



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Shashi Deshpande's Obsession with Feminine Space: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande has clearly articulated in her novels that women must speak for themselves because they are free individuals, but their autonomy is not derived from the liberal humanism which believes that all are equal- something that would surely be hard to sustain in a country like India riddled with gender bias. Deshpande's conviction that each individual subjectivity is ultimately responsible only to itself comes from the realization that no one can occupy another's subjectivity, a fact which becomes glaringly obvious in the face of death, which each must encounter alone. Thus, paradoxically, it is death, not creation, that endows freedom on the individual in Deshpande's fiction.

Deshpande clamour for feminine space thus, is a code for the repression, self-imposed or otherwise, which cannot be breached. She forgets that the silence of women protagonists is annoyingly insidious which is often mistaken for speech. Deshpande claims that an essential self for every woman must exist since it is an ontological necessity. But this very demand for liberation from the limitations of gender roles is rather ironical because it exists only as a prerequisite for its death.

Key Words: Liberal humanism, feminine, gender, autonomy, subjectivity

Reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels feels like delving deep into the psyche of Indian women- their plight, predicament and preoccupations. She paints her female characters with shades of usual human emotions and feelings alongside their own awareness of their abilities and weaknesses which are often downplayed by a conditioned traditional society affected by patriarchal values. She underlines their low self esteem and interminable predicament. Her 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 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. If all her novels are taken together, we find that Shashi

Deshpande is obviously concerned with feminist issues. It is only in one of the nine novels, *A Matter of Time*, that she has shifted to the omniscient narration, but there too it is the women's point of view that prevails. Indu (*Roots and Shadows*) is a journalist, Jaya (*That Long Silence*) a housewife and a creative writer, Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) a doctor, Urmi (*The Binding Vine*) a college teacher, Sumi (*A Matter of Time*) though educated, takes up a job only later, while Savitribai and Leela (*Small Remedies*) are a singer and a social worker respectively. Madhu, the narrator (*Small Remedies*), is also a journalist and a writer. Deshpande thus seems to believe that it is the educated and the creative woman who will liberate herself first and contribute to women's liberation both actively as well as through her behaviour. While the lower class-working woman is handicapped for want of education and economic opportunities, the upper-class woman is a slave to material comforts for which she makes compromises.

Deshpande lays great stress on creativity to get women liberated³. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu undergoes great mental trauma in her childhood and in marriage due to her husband Jayant's double standards. Ostensibly educated and liberal, he is intolerant about any deviation on her part from the traditional role of a wife. He is no different from the other less educated and conservative Indian men when it comes to playing the role of a husband. The miserable plight of Indu's Kankies and Atyas is revealed through Indu's eyes. The heart-rending account of Akka's child marriage reveals the miserable condition Indian women of the older generation had to live in. Shashi Deshpande has remarkably presented the inferior status of women by giving us an insight into the married lives of Indu's aunts and other relations. Although Indu is educated and has a liberal outlook, she realizes bitterly that her lot is no different from her numerous illiterate and village-bred aunts, and she too a victim like them of the patriarchal social set-up. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a telling example of men who are intolerant about playing a second-fiddle role in marriage, and how their ego gets hurt when their wives gain a superior status in society. Manu feels embarrassed and insecure with the rising status of his wife Saru. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's troubles in marriage stem from her husband's tolerance towards any deviation from her role of a subservient wife. When threatened with charges of corruption, he expects her to go into hiding with him; when she refuses to comply, he is greatly enraged and walks out of the house. Jaya is miserable as she followed her Vanitamami's advice that a husband is like a 'sheltering tree', which must be kept alive at any cost, for without it the family becomes unsheltered and vulnerable. She does so but finds herself and the children the more unsheltered and insecure. In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande raises the issue of marital rape. Women like Mira, Urmi's mother-in-law, have to bear the nightly sexual assault by their husband silently. Other women like Shakutai, her sister Sule, Kalpana and her sister have their own sorry tales. Shakutai's husband is a drunkard and a good-for-nothing fellow, who leaves his wife and children for another woman. Kalpana is brutally raped by Prabhakar, Sulu's husband. Urmi takes up cudgels on Kalpana's behalf and the culprit is caught. Urmi's husband is in navy and during his long absence she craves for some physical gratification. Her friendship with Dr. Bhaskar provides her ample opportunity, but she never oversteps the boundaries chalked out in marriage. This virtue of hers remains unacknowledged by her husband. *A Matter of Time* is yet another novel wherein the husband walks out on his family comprising the wife and three daughters. Sumi, is so shocked that she lapses into complete silence but, apparently tries hard to keep things normal for her daughters. Her desertion is a cause for great humiliation and mental trauma for her as it's not only a matter of great shame and disgrace but a bitter realization of being unwanted. Words of sympathy from relations fail to console her. She is self-respecting and takes up a job for herself and her daughters. Though, Gopal, her husband, returns but she is a new Sumi now. She has coped with the tragedy with remarkable stoicism. In *Small Remedies*, is narrated the tragic tale of Savitribai Indoreker, doyenne of the Gwalior Gharana. She leads the most unconventional of lives, but undergoes great mental

trauma because of the double standards practiced in society. Right from her childhood she had sensed the gross gender discrimination in the society that had one set of laws for men and another for women. Madhu, too, is a victim of double standards of society. She gets totally estranged by her husband Som after she naively discloses to him about her single act of physical intercourse before marriage, though Som has himself had a full-fledged physical relation with another married woman before marriage. If I Die Today contains elements of detective fiction. The narrator, a young college lecturer, is married to a doctor, and they live on the campus of a big medical college and hospital. The arrival of Guru, a terminal cancer patient disturbs the lives of the doctors and their families' old secrets are revealed, two people murdered, but the tensions in the family resolved after the culprit is unmasked. One of memorable character is Mriga, a 14-year-old girl. Her father, Dr. Kulkarni, appears modern and westernized, yet he is seized by the Hindu desire for a son and heir, and never forgives Mriga for not being a son, her mother too, is a sad suppressed creature, too weak to give Mriga the support and love, a child needs to grow up into a well balanced adult. In Moving On a daughter discovers her father's diary which leads to the unfolding of a story. As Manjiri, unlocks the past through its pages rescuing old memories and recasting events and responses, the present makes its own demands: a rebellious daughter, devious property sharks and a lover who threatens to throw her life out of fear again. The ensuing struggle to reconcile nostalgia with reality and the fire of the body with the desire for companionship races to an unexpected resolution, twisting and turning through complex emotional landscapes with her uncanny insight into the nature of human relationship and an equally unerring eye for detail. Deshpande ventures further than she ever has the terrain of the mind, teasing out the nuances and exploding the stereotypes of familial bonds.

Critics have all along labelled Shashi Deshpande as a feminist. But she herself says that she writes about human beings only. In an interview given to Sue Dickman, she says, "I am writing about Jaya. I am writing about Saru... I am writing about Jaya...I am writing about Mira. Not women. And my books particularly, I feel, get slotted as women's books, more than anyone else's. I don't know why."¹

In choosing a protagonist thus who is somewhat feeble at the beginning but emerges in the end as a stronger woman with a transformed consciousness, Shashi Deshpande follows a liberal 'feminist' ideal where growth in consciousness is the objective. In an interview with Chandra Holm Shashi commented that she believed they(women) learn to hide their own strength, because a woman's strength seems to weaken a man."²

It is not surprising, therefore that in all these novels the protagonists are not only educated, creative and liberated but also mature and compassionate enough to reach out to others who are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Indu (Roots and Shadows) helps Padmini to settle down and Vithal to have his education even though the latter is not related to the family. In The Binding Vine Shakutai finds her own voice through Urmi's sympathy and guidance. Jaya (That Long Silence) helps the crazy Kusum against everyone's wishes, later helps Jeeja when her son has an accident. Saru (The Dark Holds No Terrors) takes great interest in her patients.

One of the recurring themes in her novels is rape in marriage-man imposing himself on a woman. The causes of this vary from case to case. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, it happens because Saru begins to earn more money than Monohar and society recognizes her as the breadwinner. In *The Binding Vine*, it is Mira's husband's obsession for her and his idea that love can be expressed only through the sexual act. In *Roots and Shadows*, Akka is too young and frail for her hefty husband, so he is drawn to other women. Even in *That Long Silence*, there are occasions when Mohan has sex with Jaya quite against her will. However, the extent of cruelty differs in each case. Akka (*Roots and Shadows*) finds the sexual act so painful that she prefers to be locked up in a room and starved rather than go to her husband's room. Mira trembles at the arrival of the night. In Jaya's case, the cruelty does not go that far. In fact, after the sexual act, Mohan inevitably asks her whether he has hurt her! But in her later novels, especially in *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*, we find that the couples almost transcend sex. We can say the same about Madhu and her husband, Leela and Joe and Savitribai and Ghulam Saab in *Small Remedies*. For all these couples, sex is not important for its own sake. It is some other bond such as music, or social work, that ties them and is a stronger link than sex. Thus, we can draw a tentative conclusion: to the older generation of men, love means lust. To the women, however, sex is tortuous. In Jaya's case, there is no cruelty but there is nothing except physicality that connects her to Mohan. Jaya's is a representative case of an average Indian housewife. Love between Sumi-Gopal, Leela-Joe, Savitribai-Ghulam Saab transcends the body and its limitations too. This love creates the small good moments of life which are the small remedies.

Shashi Deshpande has thus constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation⁴. Her protagonists are victims of the Indian patriarchy and after initial submission resist the oppressive situation, thereby reflecting the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her individuality. In all the novels, patriarchy and the values it implies are criticized explicitly as well as implicitly. Some of the external and obvious ways that patriarchy uses for domination are sexual and physical violence, mental torture etc. This form is comparatively easier to deal with. The other subtler forms which have been imbibed by generations and have taken the form of well-established traditions are not so easy to retaliate against because the victims themselves have internalized these values which include gender defined roles.

Deshpande's foregrounding of women characters vis-à-vis their predicament in a male-dominated society invariably unveils her own psyche as a writer. As she tries to reveal through her female protagonists that the life of a woman is made difficult by values and ideals imposed upon her by an androcentric set-up, she shows her own predilections as a woman. She implicitly advocates that women's issues and concerns that have been explicitly dealt with in her novels must occupy the centre stage. Her own obsessive and compulsive desire to give woman a distinguished identity is firmly attested by the suppressed voices of her female protagonists.

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