



TOWARDS SELF AFFIRMATION: WOMEN IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

Dr.Y Malyadri

Lecturer in English

Visvodaya Govt.Degree college

Venkatagiri, Tirupati (D.t) AP

Abstract

This paper, "Towards Self Affirmation: Women in the Early Novels of Shashi Deshpande" by Dr. Y. Malyadri, examines how Deshpande portrays the journey of Indian women from silence and subordination toward self-realization. Against the backdrop of a historically male-dominated culture where women were seen as incomplete without men, the study traces the emergence of a new female consciousness influenced by western education and social reform. Focusing on Deshpande's early novels *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *That Long Silence*, the paper analyzes protagonists Saru, Indu, and Jaya, who confront patriarchal norms, marital discord, and internalized guilt. Each character uses a return to the natal home as a space for introspection, moving from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion. Deshpande's women seek not rejection of relationships but redefinition of them, asserting autonomy, dignity, and creative selfhood while negotiating tradition and modernity. The work positions Deshpande as a key voice in contemporary Indian English fiction, foregrounding women's quest for the 'self' and affirming their right to author their own authority.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande Novels, Contemporary Indian English Fiction, Women in Shashi Deshpande Novels, Work Positions of Deshpande

Human experience has chiefly been a masculine or, what may be called, a 'malist' Experience. Hence the cumulative image humanity offers a tilted, distorted one with the female voice denied an equal force, with the woman remaining behind the areas. She was often considered incomplete without man. Kate Millet maintained that

*'Women are not a dependency class who live on surplus.'*¹

Even Sophia in her book *Woman Not Inferior to Man*² wrote "the worst of us deserve much better treatment than the best of us receive". It is "A dynamic affirmation of women's newly acquired identifies as whole women"³

Women today no longer want to remain a Cinderella, a *La Chingada*, a Madison Avenue's woman. She must change. She must release herself from what Francoise d'Eaubonne calls 'feminitude', from her legal, social, psychological exclusion.

Today the suppressed female voice is articulated. The dignity of woman is affirmed. She has a greater share of social responsibility and a greater readiness to author her own authority. Rosalind in *As You like It* puts on a man's garb and goes about looking for her lover. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*⁴ is concerned with the physical suppression of woman. Elizabeth Barret Browning and George Eliot revolted against social conventions. Even Sita, an oft-quoted example of anti-feminism, had the guts to resist Ravana. The result was women have been reclaimed into the male world order.

Traditionally, India had a male-dominated culture. Indian women 'covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence' in literature as well as in life had no autonomous existence. She was what Sylvia Plath calls her,

*"The cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at Wind's hand"*⁵.

But with the influence of western education and culture, the Indian woman has re-emerged as a new being. A new feminine literary tradition has spawned out of the curiosities and anxieties of a woman's life. As a result, the Indian woman today is no longer a Damayanthi. She is a Draupadi or a Damini or a Nora or a Candida or a Joan of Arc. Social reformers



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like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and political revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru lent her a new dimension, gave her a new direction.

Indian women writers have turned inward to explore the private rather than the public life of the individual. So their literature has largely become confessional and personal and their subjective style has been labelled feminine, even though men, too, employ it. They launched an aesthetic voyage within to explore the private consciousness of their women characters and measure the pressure of the inner weather. Not only women writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimbkar, Shobha De, Kamala Markandaya, but male writers like Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Manohar Malgonkar etc., dwell on tortured womanhood.

Among the Indian English women novelists, there is a long consensus about recognizing Shashi Deshpande as a major figure in the contemporary scenario. Her writings are concerned with a woman's quest for 'self' and an exploration into the female psyche and the protagonist's place in it. She writes about the problems of women, whose desires and emotions are 'atrophied though a life time of disuse.' Her portrayal of women is quite unique as they are preoccupied with the modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. In her own words,

*"I write about humans and human relationships. Of their struggle to make sense of life, to understand their place in the scheme of things"*⁶

The theme of quest for feminine 'self' starts from her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* and continues up to her seventh novel *Moving On*. But the most recent novel *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) explores the slippery, treacherous terrain that love takes people into.

Shashi Deshpande first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) is the masterpiece that depicts the desperate struggle of a girl, Saru, striving to come out of the folds of the dark patriarchal society. The novel begins abruptly with Saru's coming back her parent's house, after fifteen years, as a refugee, ostensibly to see her lonely father after her mother's death, but in reality to escape the nightmarish brutality her husband inflicts on her every night. When her husband asks her reason for going back to her parent's house after long gap, she fails to articulate her inner feelings.

*"I want nothing so complicated. My wants are simpler. To sleep peacefully the night through. To wake up without pain. To go through tomorrow without apprehension. Not to think, not to dream. Just to live"*⁷

She longs to get away from "this house, this paradise of matching curtains and handloom bedspreads." *"This hell of savagery and submission."*⁸ She wants to know whether the hell is within her. In her experienced father's company, she reflects on the events of her past life and introspects her relation with her mother and husband, which paves way for her confident future. In one of her recapitulations Saru recollects her interaction with her mother.

"Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker"

"Who cares?"

"We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married."

"I don't want to get married."

"Will you live with us all your life?"

"Why not"

"You can't"

"And, Dhruva".



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"He is different. He's a boy."⁹

The difference that her mother shows in the treatment of her son Dhruva and daughter

Enrages Saru. Saru's real problem begins when her brother accidentally dies at seven through drowning. She has seen him drown. Her mother holds her responsible for the death of Druva. Her mother's words "Why don't you die? Why are you alive and he dead?"¹⁰ haunts her throughout her life, making her guilty. She alienates herself from her parents and identifies herself with the loveless, the unhappy and forsaken.

When Saru expresses her desire to go to Bombay to study medicine, her mother sternly rejects Saru's proposal and reproaches Saru's father:

Yes, but they're girls, whose fathers have lots of money. You don't belong to that class. And don't forget medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor you still have to get her married; spend money on her wedding. Can do both? Make yourself a pauper, and will she look after you in your old age? Medicine! Five, six, seven.... god knows how many years. Let her go for ayou can get her married in two years and our responsibility is over."¹¹

Saru's mother once again accuses Saru of killing her own brother, Dhruva. At this juncture Saru's father breaks his silence and comes to her rescue. He sends Saru Bombay to study medicine, much against her mother's wishes. She works hard "to be a success, to show them... her something" to make herself "secure so that no one would ever say to me again... 'Why are you alive?'¹²

In her perseverance to attain autonomy of self Saru resents the role of a daughter and look forward to the role of a wife with a hope that her new role will give her security, love and freedom. She, who is deprived of love and affection from her parents, weaves her dreams around Manohar "a superior conquering male"¹³ a charismatic young poet. When he reveals his love for her, Saru gives herself up "unconditionally, unreservedly to him. To love him and to be loved."¹⁴ She once again defies the authority of her mother by selecting a person out of their caste. She comes away from her parents "in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was caste, the decision taken, my boats are burnt. There could be no turning back."¹⁵ Her marriage with Manu is an assertion of her feminine sensibility.

Saru's trauma begins, after a brief spell of conjugal benevolence, when she sets herself up as a doctor. Manohar's professional and sexual jealousy creates a dichotomy between them. Saru's profession makes her more important and respectable in the society than her husband Manohar, a college teacher.

When we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and Namaste. But they are all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored."¹⁶

After she sets herself up as a doctor, the situation changes "he had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband."¹⁷ She becomes bread and butter winner of the family. Her success in her profession hurts Manu's male chauvinism. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon Saru. Thus; the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night. She doesn't dare to speak about it to anyone. She becomes a mute sufferer. She goes on putting bricks on the wall of silence between Manohar and herself: "may be one day, I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death. Perhaps the process has already begun... It seems I can do nothing to save myself."¹⁸

The urge to confide in some one, to talk to someone grows in her. She searches for a person to share her burden. In such a state of mind she finds it difficult to discharge her duties as a doctor, with full concentration. She becomes a ventriloquist in her profession.

I don't know what I did, what I said, to the other patients. I suppose, like any other well trained animal, I was capable of making right noises, the right gestures automatically"¹⁹



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To escape from professional jealousy and from nocturnal sexual assaults, she prepares to give-up her job. She tells Manu her desire to give up her job. When he asks the reason she fails to articulate the words in her mind:

*Tell him. Tell him now. Tell him what he does Tell him you can't stand at any Longer. Tell him you are prepared to sacrifice everything as long as he leaves you alone. To sleep alone in a room to be myself on bed, to be untouched, unhandled...*²⁰

She gives lame excuses that she is tired and she wants to stay at home to look after her children. But Manu doesn't want it, as it brings down their standard of living, "on my salary? Come on, Saru, don't be silly, you know how much I earn."²¹

Roots and Shadows (1983), Shashi Deshpande's second full-length novel emphasizes the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu, in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She marries Jayant in order to get freedom from her parent's house, but it brings submission on the name of love. "As a child, they told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. Why? I had asked. 'Because you are a female!'"²² She laughs at them and swears that she will never pretend to be what she is not. Then she meets Jayant and finds out that he too expects her to submit. "No, no expected. He took it for granted that I would. And I did it, because, I told myself, I loved him."²³ At last she finds her educated and ostensibly progressive minded husband is no different from the average Indian male. She realizes that she has all along been unconsciously aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. Marriage deteriorates Indu's personality drastically. She, who considered herself, independent, intelligent and was proud of her logical thinking, becomes a typical submissive Indian woman after her marriage. Obsessed by her overwhelming love for her husband in the beginning, she would 'think of him' always:

*Always what he wants, what he would like, what would please him.... But when she finds out that Jayant is just another Indian male who takes his wife's submission for granted and expects her to be a passive partner in sex without feelings or passion, Indu is disillusioned and hurt. Nevertheless, she tries to please him by suppressing herself.*²⁴

Indu's uncle tells her that the world is made up of interdependent parts and that one need not be ashamed of one's attachments or one's dependence on others. He makes her realize that freedom and fulfilment are achieved through the right perception of life. Indu in the end comes to realize 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; and that alone brings harmony in life.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande perfectly delineates the predicament of a writer in a hypocritical society. Indu, as a journalist interviews a woman, who has been given an award and an important office in recognition of her social services, especially for her services in the cause of the upliftment of women. Before she publishes the interview report Indu comes to know the other side of the same woman, who in pursuit of fame, power money, unscrupulously exploits poor and needy, from a social worker. When Indu expresses her desire to speak the truth about the woman, her editor is aghast and scoffs at her desire to speak the truth, as the woman is influential in the society. He warns her not to bother about the poor "no foolishness, mind you, Indu. I won't do. God, if we were to publish all the dirt about all the dogs and bitches around..."²⁵ But even more to her is Jayant's response to her dilemma.

*That's life! What can a person do against the whole system! No point making a spectacle of your futile gestures. We need the money don't we? Don't forget, we have a long way to go.*²⁶

Though she isn't satisfied with her writing, with her job, she goes back to her work hating it, hating herself. Waking up each day and think I can't go on. Feeling trapped, seeing myself endlessly chained to the long dust road that lay ahead of me.

Jaya, the protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's third novel *That Long Silence* (1988), is an Indian housewife who undergoes the mental torture and sufferings at the hands of man. She, believing the maxim that 'a husband can never be wrong,' like Saru, follows her husband, Mohan, who has been accused of misappropriation of office funds, to seek refuge at the flat in Dadar, which belongs to her maternal uncle. Jaya's exile to Dadar flat and absence of her children gives her enough time to brood on her seventeen years old marriage, which hamstrings her talents as a writer. In fact, the Dadar flat becomes the



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inspiration for further intrusions upon Jaya, which mock her precarious self constructions. By her journey into the past, Jaya gets guidance for her future. The alienation from the children gives her a chance to review the scriptures, traditions, rituals and customs of India, which stultify women from establishing herself as an authentic being. For instance, at one point in the novel, Jaya discovers that her name is not included in the family tree, delineated by her uncle Ramukaka: "Look Jaya, this is our branch, this is our grandfather - your great grandfather and here is father and then us - Laxman, Vasu and me, and here are the boys - Shridhar, Janu, Dinkar, Jaya asks, "I am not here!" Ramukaka instantaneously says with irritation "How can you be here?" "You don't belong to this family! You are married; you are part of Mohan's family. You have no place here."²⁷. But it is only half of the truth told by her uncle to avoid conflict, as Jaya's mother, grandmother, her uncle's wives find no place in the family tree. The existence of women is totally ignored in her father's house as well as in her husband's house. In the end she bursts out by delineating the sacrifices she has made. Kamat, the neighbour sympathises with her and encourages her to live her true self with Mohan in the entire seventeen year span of marital life. At last she determines to break that long silence and grapple with the problems of self-revelation and self-assessment. The final utterances of Jaya, immediately reminds us of Nora, the New Woman, who at the end of the play (Ibsen's *A Doll's House*) pushes the door and goes out of the house only to break her long silence. Thus, Shashi Deshpande, through Jaya, makes conscious of other women, those unhappy victims who never broke their silence. One may tune with Toril Moi, a famous Indo-Anglian critic and say that the novel 'seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices.'

In *That Long Silence* Deshpande portrays "the inner conflict in the mind of the narrator between the writer and the housewife."²⁸ Jaya in her anxiety to fulfil her role as a wife does injustice to her talents. Jaya, as a writer for a magazine, makes a good beginning by producing a story, which wins the first prize. But Mohan, her husband, assumes that the story is about their personal life and feels dispirited at the thought that the people of his acquaintance may take him as the person portrayed in the story. To safeguard her relationship with her husband, she takes her writings light-mindedly and produces stereo type of women in her works.

Jaya's character in this novel is a magnificent creation. She, contrary to expectation, armed with her new knowledge, does not turn her back to her marriage. Instead, she marches ahead with renewed vigour to breathe new life into it. According to Jaya discovering one's self doesn't mean to stand aloof from the rest of the world. Desponded, through this novel, says that the solution to problems within relationships doesn't lie in walking away from them, but rather in rebuilding the relationships in such a way as to give little place for problems to crop up.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists long for freedom, independence and self-respect right from their childhood. In order to achieve them they look forward for the role of a wife. They cling tenaciously to their marriage not for love alone, but because they are afraid of failure. They want to show the world and to their family that their marriage is a success. But they soon realize that their husbands are killing the roots of their existence. Unable to meet the demands on them as wives they runaway to their parent's house. Their revisit to their natal home in the absence of their mothers gives them an opportunity to apprehend their inner self, to fathom their emotions and to recognize their wants.

Shashi Deshpande employs nostros' or homecoming as a tool for self-introspection and self-realization for her protagonists Saru, Indu, and Jaya. Coming back to their natal house gives them ample opportunity, to know their inner self, to free themselves from the terrifying complexes of guilts, to assert their potentialities. Thus, Shashi Deshpande's protagonists do journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. They learn to liberate themselves from the shackles of tradition and exercise their rights for the manifestation of their individual capabilities. They realize their feminine selves through identity assertion and self affirmation

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