

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: A STUDY

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that women, who are physically and mentally equipped to perform on her with men, have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, but also deprived of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, their thoughts and their anguish. As Sushila Singh puts it: “Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life”. The feminist movement, which started in the West in the 1960s, went a long way in arresting the injustice meted out to women. There had been an abundance of feminist writing which preceded and followed this movement, but there is much still left to be done to wipe out the age-old prejudices and misconceptions regarding women.

Though Shashi Deshpande has emerged as a leading woman novelist on the Indian literary horizon, and won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *That Long Silence*, she has received the critical attention she deserves. The only book, *The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* by Sarabjit Sandhu, that has been published so far gives only a brief account of the image of woman, the study being confined to the early novels of Deshpande. Barring a few articles in some journals and books, there is no full-length study of Shashi Deshpande’s fiction especially from the feminist perspective. Hence for a close study is needed to understand the novels of Shashi Deshpande. The close study offers a fresh perspective for critical analysis, linking literature with real life situations.

The aim of this article is to evaluate the novels of Shashi Deshpande from a feminist perspective. Deshpande has gained reputation as a serious writer with tremendous potential. Most of Deshpande’s protagonists are women who are educated and exposed to Western ideas. The emotional upheavals in the minds of these women and their reactions to various issues related to women, caught between tradition and modernity, are susceptible to treatment from a feminist angle.

The woman of today stands poised on the threshold of social change in an unenviable position. She is intensely aware of the injustice heaped on her and unlike her counterpart a generation ago; she does not believe that woman in an inferior being that must remain passive and submissive. This awakening of the woman’s consciousness as delineated by Shashi Deshpande in her novels deserves a close study to assess the extent of articulation of a woman’s point of view. Hence the need for a close study of Shashi Deshpande’s novels as the products of feminism which offers a fresh perspective for critical analysis linking literature with real life situations.

The close study traces the origin, growth and development of feminism in the literary world, in general, and in Indian writing in English in particular Deshpande's view of feminism is studied while tracing the formative influences on her writing.

The first novel *Roots and Shadows* records the suffocation experienced by Indu in a society governed by the age-old customs and traditions. It also unmasks the protagonist of her garb of a liberated woman and exposes the hypocrisy of ostensibly progressive-minded men like Jayant, Indu's husband.

The second novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* describes the life of the protagonist, Saru, Deshpande highlights the trauma of a woman who is made the victim of her husband's frustrations because economically and socially she has achieved a superior status. The chapter also seeks to discuss the gender discrimination practiced by parents towards their children.

The third novel *That Long Silence* itself deals with the protagonist Jaya's passage through a maze of uncertainty and apprehension towards the assertion of herself. It reveals the trauma of an ostensibly contented housewife who is smothered under the weight of male-dominance.

Deshpande's fourth novel *The Binding Vine*, in which the author makes an attempt to venture into an area-the issue of martial rape-which, perhaps, has not been dealt with by any other Indian writer in English. It focuses attention on the victims of man's lust and woman's helplessness.

Deshpande's fifth novel *A Matter of Time*, which is different in theme and presentation from her earlier novels. In this novel, the author makes a successful attempt to present the story from the point of view of her male protagonist, thereby fulfilling her self-confessed desire to write of human beings and not of men or women.

The overall study highlights the feminist perspective in the novels of Deshpande. Operating within the framework of a male-dominated and tradition bound society, Deshpande's heroines are conscious of their predicament as victims of inequality. It is shown that Deshpande's depiction of her protagonists is realistic to the core in as much as she does not succumb to the temptation of creating exceptionally strong women characters that revolt against conventional morality. Deshpande seems to write about the middle-class Indian women and their feelings, not as their champion but as their articular.

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