

Female Protagonists of Shashi Deshpande

***Suksham Ahluwalia**

Abstract :

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. Deshpande does not regard all traditions as bad and harmful. To her, traditions have the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolize the Indian way of life. Modernity to her is the assertion of independent individual identity. Keeping in view the long standing traditions of Indian society, she seeks solution to the problem by changing mind set. **Keywords :** Women Centric Issues, Tradition v/s Modernity and Individual Identity

In most of her novels Shashi Deshpande keeps women center stage and deals with some of the thought provoking issues. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists know that women are exploited and subjugated at various levels in the masculine construct. They also know that patriarchy has double standard ethical, societal, racial and spiritual codes. They work against women as a group. They are well aware that patriarchy muddles them and limits their rights. Therefore, they sturdily denounce the overbearing scheme of patriarchy. They know that the patriarchy doesn't allow them to grow as individuals. In this culture of male supremacy, longing for male child still continues. Even today baby girls are not welcome. Moreover in some parts of the country female infanticide is still a common practice. The novelist through her novels challenges the prevailing double standard code of conduct of the society that has different gauges for men and women.

***Associate Professor, Department of English, Arya College Ludhiana**

Rashmi Sahi points out

“Deshpande does not believe in portraying her characters in black and white. Her characters may be guilty of dividing human beings into the categories of good and bad. In the struggle of these women to give shape and content to their individual existence in a sexist society the realization comes in the end that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it.”

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Shashi Deshpande tries to focus on the aspect of a man – woman relationship keeping in mind a society based on equality where every individual acquires their ascribed status irrespective of gender and without dominating one another. The eternal quest for self and recognition of the existence is the focal point of her novels. Women are not ready to accept the secondary status in the family and therefore they always struggle to prove their importance and individuality through different activities. She depicts women as strong who acknowledges themselves co-equal to men. The female protagonist evinces sufficient vigor and courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion, and culture. The women want to be themselves by accepting themselves in whatever form they are. Deshpande in her works highlights that a deeper awareness of the self -leads to the understanding of its nature and the self-realization in psychological rather than metaphysical. In the book *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir as a feminist writer endeavors her women character to struggle for independence , self-identity and to begin her place in humanity as a whole being. Similarly Shashi Deshpande highlights that women should have a space to grow and to nurture her needs. She focuses on the fact that men occupy the role of self or subject and women is constructed as the ‘other’.

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 Deshpande’s women are role models of the new society who thirst for modernity, elevation and upgradation. Her modern women protagonists are assertive with individuality and quest for self-identity in the

male dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for their individuality within married life.

Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. The words which we always associate with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. As in the ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’, the life of Sarita who is always neglected and ignored. ‘Roots and Shadows’ explores the inner self of Indu, Mini, and Akka and Shashi Deshpande in ‘That Long Silence’ shows that Jaya is not a silent sufferer. Also in ‘The Binding Vine’ Mira has hated the way her mother has been surrendering herself to her husband. In the ‘A Matter of Time’ one can trace an exploration of Kalyani, Sumi and her daughters Aru. Shashi Deshpande’s fiction is an example of the ways in which a girl child’s particular position, social reality and identity and psychological growth determine her personality.

A quick look at her different novels will reveal that in Shashi Deshpande’s novels, we can find the variety of characters too. In Deshpande’s literary world there are characters taken from almost all the sections of life. They are medical practitioners and writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and maidservants. Besides poverty, bereavement and such other common adversities, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering a woman has to undergo. Sometimes the suffering is attached to the social taboos, and sometimes the women are silenced in the name of family honor, and are compelled to digest torture.

In her first novel *Roots and Shadows*, 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 humiliations and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife.

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 Urmī to focus attention on the victims like Kalpana and Mira. Urmī 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 Urmī. Urmī 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. Urmī 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.

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 practices double standards — one for men and the other for women.

In the words of Y.S. Sunita Reddy, *“She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism”*²

However, Unlike Western Feminists, she does not believe that men and women constitute basically hostile groups in society. While Western Feminists, atleast a section of them, dislike the institution of family and advocate its abolition, Deshpande stands for the solution of women's problems within the framework of family.

Women in her novels rediscover their relation with tradition while re-establishing the bond within their home. This new bond is anchored on a mature interpretation of women's roles and responsibilities in the society. It is true that Deshpande's women protagonists reconsider the value of the traditional world. The understanding of the modern world which still has something to offer constantly balances the search of these women protagonists for a complete realization of the self and its vivid articulation.

Deshpande's novels have many things to offer but the central theme or the crux of all themes is the same-it is the subjugation of women. In other words, the exploitation of women in varied degrees is the main line of thought of her novels. Her novels abound with the concern for the women's problems, a concern that is enough to declare her a feminist although she earlier rejected this idea of terming her as a feminist.

Shashi Deshpande does not merely articulate the female voice which has been hushed up but also suggests the ways to mitigate their silence. Her novels are a fine study of how women are subjugated, marginalized, relegated in every walk of life.

She herself says, *"I am different from other Indians who write in English, my background is very firmly here. I was never educated abroad. My novels don't have any westerners, for example. They are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives, our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them."*³

It remains a fact that in changing times of 1970s Women shed their domestic roles. Instead of being just the baby caretaker, cook, a mother, a wife and daughter-in law, she stepped into the outer world leaving behind the claustrophobic environment of home. *"Deshpande has dexterously laid bare the inferior status accorded to women in Indian society. One can see how women are marginalized even within the social unit of the family."*⁴ Thus, they became a part of economic world, winning bread for the family, male were not now the sole bread-winners in the new changing world. Women shared responsibility with men on economic front. These career oriented workingwomen are her protagonists. Writing in the transitional time of 1980's and 1990's she knows better what problems a working woman might face. She is torn between her many roles. She has to work in the office as the situation

demands and also at her work place. She has multi-layered personality. She is a sandwich between tradition and modernity.

Hence, Most of Deshpande's characters are true to life and deal with problems most women would not want to talk about – rape in marriages, lust and breaking free from traditions and stereotypes.

"May be 30 years back nobody wanted to talk about these things, but today more and more women are talking about such issues freely," she said. It is difficult for women to break away from stereotypes, more so in the lower strata of society. "When women have money, it definitely becomes easier," she said. The sensitivity towards women, their problems and issues is changing. "It is a slow change, but there has definitely been a change," she said. The change is percolating from the urban society to the rural society. And the maxim which still holds true – a woman has to do twice as much to prove herself half as good as a man." Deshpande said. [The Times of India News Service, Jul 22, 2011.

The discord in marital relations and the following disillusionment is the theme of Shashi Deshpande's novels. Her specialty lies in her truthful depiction of life of women in particular. She successfully makes an attempt to explore the innermost being of these modern women who are at the crossroads between convention and modernism. She convincingly depicts the quandary of these sophisticated women who are struggling between the long-standing conventional values, imposed on them right from their birth and the contemporary viewpoint they acquired of late from their learning. Their condition seems to be worse than their past counterparts and those of present who still believe in these customs and traditions to which they submit themselves without any hesitation. They are unable to dispose of these conventional ethics at once and adopt the principles they acquired a fresh. Majority of her fiction echoes quandaries and fights of this kind of females.

It is worth mentioning Shashi Deshpande's views during one of her interviews where she makes it clear that her subjects are the realities of women's lives. She says "*I was speaking to a male relative about a woman in the family who'd had a very hard life, terrible really, and I was so astonished to hear the man say that her life was ok, he said "well, she never complained did she?" And then I thought maybe she did and may be you didn't hear*

her because your ears weren't tuned to her voice. I think for me that really brought women's silences and what I call the deafness of a lot of people to women's silences, that's been an important motif in all my work."⁵

ShashiDeshpande's fiction deals with the complexities of every day mundane life. She never created her female protagonists bigger than life. She always believed in representing her female characters as they are. They are never stronger or greater than actual women. Her female protagonists are neither radical in nature nor panic-stricken. Rather they are average women trapped in certain circumstances. These circumstances compel them to introspect and retrospect their bygone life. After retrospection, most of her female protagonists understand that they themselves are responsible for their condition, their suffering. They also learn the lesson that instead of blaming the society or the male-controlled culture for their destiny, they should blame themselves. They themselves are responsible for their suffering.

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