

Female Protagonists in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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This paper focuses on female protagonists in the novels of Shashi Deshpande". In fact the works by women writers constitute a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Today women are seen establishing their identity in almost all walks of life and they have heralded a new consciousness in the realm of literature too. Like other women writers, Shashi Deshpande writes about how women want to be free. Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Academy Award-winning fictionist, is regarded with the step of troubles and distress, situation and condition, pain and anguish, destruction and exploitation of middle-class Indian women trapped in the trap of Indian patriarchy. She thinks herself a humanist-feminist, aiming to perform females recognize their inherent strength and potentiality and come at the solution to their concerns and problems on their own without depending on their fellow complements. The present article proposes to critically evaluate Deshpande's women-oriented fictions with a specific focus on her female protagonists appearing as new women. The present article is an attempt to look deep into the inner psyche and consciousness of her protagonists emerging as new women determined to move on with their lives with strength, self-confidence, and sovereignty.

'The emerging woman will be strong – minded,

strong – hearted,

strong – souled, strong – bodied

strong strength and beauty

must go together (Louisa May Alcott said)

Though women with their attitude of modernity and advancements struggle to rebel against the repressive forces of patriarchy, most of the time their efforts and anger end up in vain. They finally end up in the clutches of patriarchy and console themselves by compromising on their rebel and stay suppressed in the hands of men. Her novels mainly concentrate on feminism and exposes the condition of women especially in Indian society. Her novel portrays the facets of the lives of women. One of the main concerns of Deshpande on modern woman is man-woman relationship. Sexual relationship is prominent among them and here the novels of Deshpande spell a break from the image of Indian women in the earlier fiction. For instance, the major characters in Deshpande's novels have affairs outside their marital relationship, both before and after marriage. Modern Indian woman is generally liberated from the traditional restrictions and some of the family constraints. But still she has to play certain roles in the frame of the family and society.

Shashi Deshpande has eleven fictions and four children's books to her assets. Her fictions are simple stories dealing with the lives of the ordinary people, women in particular, with their heads and hearts. Her women are the human beings who breathe and live around each one of us. They belong to the world of flesh and blood. The main thread of her novels is woven around the life of her women with their struggle for self-realization, self-assertion, and freedom. Since Indian culture, to a large extent, has profoundly been rooted in patriarchy, women have been suffering from injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation, and exploitation in one way or the other. They are the victims of social ills and sins prevalent in a contemporary society.

Her female fighters come to the understanding that their revolution on patriarchy cannot exist the unique solution to their predicaments. They attack their own battle and appear as bold, challenging and radical. These women set themselves to shift towards self-awareness and freedom. She requires them to be consummate and self-governing human lives, to be *modern* in the true sense of the expression. She puts her voice of protest on the inequality done to women in the name of gender-discrimination. She needs her femininities to establish themselves free from

male-ego and male-domination. She wants them to resist man-made laws, rules, and ideologies. She wants them to support themselves by using their own outcomes all by themselves. The present article proposes to critically evaluate Deshpande's women-oriented fictions with a specific focus on her female protagonists who appear as new women.

An Indian woman whose representative has been that of silent-sufferer and who is an upholder of Indian culture has been one of the major issues of Indian English novelists. Shashi Deshpande, being one, voices the predicaments, which trap the middle class educated Indian women. The problems of conjugal conflict, identity crisis, imbalanced family ties and the patriarchal gaze would be examined by taking into consideration. Deshpande's novels highlight the struggle of the conscience of shackled Indian Women characters, their journey from darkness to light exhibiting the predicaments that majority of women are still viewed with both at the family and cultural levels.

Women are not only seen as a social class but a culturally adapted and created class as well. It has been really a 'great tradition' for women to understand the set models of '*pativrata*' and submission to the dictates of patriarchy. Women remain to experience even in the Post-modern era whether at the hand of their own skillful role or the society that they belong to. Indian feminism, therefore, exists as a clear reply to the points clearly confronting many Indian women. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists belong to the middle-class society. They are all new, intelligent, understanding and metropolitan. All of them find sacrament burning and hurting but they do not break away from their marriage bonds rather they try to make a balance between tradition and modernity.

All her protagonist are career women, who are not happy by the discourse balance between Men and Women but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to the progress of their own capacities are achieved in their own lives. They need to come ahead to bear the burden of work along with their fellow men in every walk of life. They work to create a balance between their family and career, seeing to it as far as possible, that their position will not affect their espoused life. Being a fine-tuned feminist, she raises a voice of protest against the injustice presented to them in the name of gender-discrimination, a thought deeply rooted in Indian society in one form or the other. She is radically concerned with the prediction of developing women willing to grow their own ways remaining well within the boundaries of Indian family and society. She needs her women, who are made in different dreams and aspirations on one side and social demands and requirements on the other, to be financial, social,

familial and emotionally free and strong. She wants them to be perfect and free human individuals, equal to their male complements. Anita Myles writes:

Shashi Deshpande, in all her novels, exhibits a sharp psychological insight into the subtleties of the human mind and society. She focuses in detail on the working of the psyche of her women characters who plunge into periods of psychic disturbance due to traumatic experiences of life. Nevertheless, the suffering leads to a stage of self-introspection and later self-discovery which evinces a fresh perception of life. Ultimately her characters emerge out of the crisis as strong women willing to compromise with life as it comes. In her analysis of the post-modern dilemma of women, she concentrates on career women and the problems they face outside the threshold of their homes in a basically male-dominated social setup. (Myles 11).

Womenfolk is one who are bold and strong, radical and extremist, who has an open mind to accept new ideas, who believe in the beliefs of identity, justice and freedom and who strongly and fearlessly react on conventional norms and expectations, rules and codes which are in favour of men. Simone de Beauvoir writes:

Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values . . . The emancipated woman wants to be active, a taker and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The "modern" woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal . . . Man, however, becomes indignant when he treats her as a free (Beauvoir 726-727).

A woman is one who understands of herself as a free and independent individual willing to live with a heightened spirit of class, status, and individuality. She is a product of a new social and economic order in which she casts aside her passivity, quiet, and darkness. Deshpande believes that the nerve of the woman lies in the power of her feminine sensibility and that the woman's self-assertion, her awareness of the very strength of her feminine sensibility can save her from Indian patriarchy. Her women begin a journey towards self-awareness, self-realization, self-assertion, and self-discovery. Deshpande wants her female protagonists to be new and modern

challenging and resisting man-made customs and conventions. Her female protagonists undertake a subjective journey of self-realization with the purpose of making themselves free and independent individuals. Women use their inner strength, their courage and conviction to fight against injustice done to them. Deshpande's female protagonists are educated, career-oriented and economically independent. They fight to prove themselves as individuals attempting to set themselves free from traditional, social and moral constraints and hoping to live their lives with status and dignity.

Sarita, the protagonist of the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a modern woman who strongly dislikes the charge of Indian patriarchal society on her character and personality. She is a symbol of a defined woman who always seeks to exercise her power over others. She desires to join medicine in order to be economically independent. With her father's support, she goes for her medical education. She works hard to realize her dream. Being ambitious and innovative by nature, she rebels against her parents and marries Manu and leaves her parental home. Though initially happy in her marital life, her marriage becomes a trap in which she is made to endure marital violence imposed on her almost every night by her sadist husband. She returns to her parental home to escape from her unremitting cycle and all her unendurable horrors and her husband's sadism. During her stay at her parental home, away from her husband and his sexual assaults, she learns a lot from Madhav who unknowingly makes her change her approach to her life. She is excited by his words: "My life is my own". These words bring out a sudden change in her internal behaviour. She realizes that self-trust plays an effective role in human life. She believes: "If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk". (220). She gets Baba's motivating question: "Are you not sufficient for yourself?" (220). She understands that she has been her own nemesis all through her life. She herself is guilty of her own predicament and condition. Her character itself is her future. With this refreshed experience and success, she begins as a woman able to face her conjugal life on her own courses and requirements.

Indu, the protagonist of the novel *Roots and Shadows*, signifies women who live in a close relationship with society putting aside all small and outmodded social norms and customs. She has been resistant to wrong methods prevailing in Indian society directly from her childhood. She is against blind faiths and superstitions, dowry system, class-distinction, caste-system, and gender-difference. However, being a girl, she lets a lot in the name of gender-discrimination in her childhood. She follows the footsteps of Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, by running away and marrying Jayant, a man of different caste, in order to free herself from the pit of her family. Her marriage makes her a typical Indian wife living her life as per the wish of her husband. She gets

disappointed in her marital life. For her, marriage becomes a cage with two animals, husband, and wife, burning anger at each other. During Akka's illness, she gets a chance to set herself free from the trap of marriage. Away from her husband, she breaks all codes by getting engaged in a physical relationship with Naren.

However, she is not happy away from her husband. She starts to believe that it is she who is to be blamed for the marital dispute that departed her from her husband, it is she who has performed the hell out of the heaven, and it is she who has fastened herself in the cage and thrown away the keys. She gets a golden chance to question, to rethink about her life, her career as a writer, her marriage, her involvement with her husband, her relationship with the people from her ancestral family, and about her vision of hard-won freedom. Finally, tired of a familial dispute and conflict, feeling guilty of her physical relationship with Naren, tired of keeping herself away from her husband, she decides to go back to her marital home and to start her life afresh.

Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, *That Long Silence*, has been a silent sufferer right from her childhood. She, a typical Indian wife, takes Mohan, her husband as a sheltering tree. She, a mother of two children, follows her husband blindly and devotedly. She lives only for her husband and children. However, she is far away from pleasure and joy in her marital life. After Mohan leaves her, she begins to feel that her marriage is almost over. Though she thinks that it is painful for the woman to live without her husband, she chooses to follow the footsteps of bold and tough Mukta. She, with her difficulties in her seventeen-year-old marriage, her failure both as a wife and a creative writer, finally comes to the realization, in her passing moments of departure, that 'silence' can never be the solution of her problems. She decides to erase her long silence, to throw off the label of a mute and silent sufferer and not to be a mere shadow of her husband. She decides to follow Krishna's advice to Arjuna: "Yathechchasi tatha kuru", the words that mean, "Do as you desire", in her life. She decides to do what she desires. She confidently says: "I'm not afraid anymore. The panic has gone". (191). She rejects the image of marriage as two bullocks yoked together. She emerges as a new woman by rejecting the name "Suhasini" given to her by her husband. She is managed to assert herself and individuality and to move on with her marriage on her own terms.

Sumi, the protagonist of the novel, *A Matter of Time*, is a victim of her husband, Gopal's departure. She admits quietly and struggles to bring up her daughters all by herself. Her self-esteem and self-respect do not allow her to be a slave to her ancestral family. She takes her fate, finds a job, and gets involved in the writing of a play for a class performance. She shows the

strength of mind by choosing to begin a new phase of her life without her husband. She is strong and bold enough to carry out her duty as a mother. She does not give up her struggle to live, adjusts herself with present circumstances and takes a very bold decision to move ahead in her life without any bitterness for the man who is the root cause of her sorrows and sufferings. She successfully shoulders the responsibility of the whole family after her husband leaves the house. She emerges as a modern woman, all set and determined to begin her life anew as a teacher and a creative writer. Choosing to leave the shade of her marital life behind, she is set to go along her own way by accepting a job in a residential school without bothering about her husband. She is confident when she says: "This is the first thing in my life I think that I've got for myself . . . I've been so lazy all my life. And now suddenly I want to do so many things". (230-231). It is broken that she dies in an accident before she can begin a fresh life on her own. Aru, Sumi's eldest daughter, is a new woman in the true sense of the term. She struggles to know the marital experiences of three women, Manorama, Kalyani and Sumi, who surround her. She realizes that Manorama is domineering; Kalyani is enduring and her mother Sumi, silent and indifferent. With her experience of these three married women, closely related to her, she walks into her womenfolk and is willing to allow her life as it comes to her pack. Being a rebel, she rebels against her own father, Gopal, and his walking out on his family for the reasons not known to anybody. She is irritated by the injustice done to her mother, Sumi and her grandmother, Kalyani. She, very strongly, reacts against male-oriented society in which Indian women are deceived as a consequence of rules and customs which are in favour of men. She is responsible enough to accept the role of the man in the family all by herself after her mother's death. She does not need any assistance from her father. She is ready to live and to look after her younger sisters and her grandmother. She, with a smile of support and faith, says: "Yes, Papa, you go. We'll be all right, we'll be quite all right, don't worry about us". (246). She, being a new woman exposes unjustifiable laws and norms of a patriarchal society, and is determined to live freely and alone.

Urmila, the protagonist of the novel, *The Binding Vine*, is a clever and educated woman serving as a lecturer in a degree college. She joins with Kishore, a young man serving in a merchant navy, against the wish of her parents. She seems lonely and rough in her marital life about which she says, ". . . Marriage with a man who flits into my life a few months in a year and flits out again, leaving nothing of himself behind . . . Often after he has gone, I find in myself a frantic grappling for his image, as if in going he has taken that away as well. Then he returns and we pick up the course of our lives from the moment of his return". (164). She holds that human bond survives on hope. For her husband, marriage is: "The two of us in a closed room and we

can't go out". (137). However, so-called comfort and peace of her marital life are shattered by the sudden death of her female child, Anu. Though it is difficult and painful for her to leap into the future without her daughter, she is strong enough to deal with her grief all by herself. In spite of her sorrows and sufferings, she never sheds tears but, boldly says: "I am trying to deal with my grief. I don't need anyone". (23). She firmly thinks that the main urge in human life is always to remain in spite of difficulties and calamities, failures and defeats. She deems that she is confident enough to manage everything on her own. A voice inside her always says: "Urmi's so smart, so competent". (173). She is portrayed as an independent woman who is psychologically and emotionally very strong. She rebels against the patriarchal tyranny and expresses her anger against injustice and oppression enforced on women like Mira, Shakutai, Kalpana and many more in a cruel and callous male-dominated society.

Madhu, the protagonist of the novel, *Small Remedies*, is fully conscious of the fact that women are the victims of social evils like gender-discrimination and marital violence. She is characterized by the spirit of rebelliousness which is expressed through her rejection of her assigned role in her family and society, her refusal to follow the traditional ways of life, her aversion to the practice of favouring the male child and her disregard for the traditional social taboos. Caught in her own despair over the loss of her only son, Aditya, she tries to find a way out of her own grief with courage and confidence. She is a modern woman in the true sense of the term as she raises a voice of protest against the injustice done to women in the name of gender discrimination. Savitribai and Leela, too, represent new Indian women who have courage, confidence, urge and ambition to rebel against and violate the entrenched norms, ideas, practices, and customs of Indian society.

The novel examines the lives of two women, Savitribai who is obsessed with music and Leela who is a passionate believer in communism. Savitribai, born in an orthodox Hindu family, elopes with her Muslim lover, Ghulaam Saab to pursue her career in the field of music while kind and strong-willed Leela gives her life to the party and to working with the factory workers in Mumbai. The novel, *Moving on*, is an examination of the journey of a middle-class Indian woman from meekness, submissiveness, patience, silence, obedience and passive resistance to her self-discovery, self-reliance, self-realization, development of individuality and to the making of a woman who is strong and confident enough to have her own way in life without any cooperation from and dependence on the male. After her husband, Shyam's death, Manjari, the protagonist, boldly and confidently tries her level best to be self-dependent and self-sufficient. Being an Indian mother, she desires to look after her children, but the desires of her body begin to distract her

attention. Sexual passion in her is so dominant that she gets involved in physical relationships with other men. She thinks herself an optimist who thinks in the potentiality of life and strongly believes that life, at any cost, has to move on and on. Writing becomes an important means for her to fight against her society that requires many restrictions on the female. In a sense, she uses her writing as a means of social change and reform.

Deshpande's latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*, is a story of love between two persons from different fields - Aparna, an oncologist, and Hari, a rising singer. It draws us deep into the pleasures, misfortunes, differences, and conflicts of falling in love and marrying. It moves around the theme of sex, love, and marriage. Aparna's first marriage is a tragic failure. After she decides to end her marriage, she, being a woman, wants to get rid of everything associated with it, with the man she has married. She discards everything she has, including her *mangalsutra* and her ring. She loses her trust in marriage and decides not to marry again. She meets Shree Hari Pandit and falls in his love. Their regular visits bring them emotionally and physically together. Hari is excited to marry her but she is not ready to marry him. Being afraid of marriage, she is decided not to marry again. In a response to his question, "will you marry me, Aparna?" she responds: "Hari, I love you and I want us to live together. I am as sure of that as I am of anything else in this life. But I am not sure about marriage". . . Marriage makes a tight knot, marriage means expectations. We'll quarrel about money, you won't take my money, and we'll quarrel about small things. No, I don't want to go through all that again. I've lived alone for too long, Hari, I am not sure I can live my life according to somebody else's ideas". (251-253). She allows herself completely to him and wants to a part of his life without marrying him. She prefers a live-in relationship to a marital relationship. She thinks of her own idea of living with Hari - not tied in the tight bond of marriage but tied together only by love. She thinks a lot and ultimately prepares herself to be caught in the trap of marriage.

Deshpande's female protagonists are determined to reject the age-old myth of femininity that makes the woman a typical Indian woman, a martyr, a heroine, just a stupid fool, to use Indu's words, a woman going about her husband, being for her husband, offering herself and individuality, and to live a life of a human being as a free and independent individual. Indu and Jaya, after self-realization on their part, decide to confront their husbands and live their life afresh. Instead of running away from the problems, they are determined to face them. They, thus, strike a balance between their total submission to their husbands and their aggressive revolt against them. Indu and Jaya, hoping for happiness and peace in their life, decide to move on with their marital lives with renewed hope and confidence. They decide not to submit passively or cravenly to the

circumstances around them, but with courage, confidence, determination, dignity, and strength. Deshpande's women including Urmi, Madhu, Manjari, and Aparna have been portrayed as human beings with their strengths and weaknesses, with their flaws and follies. They are certainly not perfect and complete human beings. However, with virtues as well as vices in them, they succeed in emerging as new women ready to face their lives afresh.

A close examination of Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists in her fictions exposes her deep insight into the plight of Indian women who feel stifled and confined in a tradition-bound, male-dominated society. She describes her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, hopes, and frustrations, but finds themselves frustrated by the opposition and force from a society trained overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mindset. She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degeneration in a male-dominated society. Deshpande's women protagonists are hunted of the common foul gender discrimination first as a daughter and later as wives. Although she has a small number of literary works to her credit, her works have attracted great critical attention and acclaim for her soulful and realistic image of the Indian middle-class women.

She keeps her narratives female-centered and gives an intimate insight into the psyche of the middle-class Indian women who feel oppressed by their patriarchal socialization. She provides new ideas for the better man-women relationship, thereby increasing the scope of woman existence. She directs a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. To her tradition are the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolize the Indian way of life, and modernity is the assertion of the independent individual identity. Deshpande feels that the woman must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression to her individuality and identity.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are a realistic depiction of the pain and the conflict of the modern educated middle-class women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and frustrated and explore a way to fulfill themselves as a human being. Her concern and sympathy are primarily for the woman. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments, and frustrations. Besides revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity, the author lays bare the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression. The protagonists' resolve to resist such marginalization marks the beginning of a major revolution in their outlook. The protagonists' recall of traditional precepts from *the*

Mahabharata and *the Bhagwad Gita*, emphasizing larger existential questions is of a piece with these severe issues that cleverly enclosed Deshpande's works and take them beyond feminist concerns and feminist dilemma.

Deshpande excellently portrayed in her novels the trials and tribulations of a woman as the emergence of women writers on the Indian literary scene with the radical outlook of the recent phenomenon. They performed an idealized image of a woman in their works. It is, therefore, imperative that these writers attempted to write from women's point of view. They projected well the emotion and experiences - woman as a wife, mother and as an individual, facing psychological and sociological problems. These writers also influence the Indian life and society to an extent. After having a vivid analysis and understanding, the female characters found in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, it is evident that even though women rebel strongly against their oppressive forces, mainly patriarchy, they are still being suppressed by religious, cultural, societal realms of life. Still women are kept in the dark about their rights freedom, individuality and identity. For the protection of women from discrimination, women must be empowered by educating themselves on their right and their power, so as to enable to fight against male hegemony. By not being an outright feminist, she highlights developed and revolutionary ideas about the representation of female voice and quest for their identity. She also stresses the dire need for becoming effective and to move a step ahead in order to gain individuality and better existence in this contemporary world.

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