

SHASHI DESHPANDE: AN INDIAN WOMAN NOVELIST IN ENGLISH AS AN OPTIMIST

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, an award-winning Indian woman novelist in English, was born in Dharwad, Karnataka, a place known for learning and culture. She is the second daughter of a famous Kannada dramatist and a Sanskrit scholar, Shiranga. She gained degrees in Economics and Law. She also completed her M. A. in English from the University of Mysore. After getting married, she shifted to Mumbai where she completed a course in Journalism at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. She worked as a journalist for the magazine 'Onlooker' for a couple of months. While working for the magazine, she began her writing career with her first short story published in 1970. She is the author of eleven novels, including her novel, *That Long Silence*, which won her the Sahitya Academy Award and four children's books. She has been writing for more than forty five years and her latest novel is *Strangers to Ourselves* published in 2015. Her novels are a product of her minute observations of human beings in their relationships with one another. As a popular woman novelist, she is basically concerned with the theme of human relationships in which the woman at the centre and with her struggle for self-realization and self-assertion in a male-dominated Indian society. Her women protagonists, victimized creatures, try their level best for happiness, peace, harmony and survival of their families. They fight against age-old orthodox norms, beliefs, conventions and traditions which are in favour of the males. The present article is an attempt to assess Shashi Deshpande as an Indian woman novelist writing in English with a social purpose of improving the lot of women.

Keywords: consciousness, determination, ephemera, *kumkum*, patriarchy, self-assertion, self- realization, victimized,

Shashi Deshpande, a well-known name in the field of Indian English Fiction, started her literary career with the publication of her first short story in 1970. Her collection of short stories was published in 1978 whereas her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, that brought her a lot of praise and admiration, came out in 1980. Her novel, *That Long Silence*, published in the UK in 1988, and India in 1989, won her the Sahitya Academy Award and Nanjangad Thirumlamaba Award. Her other novels are: *If I Die Today*, *Come Up and Be Dead*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, *A Matter of Time*, *Moving on*, *In the Country of Deceit* and her latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves* published in 2015. In addition to her novels, she has written four children's books and essays available in a volume, *Writing from the Margin and Other Stories*. She was also awarded *Padma Shri* in 2009 for a significant contribution she has made in the field of Indian English novel. She has been writing for more than forty five years.

Indian literature written in English has been dealing with various issues and problems in a contemporary Indian context. There has been a significant growth in the field of Indian English fiction since the publication of the first Indian English novel, *Raj Mohan's Wife* written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1864. However, the true story of Indian English novel begins with the writings of 'The Trio of Indian English Fiction' - R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. They used 'novel' as an instrument to portray India with its merits and demerits. In addition to the 'Big Three', the writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya, G. V. Desani, Manohar Malgaonkar, S. Menon, K. A. Abbas, Arun Joshi, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Khushwant Singh, Amit Chaudhari, Amitav Ghosh, Vitram Swaroop, Anil Menon, and many others with Indian women novelists in English like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Rama Meta, Shoba De, Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapoor, Arundhati Roy, Jai Nimbkar, Namita Gokhale, Mrinal Pande, Shashi Deshpande and others have given a new direction and dimension to Indian English Fiction in the world. They have portrayed India with its glory, customs, conventions, traditions, myths rituals, beliefs, superstitions, heritage, culture, philosophy and civilization. Indian women novelists in English have been dealing with sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, suppression and oppression of an Indian woman who is born and destined to suffer all through her life in the name of gender-discrimination and marriage in Indian patriarchy. Her voice has been suppressed in Indian patriarchy, which, in itself, is one of the major causes of her tragic lot.

The woman has a very significant role to play in her family and society. A family is incomplete without her. She is a nucleus of every family. Anees Jung has rightly said: "In this complex pantheon of diversities the Indian woman remains the point of unity, unveiling through each single experience a collective consciousness prized by a society that is locked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of age and time. She remains the still centre, like the centre of the potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a social life, which in turn, has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration". (Jung 26). She is treated as a mediator, a bridge and a synthesizer. She doesn't allow herself to be carried away by superficial trends. She ensures the continuity which strengthens roots and simultaneously engineers change and growth to keep her family dynamic, abreast of knowledge, sensitive to fast moving events. Though haunted by various issues and problems, she knows that the solution to her problems lies neither in fighting for equal position nor denying it, neither in retreat into the home nor escape from it. She tries to maintain a balance between traditionalism and modernity which is necessary for the health of a family.

Since its inception, Indian English novel has been portraying Indian women as long-sufferings, daughters, wives and mothers caught in the trap of patriarchy. Indian Women

novelists in English have been dealing with issues and problems faced by Indian women in a male-dominated society. They have been raising a voice of protest against injustice done to them in the name of gender-distinction and marriage. They have been fighting for the cause of women with their sorrows, sufferings, plight, predicament, pain, agony, anguish, suppression, subjugation and exploitation in one form or the other. They have started moving away from the portrayals of meek, silent, submissive, enduring, obedient and sacrificing traditional women towards the image of ‘new’ women struggling hopefully and confidently for freedom, justice, self-realization and self-assertion. They have been writing with the intention of setting the women free from male-ego and domination, a burning social issue in a contemporary Indian patriarchal set-up. They have been optimistic in their attempt to seek solutions to their own problems, without depending on their male-counterparts.

Deshpande is one of the most popular woman novelists in English. Her novels are the product of her observations of Indian life and milieu around her. She writes of everything that exists around her through an entirely fresh point of view. Her female characters, major as well as minor, are the typical Indian creatures deeply rooted in Indian soil and context. Her novels, usually, have women as protagonists. They are deeply rooted in her experiences as an Indian woman. They are concerned with ordinary people, their heads and hearts. The projection of feminine virtues like silence, patience, endurance, tolerance, adjustability, sacrifice is the very essence of her novels. They deal with themes such as loss, loneliness, pain, agony, anguish, frustration, subjugation, exploitation of an Indian woman and her urge and struggle for self-identity, self-realization and self-assertion in Indian patriarchal society.

She is concerned with the projection of the female life with special emphasis on human relationships within and outside a family, the place and position of the woman in it, the role of Indian conventions, traditions, norms, beliefs, superstitions, mythology, culture and philosophy in her life. She herself has said in an interview with Viswanatha: “We know a lot about the physical and the organic world and the universe in general, but we still know very little about human relationships. It is the most mystifying thing as I am concerned, I will continue to wonder about it, puzzle over it and write about it. And still it is intriguing, fascinating”. (Gangadharan 11). She strongly believes: “It is necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writings. What I don’t agree with is the idealization of motherhood - the false and sentimental notes that accompany it”. (Viswanatha 13). She believes that the status and the dignity of the woman can be improved only if she desires to do so with courage, confidence and determination. She needs to help herself as solutions to the problems are within. She is an optimist in this sense. The present article intends to assess Shashi Deshpande, an Indian woman novelist writing in English, as an optimist with special reference to her novels which deal mainly with the woman in her relationship with others.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a story of a man with his unquestionable ego, dominance and superiority, and of a woman who is a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. It explores the inner psyche and consciousness of the woman, a victim of Indian patriarchy. It projects the dilemma of a modern Indian woman who relentlessly fights for her rights, identity, individuality, justice, equality and liberation. It deals with various issues related to womanhood, motherhood and gender-discrimination which constantly haunt the female mind. It moves around Saru, a middle-class woman, who is repeatedly made conscious of her gender in her infancy. She is ignored by her parents, by her mother, in particular, because she is a female child. She receives no love from her parents. She feels insulted and humiliated. She hates her mother like anything.

Her hatred for her mother is so bitter and intense that she says: “I hated her; I wanted to hurt her, wound her, and make her suffer”. (Deshpande 142). She rebels against her mother, and marries Manu against the wishes of her parents. After her marriage, her success as a doctor becomes the cause of her strained relationship with Manu who is uncomfortable with her success and popularity and who, with an intention to take revenge upon her, begins to sexually attack her. After having tolerated sexual exploitation for seventeen years, she returns to her parental home, fully determined not to return to her husband. Her stay in her father’s house gives her an opportunity to review her relationship with others. Madhav’s words: ‘My life is my own’ and her father’s question: ‘Are you not sufficient for yourself?’ (220) bring out a sudden change in her. She realizes that she has been her own enemy. She believes: “If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk”. (220). With a renewed hope, knowledge and strength, she ultimately decides to face her marriage with courage, confidence and determination.

If I Die Today is a perfect detective novel. Initially, it was published as a short story, but later, developed into a novel. It moves around Manju, the woman protagonist, a young college lecturer who gets married to a doctor. She lives on the campus of a big medical college and hospital. She is a sincere, honest, straightforward, broad-minded, kind-hearted and intelligent woman whose marital life with a doctor is not happy. Her life is filled with loneliness, frustration, silences and barriers. Though she tries her level best, she fails in her attempt to bring happiness and harmony in her marital life. The story gets a twist on the arrival of Guru, a cancer patient. On his arrival, the lives of the doctors and their families get affected and disturbed. Though a defective novel, it deals with issues such as education, economic independence, womanhood, motherhood, gender-discrimination and desire for a male child. Mriga, a 14 years old girl, is one of the memorable characters in the novel. Dr. Kulkarni, her father, appears to be modern, but he is haunted by a desire for a son and heir and never forgives Mriga for not being a son. Mriga’s mother, being a weak person, never lives according to her own wishes and desires. She is a sad and suppressed creature, too weak to give Mriga the support and love she wants very badly.

Come Up and Be Dead is a psychological mystery thriller. It deals with the theme of suicide of a schoolgirl. Miss. Kshama Rao, the Head Mistress of the school, is a young and competent woman who possesses features and characteristics of a successful woman. She fails to deal with the situation. Two more deaths follow, making the school a place of fear and suspicion. Devi, Kshama’s cousin, is successfully looking after Kshama’s house and her brother, Pratap. She doubts that Pratap is directly or indirectly involved in the girl’s murder. But before she can know the truth, Pratap dies. Devi feels that he too has been killed. She hears different facts from different characters such as Sapna, the school-teacher, Sona, the dead girl’s friend and Girish, the doctor. Devi also unwittingly offers herself to ‘come up and be dead’.

Roots and Shadows is a novel which focuses on the plight and predicament, dreams and aspirations, failures and frustrations, pain and agony of Indu, the woman protagonist, who struggles to discover her real ‘self’ and ‘identity’, but unfortunately every time she gets deceived and ultimately fails. She enjoys no freedom before as well as after her marriage. Before marriage, she was taught to be silent, meek, submissive and obedient. Caught between customs, conventions and traditions, on one side, and her urge for self-discovery, on the other, she revolts against patriarchy and marries Jayant against the wish of her ancestral family, especially, Akka. However, since the day of her marriage, she has been deceived and frustrated. Her courage, confidence, individuality, self-respect are destroyed. Jayant attempts to develop her identity and personality according to his own ideas and norms. Always in the mood of sacrifice and ready to

please her husband, she submits to her husband's wills and desires, totally surrenders her body and soul to him, sheds her 'I' into her husband and does everything to reflect his image. She realizes that she is the architect of her own destiny. She admits: "It is not he who has pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be". (Deshpande 54). In this regard, Reddy says that her hard-won independence seems only ephemera when she honestly questions herself if she is indeed independent. Under the guise of independence, the rebel in her has conditioned herself to become as submissive as any other typical Indian wife. However, she ultimately decides to live her life as per her desires. She emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman who is now prepared to live her life the way she likes.

That Long Silence, the novel that won her the Sahitya Acedemy Award, raises a strong voice of protest against male-dominated society with its man-made rules and conventions. Like Saru and Indu, Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, has been trained to be silent right from her childhood. After her marriage, she accepts her husband as a sheltering tree and becomes a typical Indian wife following her husband obediently and blindly. However, there is a strained relationship between Jaya and her husband because of their inability to understand each other. Always in the mood of submissiveness and sacrifice, she makes 'silence' a part of her life. She makes adjustments and compromises wherever and whenever possible. The marital relationship between Jaya and Mohan, and the psychological, emotional, social and cultural implications of being a wife are the major concerns of Deshpande in this novel. Deshpande feels that Indian patriarchy alone is not responsible for the plight of Indian women. The reason lies within them, too, as they are not ready to raise a voice against tyranny and injustice. After Mohan leaves her, she feels lonely and frustrated. However, the words from the *Bhagwadgita* – '*Yathechchasi tatha kuru*', meaning 'Do as you desire' change her attitude to her life and she decides to find means to live life afresh on her own. She believes: "But we can always hope, without that life would be impossible. And if there is nothing I know now, it is this: life has always to be made possible". (Deshpande 193). About the novel, Deshpande herself says: "And then I wrote *That Long Silence*, almost entirely a woman's novel, nevertheless, a book about the silencing of the one half of the humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally; the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own". (Prasad 58).

The Binding Vine is a novel which explores the innermost recesses of the woman's heart filled with the redemptive powers of love through the perspectives of Urmila, the woman protagonist, who is a clever, sharp-tongued and educated woman working as a lecturer in a degree college. Urmi marries Kishore against the wishes of her parents. The happiness and peace of her marital life is destroyed by the unexpected death of her female child, Anu. She is totally distraught because of Anu's death, and begins to brood over social evils that destroy the very identity of a woman. Grieving over the death of her baby daughter, she, in a moment of crisis, makes an inward journey which enables her to analyze the role of a woman in a family and a society. Her comments on gender-discrimination, the position of a girl child in a family, marriage, marital-violence and familial relationships constitute the core of the novel. The novel reveals a complex and intricate texture of a tradition-bound society and Urmila's struggle and urge to free herself from male-ego, male-domination and marital-violence with the help of her courage, confidence and inner strength. It also highlights the injustice done to the innocent, helpless and submissive women like Mira, Kalpana, Shakutai and Sulu by a conventional and traditional patriarchal world. Kalpana is a victim of marital-violence in the form of sex. Her mother, Shakutai, says: "I kept telling her, men are like animals". (Deshpande 147). What she says highlights the brutality and bestiality of the males. However, in the web of pain and agony,

loss and despair, there are rays of hope which change the course of the woman's life. Urmi never sheds tears but, boldly says: "I am trying to deal with my grief. I don't need anyone". (Deshpande 23). She is portrayed as an independent woman who is psychologically and emotionally very strong.

A Matter of Time is a multi-generational tale which exposes the plight and predicament of four women - Manorama, Kalyani, Sumitra and Arundhati, representing four generations of the same family deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. It deals with issues related to womanhood, motherhood, human relationships, in general, and marital relationships, in particular, physical and mental exploitation of women, sex and sexuality and many other issues such as gender-distinction and child-marriage. It is about an urban, middle-class joint family of Gopal and Sumi with their three daughters, Arunadhathi, Charulata and Seema. Gopal's walking away from his marital life makes all the members of the family face mental pain and suffering. Sumi, a victim of Gopal's desertion, lapses into a state of complete and utter silence. Sumi's parents, Shripati and Kalyani have been living in a strangely oppressive silence for more than thirty five years. Deshpande highlights the helplessness of an Indian woman and social compulsions imposed on her in a male-dominated society through what Sumi feels: "What is the woman without her husband? . . . Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? . . . Does this wifeness make up for everything . . . her *kumkum* is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife". (Deshpande 167). She, an optimist, strongly believes that the woman herself can solve her own problems, can manage her life as per her own desires and aspirations. She wants women to be as strong as Sumi managing her life with her daughters without her husband and as confident as Aru who says: "Yes, Papa, you go. We'll be all right, we'll be quite all right, don't worry about us". (246). She wants them to fight against injustice done to them in the name of gender-discrimination and marriage.

Small Remedies is a novel which artistically and realistically describes changes and transitions that occur in Indian society with changing time. It is a novel that works through a feminine sensibility and consciousness. Trapped between tradition and modernity, her sensitive heroines, including Madhu, in *Small Remedies*, are fully conscious of the fact that they are the victims of gender-discrimination prevalent in a conservative male-dominated society. Being a representative of a 'new' woman, she is concerned with the revelation of women's conduct, behaviour and existence in a male-dominated society. Savitribai and Leela represent 'new' Indian women who have courage, confidence, urge and ambition to rebel against the orthodox norms, beliefs, customs, and conventions of Indian society. Madhu, the protagonist, 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 conventional social restrictions and taboos.

Moving on is an exploration 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, self-assertion and development of individuality. It is a multi-generational story that moves around four generations with special focus on human relationships. The protagonist rebels against the oppressive patriarchal society, and the spirit of revolt provides her the right impetus, inspiration and motivation to move on with courage, confidence, determination and self-awareness. It is a story of Vasu, Badrinath's wife, who is characterized by silence, shyness, obedience, sincerity and honesty which are the very ornaments

of feminine sensibility. She has a strong desire to be liberal and independent as she is an ardent advocate and supporter of freedom. She expresses her anger at and avarice to a patriarchal society through the stories she writes. Writing becomes an important means for her to fight against her society that imposes many norms and restraints on the female. In a sense, she uses her writing as a means of social change and reform. Manjari, Vasu's daughter, too, opposes and reacts against the things which she doesn't like. She struggles for liberation and freedom. Towards the end of his life, Badrinath considers disobedience, revolt and rebellion an indication of growth and development. He says: "To me obedience is not the original sin; in fact, I don't see it a sin at all. It is a part of growing up, of moving on". (205). Manjari, after her husband, Shyam's death, tries her level best to be self-dependent and self-sufficient. She desires to look after her children, but the desires of her body begin to distract her attention and she gets involved in physical relationships with other men. She considers herself an optimist who believes in the potentiality of life and realizes that life, at any cost, has to move on and on.

In the country of Deceit is a novel that deals with the theme of extra-marital love and affairs. The story is about Devyani, an unmarried lady who falls in love with a married man much older than her. The first part of the novel describes how Devyani is living a free and independent life in her new house after the death of her mother. All her relatives including her married sister, Savita are trying to find her a suitable companion but she doesn't want to destroy her peace and independence by getting caught in the trap of a marriage. However, she meets Ashok, a married IPS officer, and gets attracted towards her. She ultimately enters into a physical relationship with him. Her relationship with Ashok is an oasis in her dreary life. She violates all established norms and conventions in the pursuit of happiness. After Ashok leaves her, she continues to move on with her life. Why do Indian women get involved in illicit physical relationships with men? Are they not conscious of ethics and its significance in human life? Actually, ethics itself is a dynamic idea that varies from time to time, and from person to person. The element of deceit and betrayal in Rani's love story constitutes the very theme of the novel. The novel projects different lifestyles, presenting in the end an idea of condemnation of a universal crime beyond redemption; and the reader is left wondering: is it the crime of love or that of deceit?

Deshpande's latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*, set in the city of Mumbai narrates a tale of an unlikely love between two unusual people – Aparna, an oncologist who strongly desires to alleviate her pain and agony, an inseparable part of her life, and Hari who is a rising star in the world of music, and whose life is controlled and governed only by his art of music. It primarily deals with the theme of love; love without which human life, life of the woman, in particular, is incomplete. Once frustrated in love in her life, Aparna, the woman protagonist, has lost her belief in a noble feeling of love. Since her frustration in love, she has been haunted by a sense of loss and failure. Love has no place, no scope in her life deeply rooted in loneliness and isolation. Realizing that she had mistaken the fake and deceptive for the true and real, she loses her confidence in herself, and her belief in the very idea of love. She feels that she has been deceived once and that it may happen again in her life. She is not ready to trust any man as well as her own judgement of a man. She, therefore, keeps herself away from love. However, her frequent meetings with Shree Hari Pandit bring out a total change in her life. Her unbearable loneliness and her growing realization that she is incomplete in herself, tempts her and she gets caught in the trap of love. She decides to move forward in her life with a renewed hope and desire.

Deshpande's novels emerge as a discovery of self-awareness and self-realization on the part of her female protagonists. They are a voice of protest against subjugation, suppression, oppression and exploitation of women who are truly victims of Indian patriarchy. Her women protagonists strive to be liberal and independent in thinking, decision-making, taking action, working and creating on the same terms as men. They strive to move in the direction of self-realization, self-examination and self-investigation. Deshpande has written her novels with a social purpose. Her basic intention is to create awareness among Indian women and to make them realize the strength of their self. She believes that this reawakening of the woman's consciousness will lead her to her realization of her 'self' and inner strength. She wants her women to be emotionally strong, courageous and confident; she wants them to solve their problems on their own and emerge as 'new' women who are free and independent in each and every respect. She wants them not give up or sacrifice their 'self' and 'individuality'. She has successfully created strong women protagonists who don't give themselves up to their personal tragedies, but who start their life anew and afresh on their own.

She gives a deep insight into the psyche and consciousness of middle-class Indian women who, initially oppressed and exploited in Indian patriarchy, do not want to be a mere shadow of their husbands, but desire to assert themselves by taking their own decisions all by themselves. They successfully emerge as human beings, full of determination and not yielding to the dictates of Indian patriarchy. In connection with Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, S. P. Swain remarks: "The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her job, thus defying male authority, hierarchy and the irony of a woman's masked existence. Her self-discovery is a frightening vision of the feminine self's struggle for harmony and sanity. She is able to discover her roots as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer". (Swain 95). Deshpande depicts the innermost feelings of her female protagonists, peeping deep into their mysterious self and their struggle to arrive at solutions to the problems relating to man-woman relationship in a male-dominated Indian society. She considers the woman an individual equal to man, as competent as man, with a lot of capabilities and potentials. Like men, she has every right to live her life independently and to take charge of her own destiny. She is confident enough to "expose, question and challenge the age-old traditions and prejudices in male-dominated society". (Kaur 15-20). She strives to seek new ways of dealing with her problems, realizing that the solutions lie within. Deshpande believes that the solution to the problem cannot be given; it is 'self-bound'; it is self-specific, individual-specific as it depends on the individuals concerned.

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