

## Bleak Walls: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Technique

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### ABSTRACT

The Bangalore-based author, **Shashi Deshpande**, who is the daughter of celebrated Kannada dramatist Shriranga, has eleven novels, four children's books and an essay collection entitled Writing from the Margin and Other Essays to her credit. The Sahitya Akademi Award was conferred on her for her book, *That Long Silence*, in 1988. Most of the writings of Shashi Deshpande exhibit the quest of women for self and different strategies applied for upliftment of women in patriarchal society. This paper focuses on the style of writing of Shashi Deshpande in her novels, particularly her use of space or place in her setting. She has evolved a unique story telling skill that empowers her to present women issues more realistically and convincingly through her characters. Her characters appear as real people existing in a particular time zone and place. Detailed description of whereabouts of her character's existence contributes to their personality, values, attitudes and even their problems.

**Keywords:** Shashi Deshpande, Location, home, motility, refuge, reconciliation,

*'Home defines the people who inhabit the house.'*

### Introduction:

Right from the grandeur of lavish *havelis* to modern age apartments, the need of space in Indian fiction are not merely backdrops but it's a take on character of shifting ideas and beliefs. The gradual shift from ancestral villages to modern urban city apartments also marks a shift from joint family system to nuclear families. However, in Shashi Deshpande's novels the association of natal homes and new marital homes of her heroines is similar to naval string between mother and child. Her style of story-telling is very easy and simple for her readers. Her setting is the context, where the story unfolds including time, place and social environment. Deshpande's descriptive powers of establishing a setting make readers visualize and experience the events she's conveying. Her story settings have great impact on the people in her stories, how they react and what they do. Time and place are the two bedrock elements that make her stories credible. Her geographical locations range from metros, small towns to a single room. When writing about

specific location, she excels in physical details of the environment – appearance, unique smell, sights and sounds. She uses her power of words to describe time and space to create an effective setting. She even makes use of psychological cues from the characters to embed time and place in action and events with the purpose of revealing motivation and goals.

In Indian fiction, houses occupied by people loom like characters – not only as the backdrop for plot unfolding but the locale is particularly quite deliberate and meaningful component of writer’s technique. Likely for Shashi Deshpande’s too, not only humans and human emotions but space has always been her dominant concern. Houses have always played a big role, almost one of the characters in her novels. The very detailed description of locales defines her power of in-depth thinking. In her interview with Lakshmi Holmstorm, she has clarified the need of space in her stories -

*“For me every novel starts with people. One character or may be two. And then there is locale....For me it’s essential- almost as essential as its for movie director – to have the shape of the house clear. If I have that clear, the rest of it can happen. Because it is there that is going to happen.”*

Parental homes largely cover the major portion of Deshpande’s fiction –Saptagiri or Dadar flat in *That Long Silence*, The Big House ‘Vishwas’ in *A Matter of Time*, Ranidurg in *The Binding Vine*, House at Bhawanipur in *Small Remedies* and the list goes on. Her stories originate in, set in and revolve around houses. Her houses not only offer a living space or ground of survival to her characters where they exist, work, love, hate, quarrel, inhabit and die also. It serves as a training ground, where particularly young girls are taught the rules and rituals of behavior to be followed after marriage. The floor of the house plans reinforce the codes of behavior, the walls bear the burden in stoic silence; at times creak, groan and complain, the roof threatens loudly to collapse at the weight of silence. In *Roots and Shadows*, there are only two characters – Indu and the house. *A Matter of Time* open with a vivid description of the bungalow- *Vishwas* – a symbol of stability and trust but for this story Deshpande has made it clear that the house is named after a worthy ancestor, roots of its creation is well described and it has nothing to do with trust and faith. The author’s careful mapping of history, who built it and how, who lived in it and what it is today architecture of bungalow, its exact location, directions and even trees and bushes surrounding the house makes clear that this non living entity called *locale* is going to play a major role in the story as if any other character. The house becomes a mute witness of betrayal of trust and faith of three generations in the same family, governing the inheritance, marriage and family relationships. We find Sumi’s search for a house, detailed description of Gopal’s room or Sumi’s dream house, all reinforce the need of space and roots in her stories. *The Country of Deceit*, begins with young girl, twenty seven years old Devi and her elder sister Savi rebuilding their old house. After the house-warming party, Devi announces to live alone in the newly built house. She had lived all her life in Rajnur. The first chapter opens with,

*“I have this dream, the recurring dream. It began after the demolition of the old house. Since then, it comes to me with infrequent regularity, unchanging in every detail. I wake up with the same sensation of bewilderment.”*

Motility has always been a part of our natural course of life and so does of Deshpande's characters. Nearly all her heroines move out of their natal homes either for studies, career or for marriage. Rebellious Indu of *Roots and Shadows* leaves the house at the age of eighteen and later marries a man of her choice, against the will of Akka. In *Moving On*, we find Manjiri living in the large house that her father has bequeathed to her daughter, Sachi and fighting with devious property sharks. *That Long Silence* opens with Jaya along with her husband Mohan shifting from their well-settled and comfortable house of Church-gate to their dingy old Dadar flat. But for Jaya coming to her Dadar's flat is home-coming. Description of Jaya's sheer drabness of life in the comfortable Church gate apartment,

*"the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curious that had to be kept spotless and dust free, and those clothes, God, all those never ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again."*

Women and domesticity are often coupled as the houses; where women both live and work. The locales in her novels are not just geographical locations rather they are the places from where women characters come. These locales have definite meaning, purpose and function in all her stories. Houses act as a mechanism for controlling women – a kind of controlling grid within or against which women negotiate their lives and relationships.

Homes often shelter women; they act as buffers and refuge to characters like Akka in *The Binding Vine*, who returns to her parental home after her husband's death; Gopal's desertion in *A Matter of Time* results in bringing Sumi back to her parental house; Madhu is offered home of Hari and Lata after a series of deaths in her life – Adit, Joe and Leela, she is planning to interview Savitri bai. They provide her the freedom of their house so that she can have a sense of belongingness. But their place in the home is not guaranteed. The prize of breaking rules of house, like Savitribai of *Small Remedies* and Jiji of *Moving On* is friction and homelessness. *The Dark Holds No Terror* depicts Saru's escape from nightmarish brutality of her husband.

*"To get away from this house, this paradise of matching curtains and handloom bedspreads. This hell of savagery and submission."*

Deshpande in her fiction raises many questions as why should woman confine herself to the four walls to safeguard her and self respect. The four walls appear to be guardians of the hearth but they also become prison for the women who dare to challenge the rules of the society. There is an episode from *The Binding Vine*, where Kishore is repeating a song from the movie Bobby – *'Hum tum ek kamre mein band ho jaye aur chabi kho jaye.'* Not with the intention of signifying privacy but an enclosure out of which there is no escape. Her earlier novels too prioritize space. The house Indu had discarded in *Roots and Shadows* becomes the place of refuge, solace and consolation. It is the Akka's house which offers her ample opportunities to know herself, to discover her roots as a daughter, an independent women and a commercial writer. She begins to see life in a new light,

*"Yes the house has been a trap, binding me to the past. I had to move away from. Now, I felt clean, as if I had to cut all necessary uneven edges of me."*

In *That Long Silence*, Dadar flat offers Jaya a chance to review her life and search for answers to the riddle called life. Madhu begins to feel at home in the house of Bhawanipur. Bhawanipur house gives her some measure of control over the past events and strength to contemplate a future without her son, Aditya. Whereas Ranidurg remains a symbolic haven where Urmi as a child lived and where she with her child wants to return. Indu's return to the house is a journey of deep introspection over her past life. It is here, in this house she learns to be self realized about her roots, freedom, moral responsibility, her relationships and her different roles. In fact, we find these returns of the heroines to their natal homes as a kind of return to a personal, historical archive and a step essential before they can *move on* in their lives. These nonliving structures act as shock absorbers, thus filling up the empty space and allowing time for the wounds to heal. Homes make sure that all inhabitants keep up the appearance; maintain communication to extend courtesy that can help them to retain some kind of hold on sanity and grip to their roots.

*A Matter of Time* novel begins with the Big House, opening with an epigram from the Brhadarnayaka Upanishad; "*Maitreyi*", said Yajna Valkya, *Verify I am about to go for them from this state.....*" Here it refers obviously Gopal's decision of withdrawal from the household responsibilities, but the author in a way warns us to the revelation that Shripati, too, gave up his role as a householder many years ago, thus adding more to the complex history of the Big House. And so the household reverts to the women. Households' formidable presence and hold memories. Saru realizes that the house and the parents are not the refuge but she is her own refuge. As the epigraph reads :

*"You are your own refuge;*

*There is no other refuge*

*This refuge is hard to achieve."*

## Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande explores how homes can transpose into confinements. But they also suggest alternate healing spaces detached from the rigid margins of patriarchal hierarchy. Her protagonists presume their personality to be context free, but in reality no one is ever free from the physical, natural and social surroundings. And they are not always aware of the fact that home is a home because it unknowingly blurs the thin line between the self and the environment and challenges the line they try to draw between who they are and where they are.

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