

The Female Protagonists in the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to trace the parallels and contrasts in the select novels of the Indian English woman novelist named Shashi Deshpande. The earliest and the latest novels of Shashi Deshpande especially with female protagonist are taken for the study. The Indian woman can take up a cause, espouse a rebellious or revolutionary standpoint, but she cannot escape the burden of her traditional roles, responsibilities and postures, all of which have been handed down as part of her Indian heritage. And so she is hardly ever an individual by herself. This is because the Indian psyche has been, over millennia, nurtured in such a tradition. Within these limitations, of course, the Indian woman can aspire for degrees of freedom and individuality. This is the Indian woman's predicament. That is what Indian writers, particularly women writers, attempt to drive home in their writings. A close reading of the two novels of Shashi Deshpande shows a marked progression in the condition of the Indian woman. Despite the changing times, the woman keeps changing in outlook and action. She is more aware, more mature, more balanced and have a wider outlook.

Keywords: Feminism, Womanism, Parallels and Contrasts, Equality and Liberation.

INTRODUCTION

Indian culture has always been male-dominated and early Indian literature, especially fiction, reflected this fact, especially in the portrayal of the women characters. The Indian woman is now beginning to stir out of their placid stoicism. She provides a fascinating glimpse into a hitherto scarcely known aspect of Indian fictive and social life. She seems to have emerged from her shell. She seeks to be emancipated by being delivered from manipulation. The novel in India constitutes a rare region of enlightened lucidity wherein the Indian woman picks up enough courage to raise her head and ask a few awkward but pertinent questions.

The awakening of woman's consciousness establishes a new set of values in the fictive system. The typological experiences of these women have constant elements like an abrupt awakening, intense introspection, a stasis in time and action, and an abrupt ending with a conscious decision. The ending does not lead to a resolution of her problems, but the fictional shaping of a very specific kind of crisis seen through her eyes is rewarding, for it leads to inner enrichment, a sense of exhilaration and achievement as we see her battling through harsh reality. All the options from childhood through motherhood and manless life style are now open to her. *Equality* and *liberation* are the two operative words here. It is seen that it is difficult for the woman to reconcile these concepts with the reality of her life.

Despite the changing times the predicament of the Indian woman in Indian society is still subject to certain limitations emanating largely from the tradition-bound Indian ethos. This precludes any identification of the Indian woman with advanced concepts of feminism in vogue in the West. Such concepts may be debated upon in the rarefied ambience of academia or even glimpsed at in the higher echelons of elite society, but can hardly be even dreamt of in ordinary Indian society. Possibly because of the changing times, the woman keeps changing in outlook and action. She is more aware, more mature, more balanced and have a wider outlook. The present study attempts to find the parallels and contrasts, by analysing the two different novels of the Indian English woman novelist, named Shashi Deshpande. The novels selected for close study are Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Moving On*. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian English novelist with a sustained achievement. Her writing career began in 1970, rather late in life, initially with short stories. She has written six collections of short stories and four children's books. Deshpande's short stories deal with the subjugated position of women in Indian society and depict woman's positive reaffirmation of herself. The collection of her short stories titled *The Legacy* is prescribed for graduate students in Columbia University, USA. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Nanjangul Thirumalamba Award and the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize

for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. Apart from writing novels and short stories, she has also written the film script for the Hindi movie "Drishti". One of her four books for children was made into a film titled "The Narayanpur Incident".

Shashi Deshpande has published ten novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000) *Moving On* (2004) and *In the Country of Deceit* (2008). Of these novels *If I Die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead* are detective novels of only chronological importance. *Roots and Shadows* was the first novel that Deshpande wrote, but it was published only in 1983. Deshpande's writing clearly emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society. She is almost exclusively concerned with the practical realities of day-to-day human existence especially that of a woman, told from the woman's angle.

All over the world there is a huge cry for women's rights. In Western societies the sexes have more or less become equal. In very backward and conservative societies the women's cause has hardly yet been mentioned. However, in middle societies like the Indian, where economics and sociology have progressed to a level approximating Western norms, there is a dilemma. Materially the sexes seem equal, but the ancient tradition of patriarchy refuses to die.

A list of works cited is appended to this research paper and it is written and documented according to the guidelines provided by the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, by Joseph Gibaldi, 7th edition (New Delhi: Associated East-West, 2009).

Parallels and Contrasts

The Indian woman is conditioned by generations of tradition. Her hoary tradition invariably places her below the status of the male in a patriarchal society. Education and exposure to the outside world may incite her to rebellion and resistance. But there is always a limit to the resistance. The Indian woman may be modern in dress, outlook and relationships outside the home, but within the home, her place is at the feet of her lord and master. She is conditioned to the fear of the unknown and the wide world. Any foray into the outer world is fraught with risks and dangers and the woman with progressive ideas soon learns to curb them and seek refuge again within the home. The woman writers are well equipped to deal with any theme. However, given their different backgrounds and circumstances, they do differ in certain respects in their writing. For instance, they differ in their choice of characters and situations. However, they present a growing maturity.

Shashi Deshpande presents a world which she knows intimately from her own experience. Her female protagonists are all from her own upper middle class. The majority of her characters are Kannadigas and there is generally a Marathi or other ethnic intruder. Her favourite locales are Bangalore and Bombay. Her novels tell domestic stories with a personal crisis as the focal point. The stories are filled with intimate details of daily life, children's pranks and grown-ups' struggles.

The protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita or Saru, is an intelligent and sensitive girl to start with. She is perennially conscious of gender discrimination in her own home, where she is treated as of no consequence whereas her younger brother Dhruva is the cynosure of her mother's eyes and is made too much of by her. When Dhruva dies in a drowning accident, her mother bluntly accuses her of having killed her brother. The accusation is etched indelibly on her heart as the extreme in a series of life-long insults. When she matriculates, she opts to take up medicine just because her mother is set against it. Her father, usually subservient to her mother, for once carries the flag for her and she goes off to a hostel in Bombay.

At the college she is very withdrawn and introverted because of her mother's overbearing attitude and her deliberate discrimination. However, in course of time, she is drawn to a student of literature, Manohar, who is reputed to be a budding poet. When her mother opposes the marriage of Saru and Manohar on the ground that he belongs to a lower caste, Saru is all the more determined to marry him, just to spite her mother. She leaves home and marries Manohar. Their life is an idyll—for some time. Saru relishes the freedom afforded by her marital licence to explore all the pleasures that she has suppressed till then.

In course of time Saru advances in the medical profession and achieves a certain degree of affluence, reputation and status. Manohar, on the contrary, is a failure and cannot advance beyond the status of an innocuous lecturer in a college. After two children, the marriage sours, principally because of the strange chemistry of Manohar's mind. The constant reminder that he is the lucky husband of the illustrious doctor, Sarita, plays havoc with his psyche. As a result, he tries to establish his male superiority in bed, turning into a callous brute and inflicting unbearable pain on Saru. The irony is that, while she dreads the approach of each night and suffers silently his assaults on her body, in the morning, he seems blissfully unaware of what happened in the night. Saru guesses that her success is the cause of the change that has overtaken Manohar and so offers to quit her profession. But Manohar argues that they cannot keep up their wonted style of life on his meagre salary. Saru is not keen on maintaining their current way of life, but Manohar sees no reason

to give it up. Saru tries to seek solutions from her mentor Boozie, but finds out that he himself is a moral wreck who cannot counsel her. So, she is left to shift for herself.

At this juncture, Saru learns that her mother is dead and that, till the end, she had not forgiven her or desired a reconciliation with her. Using this as an opportunity, Saru goes to her father and finds him the same as ever, but now dependent on a young student named Madhav. The early moments are awkward for both the father and the daughter. However, in the course of a few days, they come to terms with the past. The neighbours also help to instil a sense of normality in Saru's mind. Saru opens her heart to her father. He is sympathetic, but firmly says that she will have to find her own solution to her problem. However, he hints that Saru would do well to look into her own mind to see what is responsible for her predicament.

When a letter comes to announce the impending arrival of Manohar, Saru instantly decides to leave so as not to meet him. However, her father, for the first time in his life, makes bold to make a stand. He advises her that running away from her problem will not solve it and that she should turn around and face it. He suggests that Saru talk it out with Manohar, hinting that Manohar might not be aware of what he is doing to her in bed. This makes sense to Saru and she decides to face Manohar and her problem.

In her short story "A Liberated Woman," Deshpande tells the same story, but makes the successful female doctor confess that divorce is not a solution to her problem because she does not want her children to suffer and because she does not wish to attract too much of public attention to her problem. This is the typical predicament of the Indian woman. She has all the right reasons to seek liberation from male domination and exploitation, but will not do so because of her children and the public. Perhaps it is for the same reason that, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru decides to stay on and meet Manohar, but certainly the novel, unlike the short story, ends on an optimistic note. Saru learns the hard way that adolescent retaliation for gender discrimination during childhood cannot build a viable platform for life, that the patriarchal vestiges in society, despite education and progress, cannot be wished away and that one needs to look critically into oneself too. Ultimately, Saru decides that she cannot run far enough away from her problem or pretend that it does not exist, but must face it squarely, without, however, compromising on her individuality.

Jiji, the protagonist of *Moving On*, is a normal girl brought up amidst a host of children from the families of relatives, near relatives and lifelong friends. The only aberration in her early life is her younger sister Malu, who always wants to be a part of whatever she does. Her mother, a Marathi intruder into their Kannadiga family, is a successful and popular writer of stories in magazines and keeps a somewhat exclusive distance from the rest of the family. Jiji is attracted to Shyam, a cinema photographer who comes to photograph her mother for a magazine and reciprocates the girl's interest. When the mother disapproves of Shyam because he is a Sindhi boy, Jiji pursues her intention with determination and marries him. In course of time she is reconciled with her parents, but the rift rankles.

Too late, Jiji discovers that the members of Shyam's family are not at all like him. They are an obnoxious and parsimonious lot and Jiji is soon sick of them. Shyam is sensitive to the feelings of his new bride and moves her to another place borrowed from a friend in the film world. They lead an idyllic life for some time, but Shyam's hopes for better fortunes are belied one by one and they face privation and want. Jiji goes home for her confinement and Shyam visits now and then, but there are plenty of signs that he is no longer the sanguinary optimist that he once was.

It is discovered that Malu is pregnant. Questioned closely, she says that Shyam raped her. Confronted with her claim, Shyam takes umbrage and leaves, making it clear that Jiji will have to find her own way back to him. The family designs a grand strategy by which the pregnant Malu and Jiji, with her baby, will be hidden away from public view in the care of their maternal uncle Laxman, who is an underworld don, and come out only after the birth of the baby, which will be passed off as the second child of Jiji. Everything goes according to their plan until the baby is born. But the whole plan is thrown out of gear when Malu dies of post-natal complications.

Jiji disappears with her son Anand. No one knows anything about her whereabouts. Malu's baby girl, named Sachi, is brought up by Jiji's aunt, the childless Gayatri. Jiji's maternal uncle Laxman brings Jiji the news that her husband has committed suicide by drowning in the sea. Laxman also informs her that her mother is on her deathbed. At last Jiji returns home. After the funeral of her mother, she disappears again, this time taking Sachi also with her. Years later, her childhood companion Raja traces her and informs her that her father is on his deathbed. Baba hints to her to read his diary and he dies.

Baba's diary reveals many unknown things to Jiji, who has to revise her opinion of and attitude to several people and things. Since her grown-up children Anand and Sachi are away, busy with their education, Jiji finds herself alone in Bangalore in Gayatri's house, which devolved to Baba after her death. Her only friend and constant companion is her childhood playmate Raja. He is a widower with a difficult son whom he cannot manage. He helps Jiji in everything.

But she is upset by his constantly pestering her to marry him. She has never thought of him as a possible husband. At the same time she feels no qualms about asking him for any help. He pleads that, if they marry, it will be good for all their three children. But Jiji is not convinced. Jiji is physically drawn towards a young man named Raman, who occupies the upstairs portion of her house. She slakes her bodily thirst with him, but imposes so many conditions governing the process that she virtually rapes him each time she goes upstairs to his portion. When Raman is involved in police enquiries, Raja advises Jiji to get rid of him. When Jiji appears to hesitate, Raja reveals that he is aware of the affair between her and Raman. Then Jiji gets rid of Raman.

Raja, who has been shepherding her all along, suffers a fracture of the leg and lies bedridden. He and Jiji have a good opportunity to talk to each other. Jiji tells Raja the whole story of Sachi and explains how she has all along been passed off as Jiji's second child. She also reveals the struggles she has undergone to bring up the two children without anyone's help, which has rendered her zealous of their welfare. For his part, Raja reveals that he married his late wife Rukku because Jiji was not around then, thereby revealing that he has always been in love with her. So, at last, two good people get to open their hearts to each other and find abiding love for each other there.

Jiji does not merely battle with the problem of her identity or individuality. She is concerned more with the security and the happiness of her son and her niece and puts herself in jeopardy time again for their sake. She has faced several tricks designed to take advantage of her single status, going to bizarre extremes to deny her womanliness. Her single adult aberration involving Raman may well be taken, not as a female weakness or dependence, but as an affirmation of her femininity.

In "Moving out of the Cloistered Self: Shashi Deshpande's Protagonists," Kamini Dinesh sums up Deshpande's women protagonists thus:

To be true to herself, the woman has to exorcise the film of superimposed attitudes and roles. Her emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife, in the end, is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife—one who has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. She is a wife reconceptualised as woman and as individual—a marked contrast to the older generation of women around her with their uncomplaining, unresisting, fatalistic attitude. Hers is the dilemma of the new woman that could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and society. Deshpande concludes the novels with the protagonist poised to make this decisive move. . . . (204-05)

CONCLUSION

The woman in fiction often serves as the symbol of the seething discontent raging within the heart of the ordinary Indian woman, who has vowed to throw off centuries of gender discrimination and exploitation. The Indian woman is now a symbol of personal growth and development, which marks her off from her forebears. She prefers to be an individual first and anything else only afterwards. The awakening of woman's consciousness calls for a new set of values. The ending of the experiences of the woman may not lead to a resolution of her problems, but the projection of the experiences is rewarding, for it leads to inner enrichment, a sense of exhilaration and vicarious achievement as we see her battling through harsh reality. The figure of the Indian woman—despite the persisting appendages from past tradition—serves as an inspiring light of hope for the future.

However, the Indian woman still has to live her life within the tradition-bound Indian society. The norms set by millennia of tradition and custom cannot be overthrown overnight. Prejudices still linger, rendering any progress difficult. So the liberation or emancipation of the Indian woman can be brought about only gradually and by a great effort. An interesting aspect of Indian English fiction is the growth or development of woman, particularly when portrayed by women novelists. Possibly because of the changing times, the female protagonists keep evolving, until the novelist fashions a female protagonist who is completely different from her earliest protagonist in outlook and action. The difference lies in the way they tackle issues. The latest protagonist is no longer at the mercy of a cruel fate; she no longer blames the gods; she meets her problem head on and tackles it the best way she can. She is more aware, more mature, more balanced and has a wider outlook than the earliest protagonist for the simple reason that times have changed and she has better resources to hand. She is better informed, suffers from fewer inhibitions and is not awed by the aura of masculinity. Above all, she exhibits a mind of her own. The present study has attempted to trace the parallels and contrasts between the selected novels of the Indian English woman novelist, named Shashi Deshpande.

A close reading of the texts of the two novels shows a marked progression in the condition of the Indian woman. Deshpande, in her first published novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, chooses a milieu she is familiar with and fashions a female protagonist who faces a single problem and sets out to solve it, only to realise that she alone can solve it. In her novel *Moving On*, Deshpande fashions a totally different female protagonist who lives only briefly for herself, but spends the rest of her life completely for others, trying and helping to solve everyone else's problem, all the time

unaware of or blind to the fact that she too has a problem and that the solution to it is in her own hands. Two reasons may be attributed to the growth or development of woman: one is the impact of changing times, calling for more complex and multidimensional characters, and the other is the novelist's growing confidence in her art. Whichever be the case, it is undeniably true that Indian English literature, particularly Indian English fiction, has become richer because of the growth or development of woman in Indian English fiction.

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