

# THE THEME OF VIOLENCE ON THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SHASHI DESHPANDI'S NOVELS

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## ABSTRACT:

Shashi Deshpande holds great worth as an Indian English woman novelist. She has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of a woman. In her later novels, she has portrayed her protagonists as actually aware of their smothered and fettered existence in a male dominated society. The realistic delineation of woman as wife, mother and daughter and their search for identity and sexuality as well is revealed. In all of Shashi Deshpande's works her protagonist's struggle is essential to understand their characters and search for meaningful existence. All of them explore nature of the human freedom and tensions between the individual's need for self and society. The characters move in their own real world. They re-enter into the world with awareness of self, as through the trauma and pain they gain insight into the truth of life. All her characters establish Deshpande as a sculptor of 'a new womanhood'. By delving deep into psychological complexities of her characters, Deshpande invents new lives, seeking self affirmation within the context of their own culture.

**Key words :** Trauma, explore ,suffering, oppression, self, identity.

This paper focuses on the problems of suppression, oppression and victimization of women in the works of Shashi Deshpande. The objective of the study is to discover and analyse the novels of Shashi Deshpande in the theoretical framework of Foucaultian power. Michel Foucault introduces the concept of power by substituting the traditional concept of it. Traditional concept of power is something negative and suppressive. Foucaultian power is positive. It is productive and produces positive effects and is omnipresent. It inseparably influences the social, political, and individual life of a human being on earth. It produces subject, fact, identity, knowledge, and even reality. Power is a strategy that activates in a society. It has direct networks with the social and learned discourses of the specific society. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* Foucault states that, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (95). The urge for supremacy

and authority is inherent in human nature. Foucault's power is circulatory. It operates in a systematic sustained pattern. No one is the permanent authoritarian of power. Power can be analysed in the form of a chain. The circulatory nature of power is often visible. It amalgamates from person to person or from groups to groups. Foucault's power is not a policy to oppress directly. Quite often, the strategy applied for subservience is hidden. This is the victory of strategic administration of power. Foucault's concept on power, subject, identity, discourse, and knowledge have great impact on the present milieu. Here, applying the theory on the corpus, we find the various ways in which the female characters in Deshpande's novels are helplessly bullied through sustained power. A power systematically structured and exercised in a male-centred social set-up. Finally, they are demarcated as victims of the so called patriarchal system. Many times they have to counter their real identity in order to keep themselves fit in the male - centred domestic and social arena. Being meek bodies they suffer wordlessly. This wordless is a mode of revolt against the tyranny imposed on them. Embedded roots of domination and subjugation are in prize when the female protagonists identify their strengths and march towards evaluating themselves as the personification of power and vigour to fight for their rights.

Shashi Deshpande's award—winning novel *That Long Silence* depicts the story of Jaya who becomes a victim of the existing patriarchal social set-up. Her role as a wife is just an adjunct to her complement. She is directed by her husband Mohan. Jaya has no choice of her own. She has to succumb herself to the impulses and fancies of her husband. Inseparably, she is yoked with her husband. Deshpande has used the metaphor, “two bullocks yoked together”(11) to convey the idea that marriage is foreseeable and the wife is bound to follow her husband. Jaya suppresses herself silently to cope with the social and cultural outlook. She is left with no individuality of her own. She says, “Just emptiness and silence (144). She raises her voice against the traditional concept of an ideal marriage: “If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything” (61).

Mohan is highly covetous and in order to fulfil his ambition, he sanctioned the substandard material which put him in a financial dodge. He feared that he would have to face ignobility. Consequently, they shifted from Church gate to Dadar flat of his wife. He blamed his wife for all this inconvenience. He accuses Jaya for his misfortunes and reminds her that it is only for her that he did all this. She suffers all these accusations without any denial because she is advised by her Aiji to keep silence. With this scam Mohan fails to maintain his noble impression. He breaks down. At this juncture she realizes her inner strength and tries to be worthy of her real name. Being Mohan's wife and mother of two children, she felt that her life is pointless. What she expected is deprived of in her household. So she finds refuge in the company of Kamath. His warm and friendly nature appeals her. He warned her to give up her view that "women are the victims"(148) and uphold and empower the woman in herself earnestly. She becomes conscious that she also has contributed to her victimization. She decides to fight against her own miserable

plight. She projects to break the silence and establish her identity in a male oriented social division. She decides to give up writing for the newspaper and starts to write what she wants. At the end of the novel she urges that "It's possible that we may not change even over a long period of time. But we can always hope" (193)

*The Binding Vine* is about Urmi, an educated middle-class wife who is grieving over the death of her one-year-old daughter Anu, and in the course of time becomes very subtle towards the sufferings and sorrows of other people as well. Had she not undergone such a personal loss, perhaps she wouldn't have had any concern with the others. Thus her narrative comprises three tales — one about herself and the other two about Shakuntala, a rape-victim's mother, and Urmi's mother-in-law, Mira, a victim of marital rape. The novel opens with Urmi grieving over her dead infant daughter. Although she tries to fight the loss, she feels that forgetting this loss would tantamount to infidelity. "This is one battle. I have to win if I am to go on living. And yet my victory will carry with it the taint of betrayal. To forget is to betray." (21) It is her intense attachment to her daughter that becomes the cause of her suffering.

In such a depressed state she happens to meet Shakuntala, mother of a rape-victim, Kalpana. She meets her in the hospital where her sister-in-law, Vanaa works. Kalpana is lying unconscious and her mother thinks that she has met with a car accident, however Kalpana has been brutally raped. Her mother Shakuntala's reaction is that of a typical Indian mother bred in an oppressive male-dominated society. She tells Vanaa: "It's not true, you people are trying to blackmail my daughter's name." (58) Most Indian mothers would react in a similar way as they are concerned about their daughter's marriage. The novelist has evocatively laid bare Shakuntala's agony, anger, feebleness and fear.

Deshpande does not want to be seen as someone who writes about issues and problems - she is keen to point out that she is a writer of fiction. Her characters' struggles are those of ordinary women fighting to be themselves rather than conforming to stereotypes - to a fixed idea of how women should be. Shashi Deshpande acts as a moderate Indian feminist writer who does not go to extremes. She knows that the "wails of anguish or thunder of curses or growls of anger do not by themselves turn into great literature." It is noteworthy that in the creative female world of Deshpande all men are not villains. For example, the husband of the protagonist Urmi is good to her and she is fully satisfied with him. But she realizes the responsibility to her own caste- the *Stri Jati* — and struggles to bring its truth before the society. This embodies the depth of the dimensions of personality of Deshpande's heroine. Contrasted with the earlier protagonists Urmi is concerned with the redemption of her own caste.

*A Matter of Time* deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. For the first time Deshpande makes a man the protagonist of the novel, but this has not led her to focusing entirely on the man. As usual she has given expression to women's pain, suffering and fortitude in marriage. The novel swings round an urban, middle-class family of Gopal and Sumi with their

three daughters — Aru, Charu and Seema. It begins with Gopal entering the house and telling Sumi that *he* is leaving the house for good. Sumi is unable to react verbally. The next morning she tells it to her daughter, repeating Gopal's words in toto. She is so shocked with Gopal's action that she lapses into whole silence, trying concurrently to keep things normal for her daughters. But they feel restless as "Sumi, despite her facade of normality, has about her — a kind of blankness — that makes them uneasy." (10-11) Gopal's walking out on the family comes as a shock to the readers as well. They feel why Gopal married Sumi in the first place. Theirs is not an arranged one but a love marriage. Gopal asks himself: "Why did I marry Sumi? Because I met her — it's as simple as that." (65-66) thus, the marriage is barren of any initial romance, but is the inevitable outcome of a matter-of-fact relationship. The contract is easy and its breach is even easier. But their marriage cannot be said to be mismatched as their first physical consummation is satisfying and rewarding to both. No rational reason is assigned for Gopal's departure and the readers remain in the dark as to his motive behind his mindless act. Sumi progresses herself from the invisible chains of male-controlled pressure and other family responsibilities. She is seen gradually emancipating as a new and independent woman experiencing the anguish of an isolated partner. Sumi helps her children to get on with their lives. Sumi also comes to her parental house like the other protagonists did earlier. If others submit themselves to self-examination and cogitation, Sumi straight away decides to face the facts directly. After 23 years of her marriage, in a very casual way Gopal walks out and unburdens his responsibilities as husband and father of three grown up children leaving Sumi in a stunned silence. Describing the whole scene of Gopal's casual desertion, Keerthi Ramachandra says: "He waits for Sumi's reaction, but within moments both realize that there's nothing more to be said and he leaves as quietly as he had entered." Sumi too wants to fight her own battle and assert her individuality. Though isolated, Sumi does not anticipate a divorce as she considers this to be of no use to her. Divorce frees a woman legally but the memories attached to the marriage cannot be erased easily. The divorcee has to further bear the onslaughts of a harsh society which does not allow her to be free and happy. Sumi, has the full support and sympathy of her parents, sister, cousins and others. This has helped her to a great magnitude to withstand the shock, pain, humiliation and the trauma of desertion.

Sumi and Gopal enjoyed a harmonious relationship during the early years of their marriage. Their joyous intimate love, physical as well as mental, leads one to understand their conjugal bliss especially in the early years of their marriage. Thinking of their first union, Gopal thinks "And I knew then that it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being that men give up their dreams of freedom." (223) Shashi Deshpande raises these age-old questions in her book *A Matter of Time* about women whose lives are dominated by the shame and guilt caused by the actions of their spouses. The lives of three generations of women living in their family home, "the Big House," seem to be ruled by similar patterns of destiny. In fact, destiny is the word of choice of one of the central characters, Kalyani, the grandmother. Deshpande crafts a suspenseful story about Kalyani. She is forced into an arranged marriage with her maternal uncle Shripati, and the tragedy of their life occurs when he initially deserts her and then returns to live in an isolated room

in the Big House. He ceases talking to Kalyani. Thirty-five years later, Kalyani is devastated by another man's desertion-this time that of her son-in-law, Gopal, who walks out on her daughter Sumi, and away from a much-coveted job to find an answer to life's emptiness.

Shashi Deshpande in her later novels keeps her narratives female-centred and gives an intimate insight into the psyche of the middle-class Indian women who feel oppressed and hemmed in by their patriarchal socialization. She provides new ideals for a better man-woman relationship, thereby broadening the scope of woman's existence. She not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. To her, traditions are the values of harmony and coexistence that symbolize the Indian way of life, and modernity is the assertion of the independent, individual identity. After having passively played out their socially ordained roles, her protagonists move out of their cloistered selves to assert their individuality as human beings. Deshpande feels that the woman must be true to her own self if she wants to realize herself. The strait jacketed role levied on woman only bogs her down in sludge of negation and suppression. She must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression of her individuality and identity. Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal her deep insight into the plight of Indian women, who feel suffocated and hampered, in a tradition-bound, male-dominated society.

Deshpande's strength has always been in the characters she created, through her characters she demonstrates the difficulty woman have in finding a relationship in which they can explore all the aspects of self. Her method of portrayal is based upon acute observation and a quite but incisive irony. Women in her stories belong to the middleclass but they are convincingly alive. Her major attempt is to capture moments of sensibility in order to reveal the inner lives of her characters. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. The concept of individual self is only accepted if it is in accordance with the status ascribed by the society. The creative tension is between the status by ascription and the status by acquisition. The bond which unite one individual in the society to another is considered as it is necessary for the harmonious development of women's personality. The heroine of the novel sets out on a sentimental journey throughout her life. They are aware of their strengths and limitations, but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mind-set. Deshpande highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a male-dominated society. Her emotions are affected by her beliefs, traditions and action. As the need of social approval is important the women surrenders personal values sometimes integrity to be accepted by others.



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