

## Mapping Female Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *Ships That Pass*

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### Abstract

In the contemporary literature woman has been depicted in various colours by the writers across the world. Shashi Deshpande presents contemporary Indian middle-class society that has different yardsticks to measure man and woman. Her works encompass a galaxy of women characters ranging from docile, submissive, obedient, uneducated to determined, asserting, self-reliant and educated. With the passage of time women have come out of the dark cave of oppression and realized that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." The novel *Ships That Pass* is a story of determined young girl, Radhika, who has a different perspective to see the world. Deshpande has projected two sisters; Tara and Radhika, in this novel and shown how both of them have their own way in their lives. She has also presented the way of the present world which tries to chain them in the mould of the previous times which no longer is able to restrict them. The new woman is a liberated soul but it does not mean that they deviate from tradition, culture and society. They have a different perspective which allows them freedom and option to see the world in a different light. The novel puts forth the woman protagonists who are repertoire of transitional Indian society. Such women who have thrust for autonomy form part of Deshpande's novels that are somehow confined by ages old social order. The present paper is an attempt to explore how women in the novel show that the old order paves way to the new one.

**Keywords:** Shashi Deshpande, Identity, Female, Mapping, Indian Middle-class women.

Literature has been the depiction of life in its innumerable aspects; both real as well as fictional. But the space that is given to woman has been more or less set on fixed parameters. The paradigm that dominance is male prerogative and submission is female virtue has always found its reflection in real world as well as in literary works. Conventionally, culturally, economically

and socially the pattern for woman has been crystallised by men. The image of woman is based on predetermined model which is set by different ways, sometimes by myths, culture, conventions, biological differences and a lot more. The digital world too has commodified woman in its own uncanny way. Many movements have started but the concept of “free woman” that Doris Lessing talks about in *The Golden Notebook* is yet to be realized. Feminism is a reality with the publication of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) but still the crux of the problem is same though the debatable questions have changed. Though woman has achieved eminence in many fields yet the gap is still unbridgeable.

Shashi Deshpande (born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka, India), is an award-winning Indian novelist, her canvas is not limited to novels only; she has written four children’s books, a number of short stories, several perceptive essays, now available in a volume entitled *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. The novel *Ships That Pass* had been first serialized in the 1980s in a popular magazine but it was only in 2012 that she published it as a novel. Deshpande has very skillfully structured the novel in such a manner that the readers nowhere find the semblance of serial in it. Most of the works of Deshpande revolve around woman, presented in different roles from different strata of society. Shashi Deshpande’s works encompass a galaxy of women characters ranging from docile, submissive, obedient, and uneducated. Her earlier novels mainly present this kind of women; Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sumi in *A Matter Of Time*, all are pictures of compromising, self effacing women characters. Her later novels like, *In The Country of Deceit*, *Moving On*, present different picture of woman. The woman characters are independent, determined, asserting, self-reliant and educated. The novel *Ships That Pass* too is in line with these novels. She has presented changing

Indian society and has portrayed contemporary middle-class women with rare competence. Over time, women have broken free from the constraints of submission. and realized that, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.”

The novel *Ships That Pass* tells the story of Radhika, a determined young girl with a unique perspective on the world. While crossing the road she takes the decision to get married but is not ready to follow the marital rituals. Radhika’s family persuades her for preparing competitive examinations like IAS after completing the college. They justify it by correlating her working status to her marital life. It seems that they think working woman does enjoy prestigious status in the society, but Radhika’s conundrum reflects something else. She thought of marriage instead of career option whereas her friends have planned for a definite career. Planning to get married does not bind Radhika rather defiance has been clearly shown in her character as she refuses to wear sari;

“So when Aai asked, “You will wear a sari, won’t you, when they come?” I protested, “They had suddenly become a potent force in my life, in all our lives, actually. A sari?” I was prepared to get into the act of a girl being seen by her possible in-laws. But a sari? “ No, I said firmly.” (Deshpande, 10)

Her elder sister, Tara, who had her own way by marrying Shaan, has experienced the disparities present in the world. She has seen that the freedom that she visualized before marriage was all façade. She guides Radhika,

‘Don’t listen to her. Things were different in Aai’s days. They didn’t want anything of their own. To be married was the final goal of their lives. To have Children and look after your husband and kids, may be even your In-laws –that was all there was

to life. But now...I am only thirty three, I realized the other day. And I have so many years ahead of me...I want to find what there is that I can do.' 90

The central theme of *Ships That Pass* is marriage, and the author's reflections on the same. Radhika, a young girl who has just graduated Previously, Radhika in a whim had agreed to marry Ghanashyam, a decision that she begins to think might not have been the best after a few conversations with her fiancé. At her sister's place, she finds that the apparently ideal couples are falling apart. Even as she comes to realise that her sister's life might not have been as perfect and easy as it looked, she struggles with complications in her own life as she falls for an older man, Ram. In her quest for the truth, Radhika finds truths about herself that she was probably not prepared to handle. Deshpande mirrors a realistic picture of the contemporary middle-class, educated, urban Indian woman. She portrays the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian woman and also analyze how her lot has not changed much even in the twentieth century.

In the beginning of the novella, she presents Radhika's character as a young girl but near the middle of novel she says that she has become an adult. What made her mature were the sour experiences that she has closely seen in the life of her sister, Tara. It is based on complete story of love and mystery. Though time has changed, it does not change the mystery of human mind. It remains the great mystery of all time. Radhika gets a request from her brother-in-law Shaan to come, and visit her sister Tara who is struck with some mysterious sickness. This gives her an opportunity to examine closely the realities of life. It is here only that she finds, "I thought marriage meant loyalty. I can't understand how you can betray the person you claim to love." 62. The harsher realities are unfolded in the title when Radhika finds married couple only as the

ships that pass during night and are insignificant afterwards. She observes how her sister has been accommodating even the extra marital relationship of her husband. But she guides Radhika, “keep yourself alive. When you marry, whoever you marry – or is it whomever –keep yourself intact. There’s always a real you inside. Don’t drown that real you in a man, in the family.” 91.

In all her novels Shashi Deshpande demonstrates successfully and convincingly the sources of traps, and violence awaiting women at various stages of their existence, and also suggests some way, and means of how they can possibly overcome the same through courage, and confidence. Alice Walker also writes in her novel *The Color Purple* that the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any. Women have always been presented as dependent on men which they have internalised to a degree that they start believing it as a fact. It can be observed that most of Deshpande’s women build harmonious relationship in a spirit of give-and-take, and in a mood of compromise, and understanding. They undergo the process of transformation, and change their perspective to cope with life that remains the same. They do not change the situation but change their outlook. This is the common thread found in many of her novels. In order to explore the plurality, and complexity of female experiences, and to point out the possible areas of improvement, and development for women, Shashi Deshpande has convincingly created wonderful portraits of the contemporary realities of womanhood in her fiction. Shashi Deshpande not only reveals the realities of womanhood in her respective social contexts, but also make ardent advocacy for a social change to alleviate the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual burdens of women. She stands for humanitarianism, and she expresses infinite compassion for the women. As Radhika rightly says in *Ships That Pass*, “Girls were protected and sheltered then. Today we go out into the world, and we know all about life”. All

the new empowered modern women characters of Shashi Deshpande are constantly, and consciously engaged in a battle against the ideological impositions, and power operations of patriarchy which not only believes that men are, and should be, superior to women but also curtails the free growth of women, and reduces them to second class citizens. These new women characters undergo this struggle of breaking their own psychological conditioning, and the gendered definitions of feminist. The novelist proves that this struggle is painful but unavoidable because nothing worthwhile in the life of women comes without a battle against patriarchal prejudices.

Shashi Deshpande has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist. Shashi Deshpande depicts the psychic functioning, and social behaviour of women in her fictional world. Her writings can be considered as 'factual fiction'. They teach the readers the art of understanding female psychic experiences, and widen their notions of freedom, equality, tolerance, and true love.

Deshpande focuses on the issues regarding women struggles, rights and victories. Her 'new women' dare to question and challenge the age-old traditions. Her sole aim is to harmonize the man woman relationship as equal partners. Her heroines are often bolder, self-reliant and rebellious. At that end they realize that 'walking out' does not solve their problems. Deshpande's women characters are unique because other women novelists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jabvala have portrayed this aspect of women's life without having first-hand experience of it. Unlike them, Deshpande had her education in India and wrote about Indian women issues and real experiences. Therefore the projection of her women in her novels is authentic and credible. This novel seems to emphasize that

proper education is necessary for women to make them self-sufficient and assertive. She also shows that educated and enlightened women characters do not surrender to social pressure.

*Ships That Pass* reflects power and prominence of males in the society by cautiously bringing women's yearning for independent choices in their lives. Deshpande's approach has been that of a reformist and not of a revolutionary. She has beautifully contrasted the women of previous generation like Aai and today's women like Radhika who dares to break the engagement with Ghanshyam. The more concrete picture of New Woman comes at point when Radhika marries Ram Mohan, a man much mature to her in years. She has also presented the way of the present world which tries to chain them in the mould of the previous times which no longer is able to restrict them. The new woman is a liberated soul but it does not mean that they deviate from tradition, culture and society. They have a different perspective which allows them freedom and option to see the world in a different light. The novel puts forth the woman protagonists who are repertoire of transitional Indian society. Such women who have thrust for autonomy form part of Deshpande's novels that are somehow confined by ages old social order. The novel portrays a time of transition, where women are aware of their rights and freedoms but still, in some ways, conform to the old ways. True change cannot be brought about merely by the passing of years or centuries; it will be gradual and slow.

## References

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