemonic influence in determining the conventional; image of a woman. In these stories she goes beyond and behind the facade of not only the stone women but also the manmade myth of the ideal woman and explores the inner selves of these famous women. She not only gives a new voice to these women showing them to be real thinking and sensitive women made of flesh and blood but also exposes the male hegemony in the process. On the whole, Shashi Deshpande has created in her women protagonists, heroines who do not merely stand for themselves but also for the artistic ideas the author wishes to convey. A clear cut solution to the female conflict is, from the author's view point, not important for the survival of the protagonist.



The understanding of the individual predicament is of greater relevance of her. The doubts and misgivings experienced by her women and sometimes their seemingly resigned acceptance of their predicament constitute the central message of the artist.

Her women realize how misplaced they are in their familial terrains and assert their need to move further and they are provided with the freedom of thought and speech. In her stories there is no absolute integration into the social and literary norms confirming to the traditional image of woman. On the contrary, Deshpande portrays in her stories, female experience that evolves in a series of movements of being totally victimized by society and man to a personality which consciously assumes control over her life. Most of her women end with an enhanced sense of self worth and are able to perceive fresh choices within the old framework. Her *The Stone Women* is a response to the male imagination of women, *That Long Silence* is means to articulate the silence women have been subjected to for centuries and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* explores women's anger. In all of them there is an assertion of feminist and a belief that recognition of women as persons as thinking human beings has to be on the basis of their individuality and not a concession made by men.

### **Conclusion**

To eliminate gender discrimination and promote female empowerment, women's decision making capacity must therefore be enhanced within the household, the work-place and the political sphere. Increased political influence should have reverberations for women's equality in the other realms, which will in turn have implications for India's performance against all milestones for social progress.

The message these women in Deshpande's fictional world convey is: There is a need to move beyond the 'given' that is the gender constraints, the socio-cultural inheritance, the body as such, to move beyond the margin, the subordination, the captivity, the loss of will, plain and simple surrender. There is a need to move towards self- realization and freedom and establish new relationship with the self as well as with the other (Jain, 285).

By breaking through the male normative patterns in her writings Deshpande is engaging in a process of consciousness raising and in the process subverts the stereotypical structures and images women in order to usher in the era of new personhood of women.

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