



## Feminist perspective in Shashi Deshpande's novels

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### Abstract

Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to emancipate women from male oppression. In the past, the work by the women authors has always been undervalued because of some patriarchal assumptions. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman. In literature, it refers to any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience<sup>7</sup>. The inequalities against which the feminist have raised their voice of protest-legal, economics and social restriction on the basic rights of woman can be traced throughout history. The paper is an attempt to examine the feminist perspective in *That Long Silence* of Shashi Deshpande. The male superiority signifies the patriarchal culture in the family relationship between Jaya and her husband Mohan. The result of marriage yield into frustration, discard and disharmony as there was absence of love with only sex. Jaya was compelled to keep silence and surrender and adopt socio-psychic nature. The traditional, institution of Indian family is dwindling as the familial relationship does not have gender equality<sup>[3, 8]</sup>. Male member of the family is entitled to all sorts of comforts and excuses whereas female member has to sacrifice her life keeping silence, suppressing emotions and desires. The mechanical and artificial love is significant where gender discrimination exists in family environment. Jaya could break her silence after the support of Kamat but decides to keep silence and surrender. Violence is not the solution to the problems, to bring a change one has to wait and to be optimistic<sup>12</sup>. Feminist movement advocates the equal rights and equal opportunities for women. The true spirit of feminism is into look at women and men as human beings. There should not be a gender bias or discrimination in familial and social life. Establishing gender justice and gender equity is the key aspects of feminist movement.

**Keywords:** feminism, feminist, male oppression

### Introduction

#### The introduction to the origin of women writing

The term 'feminism' has its origin from the Latin word *lemina* meaning 'woman'. It refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power at par with men on the grounds of 'equality of sexes'. In other words, it relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. The term became popular from the early twentieth century struggles for securing women's suffrage or voting rights (the suffragette movement) in the western countries, and the later well-organized socio-political movement for women's emancipation from patriarchal oppression<sup>[14]</sup>. The political scope of feminism has been broadened by the impact of Marxist ideology that has made feminists challenge sexism along with capitalism for both encouraged the patriarchal set-up<sup>[5]</sup>. Shashi Deshpande's women characters keeping in mind the various types and phases of the women characters expressed in her six novels are studied here and it tries to link these novels with the various phases of feminism. For this purpose it is necessary to have some discussion of feminism and feminist literature. Writers like Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf pledged for the equality of opportunity for the woman based upon the equality of value. But it was left for Simone De Beauvoir to come out with a bold manifesto for a frontal attack on the patriarchal hegemony in our society. In her famous treatise, *The Second*

*Sex*, she has, like a raging rebel, hit hard at the andocentric customs and conventions, art and culture, philosophy and religion which have always assigned women the secondary or rather slavish position to men. As a contemporary author, Deshpande presents the realistic picture of the male-dominated middle class society of India. Her protagonists are caught between the tradition and modernity but they try to strike a balance between the two. Deshpande is very realistic in the sense that suggests marriages are not based on love but convenience. This paper is an attempt to analyze the novel *Roots and Shadows* from the feminist perspective. It discovers the pain and suffocation of the protagonist Indu in the male-dominated society. She tries to escape from this to find her real 'self', but every time she is deceived. After a long time and much introspection her journey ends with the realization that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots behind. Indu lives in a joint family with her Kaka's (Uncle) and Atya's. She is brought to this house when she was only fifteen days old child<sup>[18]</sup>. In this house 'Akka' her father's Atya is a dominant person. She rules over the house<sup>[4]</sup>. Akka came to this house as a childless widow with her property and old uncle. obedient, submissive, meek and unquestioning. Indu is an educated modern Indian woman who has her own way of living. She is torn between tradition and patriarchy and rebels against the conventions and gets married to Jayant whom she loves at the age of eighteen. From this point of marriage, her

life is filled with deceptions and deillusions<sup>[2]</sup>. Indu leaves her house to be free, independent and complete.

### Literature Review

Kanwar Dinesh Singh, (2004)<sup>[1]</sup> Deshpande does not believe in destructing ideologies in the mask of modernism and feminism. On the contrary, through her character she declares that salvation is hidden in tradition. Unlike western literary feminism, her female protagonist does not indulge in radical steps to assert their individuality.

N. Krishnaswamy, John Varghese and Sunita Mishra, (2001)<sup>[2]</sup> Shashi Deshpande's protagonists might be considered as sexual profligates as they go off the track of tradition. But their extra-marital refuge fails them because their sexual freedom does not pilot them out of their predicaments. Instead of helping them to confront the problem, they only postpone the problem. When their sexual escapades bounce back, they divulge their problems to their friends or relatives. For example, Saru confesses to her father about her marital crisis to save herself from it. Her father advises her not to run away but to face the problem.

Sarabjit Sandhu, (1991)<sup>[3]</sup> the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are not representations of traditional 'Sita' images. They are the 'new women', who could be likened to the flooding rivers that find a pathway into crevices and holes. In the three novels subjected to study here, the heroines are initially fugitives who seek refuge to escape from domestic, professional and sexual traps in which they find themselves. But each refuge, whether it is love, marriage or sex, only turns out to be another trap wherein they further lose their freedom and identity.

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Sarla Palkar, (1991)<sup>[5]</sup> The feminist thought and the feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women's movements in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterpart.

K.M. Pandey, (2001)<sup>[6]</sup> The present paper reflecting on the three major novels of Shashi Deshpande, attempts to prove the point that Indian feminism as reflected in the Indian fiction is a unique phenomenon that has to be valued on its own scale and should not be weighed against the scales of the western feminist literature.

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Geeta Gangadharan, (1998)<sup>[16, 17]</sup>, The present paper reflecting on the three major novels of Shashi Deshpande, attempts to prove the point that Indian feminism as reflected in the Indian fiction is a unique phenomenon that has to be valued on its own scale and should not be weighed against the scales of the western feminist literature.

Lakshmi Holmstrom, 'Shashi Deshpande Talks to Lakshmi Holmstrom, (1998)<sup>[15]</sup> the underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships, especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife and also between mother and daughter. In all these relationships the woman occupies the central stage and significantly the narration shifts through her feminine/feminist consciousness.

Adrinee Rich, Quoted in Indira Nityanandham's (1995)<sup>[10]</sup> Saru and Indu regain their respective individuality without breaking social norms. Deshpande has justified Indus' infidelity by killing Naren dramatically. She does not let her heroines to indulge in adultery even though it is a matter of gaining individual identity. Ramamoorthy (1991)<sup>[14]</sup>. Shashi Deshpande, one of the distinguished contemporary women writers of India, has established her immensity by dealing with issue of Indian women by maintaining an excellent balance between the two extremes – tradition and modernity. She has been honored with Award for That Long Silence, Award for The Dark Holds No Terrors and Price for Roots and Shadows.

Viney Kirpal, (1996)<sup>[13]</sup> Socialism and feminism emphasizes the ways in which discrimination against woman is manifested and how this can be resisted. The women attempted to integrate themselves into a public sphere, a male tradition and many felt a conflict of 'obedience and resistance'. She questioned, challenged the male institutions and this appeared that she violated certain social standard and ethics of the prevalent traditional society that embittered a vague sense of guilt. She challenged the male authority. 'voiced up' and protested and consequently suffered inevitably for which she ended up her life tragically and yet victoriously.

Maria Mies, (1980)<sup>[12]</sup> at the third phase, the Indian women writing has tremendously explored how a woman celebrates the 'self' independence. In 'Roots and Shadows', the predicament of Indu represents the larger predicament of woman in contemporary Indian society where the new concept of western education, economic independence and globalization have completely shaken the roots of old Indian culture and social values. Indu opposes certain long preserved notions and taboos about the woman.

Shobha Dwivedi, (2003)<sup>[11]</sup> In "Roots And Shadows", a novel by Shashi Deshpande explores the inner self of Indu, who symbolizes the mew women, who are educated and married to Jayant but her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed. Being smothered in an oppressive male-dominated and tradition - bound society. She attempts to explore her "individuality". Indu, a rebel, often wished to be free and unrestrained. Thus she is presented as model against women belonging to the older generation. The author has beautifully voiced out how a women overcomes the domination by men,

she can 'voice up' the frustration and disappointment and challenging the grave concepts of male -chauvinistic society. S. Prasanna Sree, (2003) <sup>[9]</sup> the male writers have tremendously reduced woman as inferior and weak. The male domination in woman's life is a natural phenomena in a patriarchal society and the consequent relegation of woman to a secondary position seemed to have prompted Indian woman writers to take up the cause of women as their western counterparts. They stressed their need for women to break free from the shackles of their traditional position.

Adrienne Rich, Quoted in Indira Nityanandham's (1995) <sup>[10]</sup> Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to emancipate women from male oppression. In the past, the work by the women authors has always been undervalued because of some patriarchal assumptions. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman. In literature, it refers to any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience.

Siddharta Sharma, (2005) <sup>[8]</sup>, It appears to me that Shashi D's appeal lies in the feminist themes. Her plots mold into emphatic pictures of feminist points of view. Many of us are blinded by this optics to such an extent that we fail to see any other merit in her. For example, I was thinking of her novel *That Long Silence*.

Anuradha Roy, (1999) <sup>[7]</sup>, Shashi Deshpande is of the view that in calling her novels feminist, one straitjackets the works; imprisons them with the label. She feels that while she is feminist, her novels are novels. She hasn't written the novels as a debating voice, to develop a thesis in a debate. She feels her novels are open examinations of the experiences of people in specific setting.

### **Feminism and Fertility**

Feminism is, indeed, a serious attempt to analyze, comprehend and clarify how and why is fertility or the feminine sensibility is different from masculinity or the masculine experience. Feminism brings into perspective the points of difference that characterize the 'feminine identity' or 'feminine psyche' or 'fertility' of woman. It can be studied by taking into account the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of fertility vis-a-vis masculinity the male writers have mostly seen women as inferior and weak. Gendering and some sort of misogyny are evident in the texts written by men <sup>[4, 8]</sup>. They see men as 'superior sex' or the 'stronger sex' while women are seen as is the 'inferior sex' or the 'weaker sex'. Men are considered as logical, rational and objective, and, women are perceived as emotional, inconsistent, intuitive, subjective and lacking self-confidence. But the modern woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her by the system. And it is their pronouncement in an overt tone that has created the difference also in totality. It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the contemporary feminist ideology evolved and the female voice was heard with special concern. The focus of the literary studies was shifted to women's writing with a view to re-reading, provisioning and reinterpreting it in the light of long-existing gender bias and sexual politics in history, culture, society, family, language and literature <sup>[5, 9]</sup>.

### **Post-Feminism**

The first wave feminism has been the political movement for women's rights. The second wave feminism relates to the historical context of patriarchy and oppression and attacks the male domination in aggressive, militant tone. The third wave feminism challenges the gender discrimination and attempts to find a rationale for the identities of masculinity and femininity <sup>[4, 8]</sup>. The fourth wave feminism is termed postmodern feminism and may be called 'post-feminism', which lays emphasis on individual woman's inner freedom and awakening. It tries to resolve the issues and problems raised by feminism and attempts to understand the relationship of interdependence between man and woman. The term 'post-feminism' has become an umbrella term to cover a variety of concepts. Besides the egalitarian perspectives, it covers the concepts of the 'brave new world', 'the girl power', 'cyberspace', 'androgyny', 'pluralism', and to a certain extent the doctrine of 'multiculturalism'. The 'brave new world' and the 'girl power' refer to the world of young women who are bold, assertive, self-assured and competitive, and do not require the crutches of feminism to secure space for themselves. The 'bad girls', who can counter men by their feminine wiles and their assertive-aggressive sexuality, are also included in post-feminism. The major thrust is now on the Homo sapiens. The discrimination based on race, class, sex, gender, color, community or ethnicity is seriously challenged. It inculcates the concepts of mutual understanding and respect, irrespective of the differences. Particularly speaking about gender differences. Allan and Barbara Pease's book *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps* with a subtitle *How we're different and what to do about it*, is the latest research-based survey of man-woman relationship and the problems of gender identities, and is, no doubt, a significant work towards that end. 'Post-feminism would certainly find out definite constructive, consensual resolves for the various issues raised by feminism. It is hoped the ensuing century (and the millennium) is free from all those conflicts that have been too much stretched out only because of conceited egos and several other complexes among the genders.

### **Shashi Deshpande's Views on Feminism**

As the study attempts to study Shashi Deshpande's women characters, her portrayal of women needs to be studied from a feminist angle. As an author of the '70s and 80s', she mirrors a realistic picture of the contemporary middle-class, educated, urban Indian woman <sup>[5]</sup>. Her novels portray the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian woman and also analyze how their lot has not changed much even in the twentieth century. 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<sup>1</sup>. A look at her novels will reveal her treatment of major women characters and will show how the themes in them are related to women's problems. Shashi Deshpande has exposed the gross gender discrimination and its fall-out in a male dominated society in her first novel *Roots and Shadows*. In the novel, she depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition bound society. She refuses to play the straitjacketed role of a wife imposed upon by society. Her quest for identity

is tellingly expressed in the novel. The Dark Holds No Terrors, her second novel, is about the traumatic experience the protagonist Saru undergoes as her husband refuses to play a second-fiddle role. Saru undergoes great humiliation and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife. Deshpande discusses the blatant gender discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters and their desire to have a male child<sup>[6]</sup>. After her marriage, as she gains a greater social status than her husband Manohar, all begins to fall apart. Her husband's sense of inferiority complex and the humiliation he feels as a result of society's reaction to Saru's superior position develops sadism in him. Her husband Mann vents his frustration on Saru in the form of sexual sadism, which has been vividly portrayed by Deshpande. That Long Silence, the third novel, is about Jaya who, despite having played the role of a wife and mother to perfection, finds herself lonely and estranged. Jaya realizes that she has been unjust to herself and her career as a writer, as she is afraid of inviting any displeasure from her husband. Her fear even discourages her from acknowledging her friendship with another man. These three novels belong to her early phase and portray a mild form of feminism. The Binding Vine, her fourth novel, deals with the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmi to focus attention on the victims like Kalpana and Mira. Urmi narrates the pathetic tale of Mira, her mother-in-law, who is a victim of marital rape. Mira, in the solitude of her unhappy marriage, would write poems, which were posthumously translated and published by Urmi. Urmi also narrates the tale of her acquaintance Shakutai, who had been deserted by her husband for another woman. The worst part of her tale is that Shakutai's elder daughter Kalpana is brutally raped by Prabhakar, her sister Sulu's husband. Urmi takes up cudgels on Kalpana's behalf and brings the culprit to book. In A Matter of Time, her fifth novel, Shashi Deshpande for the first time enters into the metaphysical world of philosophy. Basically, it is about three women from three generations of the same family and tells how they cope with the tragedies in their lives. Sumi is deserted by her husband Gopal, and she faces her humiliation with great courage and stoicism. Deep inside, she is struck with immense grief, and tries to keep herself composed for the sake of her daughters. Sumi's mother Kalyani was married off to her maternal uncle Shripati. When their four-year-old son gets lost at a railway station, Shripati sends Kalyani back to her parents' house with their two daughters<sup>[6]</sup>. On his mother-in-law Manorama's request, when Shripati returns he maintains a stony silence for the rest of his life. Kalyani's mother Manorama fails to beget a male heir to her husband, and fears lest he should take another wife for the same purpose. Manorama, to avoid the property getting passed on to another family, gets Kalyani married to her brother Shripati. Thus, Deshpande has revealed to our gaze the fears, frustrations and compulsions of three women from three generations of the same family. Small Remedies, her latest novel, is about Savitribai Indorekar, the ageing doyenne of Hindustani music, who avoids marriage and a home to pursue her musical genius. She has led the most unconventional of lives, and undergoes great mental trauma due to the opposition by a society that practises double standards - one for men and the other for women.

### **Shashi Deshpande from the Feminist Perspective**

Deshpande bares the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operating within the institution of family and the male centered Indian society at large. Deshpande's feminism does not uproot the woman from her background but it only tries to expose the different ideological element that shapes her. These include social and psychological factors such as woman's subordinate position in the Feminism is quite late in the development of the twentieth century English literature. Women are always oppressed, suppressed and marginalized by men. They have been ill-treated and exploited in all walks of life. After independence, many Indian women novelists have raised their voice against the exploitation of women. Among these women writers appear the names of Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande and so on. Shashi Deshpande occupies a distinctive place in the postcolonial Indian women writers in English. She was influenced by her father Adya Rangachar who was the distinguished Kannada writer. She was also influenced by the literary works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and George Bernard Shaw. Her novels are women oriented like Jane Austen and deals with "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as human being"

Shashi Deshpande's Life and Personality-Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Dharwad, India. She is the second daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shriranga. At the age of fifteen, she went to Mumbai where she graduated in Economics. She then moved to Bangalore, where she gained a degree in Law. The early years of her marriage were largely given over to the care of her two young sons, but she took a course in journalism and for a time worked on a magazine. Her writing career only began in earnest in 1970. Deshpande began her writing with short stories which later developed into writing novels. Her first collection of short stories The Legacy published in 1972 had been prescribed for graduate students in Columbia University. Shashi Deshpande is known for creating women characters who are contemporary. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained to them by society. Her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels and stories. Each of Shashi Deshpande's novels is special and offers food for thought on human relationships and emotions. Deshpande is a master writer in the way she articulates human emotions, the fears and feelings experienced by humans, by women. Reading her books is like peeping into the hidden corners of one's own mind. Recognizing oneself in her characters, one does not feel lonely in the world anymore. Reading her novels and stories is thus an immensely satisfying

experience, as reading becomes a healing process.

### Shashi Deshpande's Position

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Shashi Deshpande uses irony in the majority of her stories and novels to satirize the morals and manners of our society although she is not an ironist. She employs situational, attitudinal and verbal irony to telling effect. Her language is simple, direct and terse; close to the speaking voice. Sometimes, instead of full and long sentences, she uses words elliptically and minimally and this makes for force. Six of her major novels, *Roots and Shadows* to *Small Remedies* in the chronological order are chosen for this thesis. The focus in these novels is on heroines or the major women characters. Her heroines are sensitive to the changing times and situations, they revolt against the traditions in their search for freedom. Indu, the protagonist in *Roots and Shadows*, her first novel, emerges successfully as a woman of determination and does not yield to the dictates of the patriarchal society<sup>[4, 7]</sup>. She exemplifies a woman in the transitional period that is torn between age-old traditions and individual views. It records how she defies the worn-out traditions, pushes aside all her fears about her imagined inadequacies and asserts herself as an individual<sup>[14]</sup>.

### Roots and Shadows

The woman protagonist in *Roots and Shadows* 23 is the new woman Indu. Indu, an educated young woman, is highly sensitive. She starts aspiring to become independent and complete in herself. She brushes aside all the age-old beliefs and superstitions prevalent in the society. As a motherless child, she was tended by the members of the joint family who never denied her any amount of care and affection. Old Uncle, Kaka, Atya and other family members always cushioned her position in the family. But now she finds the dominant Akita, a senior member and a mother surrogate in the novel, and even the family to be a hindrance in achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness. Indu develops an aversion to the 62 natural biological functions of the female as mother and has apathy towards bearing a child. She develops a vague sense of guilt and feels that her womanhood closes so many doors for her. Defying the traditional role she is expected to play, Indu seeks fulfillment in education and a career. She works as a journalist for a woman's magazine but gives it up out of disgust for writing only about women and their problems and starts working for another magazine<sup>[2]</sup>.

### Issue of Patriarchy

Most of the novels of question patriarchy in the conventional sense and her female characters are consistently seen in a quest for their identity. Her female characters are aware of their condition but they constitute the group known as "the gendered subaltern." Women are no doubt at the margins and men at the centre. But as has pointed out, even some of the females join hand with males to exploit the other members of their sex and in a way try to draw privileges by moving a step towards the centre and leaving the margins behind.

### Conclusions

Shashi Deshpande's feminism is certainly not cynical or nihilistic. She analyses the universal significance of the woman's problem, thereby transcending the feminist perspective. She believes that feminism is "... very much an individual working out her problem." She is quite down to earth in her feminist approach to the woman's problem. For though she is aware of the seriousness of the Indian Woman's dilemma and the generation old struggles behind it, she also believes that a positive change in women's social status cannot materialize without bringing about a change in woman's mindset first. The woman's increasing involvement rather than detachment in her predicament as expressed in her novels reveals the positive, humanistic side of Deshpande's feminism. Hence, Shashi Deshpande rightly considers her role as an Indian feminist as one of a 'humanist feminists'. Thus, Shashi Deshpande has given a true picture of the society and not a biased one. Although she often denies being a feminist in her writings, yet she admits that in personal life, she is one: "I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my life, I mean. But not consciously as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism" Likewise, in *The Binding Vine* raises her voice against the rape of her elder daughter by her sister Sulu's husband. In *A Matter of Time*, is left by her husband He left without saying anything to anyone. And everyone blamed for the fault which she has not committed. Then there is another brave heroine in *Small Remedies* who has lost her only son and who tries to get over the shock by writing biography of a famous singer. She tries to find out how managed to live without her child. And finally she gets her piece of mind back when she learns to live the life with courage like Savitribai.

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