

## **Negotiating Oppressions: The Intersections of Social Hierarchies in Shashi Deshpande's Women-Centered Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

In her novels, Shashi Deshpande offers a nuanced tableau of the interplay of caste, class and gender in Indian women's lives. Therefore, this paper embodies how Deshpande's multiple writings traverse the social hierarchies based on the lived experience of her heroines. It presents a meticulous study of selected works by Deshpande at different phases of her literary career, specifically *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), and *A Matter of Time* (1996), in depth and demonstrates how she confronts the nexus of the subjugation that women meet. The paper highlights how Deshpande's narratives expose systemic inequities, even as they reflect women's resilience and resistance, drawing on postcolonial and feminist literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Sexuality and Identity, Postcolonial, Intersectionality, Caste, Class and Gender, Feminist Patriarchy and Oppression.

### **Introduction**

The complexity of social hierarchies in India is deeply embedded in the lived experiences of women. From the inflexible caste system to the economic class system to gendered expectations, women often face an entire stack of oppressions they need to navigate. The second "stage" of the title pertains to Shashi Deshpande's fiction, which interrogates these complexities to provide a deep examination of how caste, class and gender coalesce upon female subjectivity, and agency.

Her novels provide deeply insightful narratives about women's struggles to create an identity in a world bent on repressing and marginalizing them.

Within the framework of postcolonial feminist criticism Deshpande's works become significant, as they interrogate the interlocking systems of oppression that confront women in post-independent India. While more traditional Western feminist discourse often omits any investigation of caste and class, by organizing to place gender in the forefront of struggle, postcolonial feminism argues that it is impossible for gender to be understood outside of caste and class. Deshpande's writing foregrounds, in this way, the layered oppressions that exist, illustrating how the reality of one woman's experience can vary, depending on the socio-economic realities that surround her. Her protagonists negotiate the demands of family, patriarchal society and institutional oppression, their lives and odysseys symbols of the broader challenges faced by Indian women.

One of the refrains of Deshpande's preoccupations is the oxymoron of silence and voice. Her female protagonists often begin by internalizing society's expectations and repressing their impulses, but their arcs become journeys of self-assertion. Jaya's silence in *That Long Silence*, for example, may represent the collective and culturally institutionalized oppression of women but also serves as a moment for self-reflection and personal strength. Similarly, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita's struggle with domestic violence, compounded by the censure of society, reveals how women's freedom of choice is curtailed by class and gender.

Fiction complicates that equation even more, and in Deshpande's work, the representation of class dynamics also adds layers to the discussion of oppression. Economic mobility is not liberation, as several of her protagonists blithely show. Even financially independent women cannot escape patriarchal coercion and control that has existed through time, and global capitalist class systems reveal that patriarchal systems of oppression cannot simply be dismantled by class privilege. This is particularly true of *A Matter of Time*, where Sumi, belonging to an educated and relatively privileged household, undergoes deep emotional and existential crises. Her story interrogates the myth of education (and, of course, the upper social class) as liberatory for women operating under structural or systemic oppression.

Caste, by contrast, is at the center of Deshpande's work and more often than not it operates in low-key, implicit ways. Where caste and gender atomic exist: What do you expect women to do in the family and in society? In many of her stories, upper-caste women wrestle with the double bind of privilege and confinement — expected to protect familial honor and traditions but denied agency over their own lives. Unlike women of higher castes, women born into lower castes are not only discriminated against on the basis of gender but also because of the social stratification to which they belong. With a nuanced hand, Deshpande interrogates these deep-seated structures of power, even as she grapples with the homogenization of female experience.

### **Caste, Class, and Gender in Marriage and Domestic Spaces:**

Shashi Deshpande's stories delve into the intersections of class and caste and illuminate how these hierarchies of society unfold in the lives of women in the domestic and married world. Her works examine the ways in which these oppressions are systemic, but poignantly through the resilience and agency of her characters.

### **Class in the works of Deshpande**

Class is another major axis of oppression in Deshpande's novels, one that often intersects with gender to produce unique challenges for women. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Sarita's financial autonomy as a successful doctor disrupts traditional power dynamics in marriage. Her husband's resentment of her success illustrates the gendered elements of class.

Deshpande writes:

*“Why should I feel guilty that I earn more than you? Why do I have to feel guilty for doing my job better than you do yours?”*

This tension highlights how class divisions in marriage can exacerbate gendered conflict; the economic independence of women — which threatens patriarchal arrangements — can turn into grounds for conflict.

Further, class differences are explored in *The Binding Vine* (1993) through the character of Mira, a middle-class woman, and her relationship with Urmila, a lower class woman. Mira's privilege renders her incapable of truly aiding Urmila, who, through the nature of her plight, has far more profound knowledge of the turmoil Mira long to soothe.

Deshpande writes:

*"I thought I was going to save her, but I didn't know how. Her world was so foreign to my world."*

This illustrates the challenges of cross-class solidarity and the shortcomings of empathy in the face of sharp class lines. What's the take away message, the one that you would hope, when shared with your audience, is met, reactionarily, with a response?

### **Caste in the works of Deshpande**

Caste alone is an important dimension of oppression: caste intersects with gender and class to produce stratified frameworks of violence (there is/are many). Urmila's caste identity magnifies her problems of sexual violence and economic marginalization in *The Binding Vine*. The caste system introduces a fundamental inequity into society and is responsible for unlimited violence against women. Urmila's story is especially painful example of the ways caste interacts with gender in creating particular forms of oppression.

Deshpande also quotes the complicity of upper-caste women in maintaining caste hierarchies. In *Small Remedies* (2000), Madhu, the protagonist, remembers how her mother mistreated their lower-caste servant, revealing caste prejudices that are, more or less, hard-wired, even in so-called progressive homes.

Deshpande writes:

*"She was nice to them, yes, but nice in the way you are nice to people who are beneath you, nice in a way that did not question the pecking order."*

This critique of caste privilege is far from pretty when it comes to its sense of harmony. Deshpande's books challenge readers to recognize the systemic nature of caste oppression and its insidious infiltration into women's lives.

### **Intersections of Class and Caste**

Deshpande's narratives reveal how class and caste combine to shape women's experiences in marriage and the domestic sphere. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita enjoys a degree of independence because she is an educated, middle-class woman, but that also increases friction in her marriage. Similarly, in *The Binding Vine*, Urmila's lower caste, lower class, status puts her on the margins on multiple fronts where her access to justice and support is obstructed. Deshpande discusses these systemic hierarchies while also signaling the resistance and agency of her characters through them. And in doing so, her work urges readers to contemplate these thickets of overlapping oppression, and envision a fair and equitable society.

Deshpande's protagonists often struggle with the tensions between traditional expectations and personal aspirations. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita contends not only with gendered oppression but class anxieties when she earns more than her husband. This reversal in the economic power dynamics destabilizes their marriage, I thought, exposing how class mobility doesn't always translate into empowerment for women. "It is my success he resents," Deshpande writes. He would have been pleased by my failure." This phrase exposes how, even when economic spheres are inverted, gender expectations remain firmly in place.

Not just patriarchal oppression (one that operates on what Kieran Keohane has referred to as a "shame economy") but class and caste too: Silence in *Such Long Silence* is ultimately about how silence is a judgment on life. More generally, the text elevates gymnasium the way the demands of the social order obtain women in such a way that they prevent them from their forms of agency. "*I finally knew it,*" Jaya mourns. *No questions and no retorts, just silence.*" Meaning, her silence is one way to live — a sign of the way women negotiate their being-in-the-world under the loud structures of society.

*A Matter of Time* similarly explores class inequity in marriage via Sumi, whose life is jolted when she is left by her husband, forcing her to grapple with her social classification as a parasitic female. Her financial instability reflects her emotional uncertainty, and demonstrates the way that economic disempowerment is bound up with gender oppression. “*Man is to women what fish is to water, to put it in Deshpande’s words. But what’s going to happen when she learns how to breathe air?*” This metaphor is a microcosm of Sumi’s gradual metamorphosis, as she finds unsteadiness and fracture in her disabilities.

The forces of marriage against which Deshpande pushes, and Uma Parameswaran (1999) and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan (2000) have pointed out saying; she knows how to deconstruct the inequalities of marriage itself. Deshpande’s portrayal of marriage as an environment in which women feel both safe and stifled is, Parameswaran argues on the precarious existence where many women in India grapple with. In a related gesture, Sunder Rajan observes that Deshpande’s women gain agency not through any grand acts of defiance but through small, meaningful and, above all, internal acts of resistance.

Integrating feminist discourse with deeply personal narratives, Deshpande’s chain of linked essays interrogates the normative structures of caste, class and gender that restrict marriage and domestic life. Her performers don’t take their lives as given; they experience doubt, wonder and (each in their own way) defiance. By doing so, Deshpande crafts narratives that resonate with the lived realities of countless women, making her work a crucial contribution to contemporary feminist literature in India.

### **Sexuality and Social Hierarchies**

The workss of Deshpande offer a fine-grained critique of how sexuality gets policed through the entangled social hierarchies of caste, class and gender. Her women protagonists struggle with yearnings typically repressed or embraced by the culture. Sexuality is not just embodied but it is lived, in Deshpande’s narratives, in ways that are deeply political, shaped by the vectors of power and its discontents. In conventional literary depictions of female desire, the bad girl or the

goddess is the main character. But Deshpande renders such desire as a natural extension of the female experience, one upon which culture and family have always collapsed their scrutiny.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita's marriage becomes a contested space in which professional gloriousness threatens her husband and in response he strives to reaffirm his superiority by subjecting her to sexual violence. Her experience embodies the intersection between gender and economic oppressions and how male insecurity writ large is enacted on the bodies of women as a matter of control. Sarita's initial denial and subsequent confronting of her trauma speak to feminist discourses on marital rape as well as the commodification of female sexuality in patriarchal societies. As she notes: "*A woman's body doesn't belong to her; it's the property of her husband and her family and her society.*" The second thing is always what she wants. Here, the passage reveals how women's sexuality is dictated by forces beyond themselves, not by their own agency.

In *That Long Silence* too, marital intimacy has its own shadow: Jaya's acquiescence is an index of her conditioning as a patriarchal subject. Jaya's sexuality, in the novel, is circuitously defined by social taboos that hide female pleasure. Her silence about desire reflects the pervasive social conditioning that has women suppressing their desires to keep the home a Place of Happiness. Such readings resonate with scholarship that argues Nigeria is held captive to constructions of Jaya, in line with Chandra (2008) who has argued that Deshpande's construction of Jaya reflects a larger discourse on female sexuality in India, in which pleasure becomes instrumentalized to duty, and motherhood. The statement "*A good wife does not demand more than she has been given; she learns to be content with less*" captures a profound belief that a woman's worth lies in her capacity to suffer and to comply.

At the heart of *A Matter of Time* is Sumi's marriage falling apart and this not only plunges her into economic hardship but it also challenges assumptions about her sexual identity outside of marriage. The novel unmakes accustomed skeins of validation of a woman's sexuality solely within the institution of marriage. Deshpande subverts this narrative by presenting Sumi's emotional and physical longings as being separate from male approval. The novel has been of interest to scholars such as Rajan (2000) for breaking the assumption that female sexuality

perishes the moment a woman is deemed socially undesirable. The line “*Desire does not die with rejection; it lingers in the spaces left empty by loss*” is an example of how sexual agency can be framed outside the parameters of social legitimacy.

Deshpande’s exploration of sexuality also threads through caste and class systems. Women of power and privilege might have more control over some aspects of their lives, but they remain bound by societal standards of sexual propriety. In contrast, lower-caste women face oppression on multiple fronts: Their bodies are both sexualized and sites of crime motivated by caste. Deshpande here deals with these inconsistencies in a subtle manner by bringing to attention the fact that sexual autonomy is also an intersectional issue and not universal to all feminism (Jain 1998).

## **Conclusion**

Through her narratives, Shashi Deshpande interlaces the notions of gender, caste, class to emphasize the complex web of oppressions embedded in Indian women. The women at the core of her narratives navigate the tightrope of living in a male-dominated world that, at every moment, seeks to prescribe and constrict female power. In her novels, Deshpande undermines the conventional clichés of femininity, and in their stead presents a realistic and profoundly introspective study of women’s desires, muteness and defiance.

Deshpande’s fictions treat caste, class and gender not as monolithic systems of oppression but as stratified and complex. Even women with relatively privileged family backgrounds are no strangers to the gendered oppression enforced by their family and social circles, but more often than not they are given an education and some measure of economic independence to make that oppression more palatable. If women come from a lower socio-economic background, they may experience overlapping forms of oppression that can amplify their sense of oppression. Deshpande’s handling of these discrepancies invites readers to transcend a monolithic idea of feminism itself as they reconcile the diversity of women’s lives.



Her works also push back against the notion that economic or educational advancement alone might unlock women's freedom. Like *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *A Matter of Time*, financially independent women writhe against gendered expectations around their bodies, draping robes associated with traditional gender roles, over their form. It means that even when women gain ground economically, patriarchy relationships and cultural norms take root so deep that women are putting their own restrictions which jeopardise their social status.

It is Deshpande's gift to feminist literature that she dismantles the view that women are passive victims and instead shows them as women negotiating their agency in relation to their contexts. Her protagonist's placid journeys toward self-realization and defiance also serve as powerful acts of resistance against deeply embedded social hierarchies. Deshpande writes about sexuality, domesticity, and the self in a manner that is individual, yes, but also universally resonates with the systematic oppression that the women face in Indian society and indeed beyond.

Thus, Deshpande's women centered narratives, ultimately, become a powerful challenge to the intersectional oppressions from which women's identities are forged. Her novels not only interrogate the systemic inequities embedded in social hierarchies, but illuminate the resilience of women who challenge, navigate and ultimately reshape these structures. The terrain of modern feminist rhetoric may be moving, but Deshpande's work continues to be a necessary and urgent voice in the ongoing discourse on gender, power and liberation in the panorama of Indian literature.

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