Chapter – VII

SUMMATION
Indian English Fiction has been rendered a marvelous history by the tremendous dedication and devotion of the predecessors and successors of its greatness and it is as astounding as Indian Culture and Heritage. As an Indian Novelist writing in English, Shashi Deshpande’s reputation has been on the rise. Writing seems to happen to her accidentally as she told in an interview:

My husband was a Commonwealth scholar and we went to England. We were there for a year. I thought it would be a pity if I forget all our experiences there. So I started writing them down and gave them to my father. He gave them to ‘Deccan Herald,’ which published them promptly. So it began very accidentally.

Her first publication that launched her career as a writer was a collection of short stories, *The Legacy* in 1978. Acknowledging her talent as a writer, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *That Long Silence* in the year 1991. Another two of her novels-The *Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows*-have also received major awards. Her writings are read and appreciated both at home and abroad. For instance, *The Legacy* has been prescribed for the graduate students in Columbia University. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has been translated into a number of Indian and foreign languages. Though she began her writing career late, she has proved herself to be a competent writer, drawing her characters from the culture and society, which she had known very intimately.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande explore the life of an Indian woman with socio-cultural and psycho-ethical paradigms of human existence. Her female protagonists often make struggle to search out new identities but they simultaneously make efforts to confirm themselves with the conventions of family and society. Most of her characters make confession of their desires in which there is an argument that synthesizing the instinctive sexual desire is with the emotional fulfillment. They stand at the cross-roads of tradition and see change but within the cultural norms, and seek not to reinterpret them but merely to make them alive with dignity and self-respect.
As a novelist, Shashi Deshpande’s forte lies in her realistic presentation of the life of women in general and the educated, modern, middle-class women in particular. She successfully makes an attempt to explore the inner ‘psyche’ of these modern women who are at the crossroads between tradition and transitional thinking. She realistically presents the dilemma of these educated women who are struggling between the age-old traditional values, inflicted on them right from their childhood and the modern outlook they recently acquired from their education. Their condition seems to be worse than their past counterparts and those of present who still believe in these customs and traditions to which they submit themselves without any hesitation. Their problem lies in their inability to discard these traditional values at once and follow their newly acquired values. Most of her novels reflect predicaments and struggles of this breed of women.

Shashi Deshpande as a feminist writer projects women’s lives and problems from the perspective of a woman. Her feminism, as already discussed, is quite different from Western radical feminism which often considers man as the root of women’s suffering, oppression and deprivation. She neither believes in the concept that her women characters should go out of their way, shouting slogans, protesting and revolting against men nor blaming men as the sole cause of women’s subordination and suffering.

Her writings reflect delicate issues like rape within and without marriage, gender disparities and various problems faced by women as a group in a male-dominated society, yet they are far from being prejudiced and biased as often found in some writings of both men and women when they write about their opposite sex. She points out women’s blind spots along with that of their male counterparts. Such objective and realistic representation of women helps us to study and analyze women’s genuine problems, their causes and remedies from a fresh perspective. This is one very significant achievement and contribution of Shashi Deshpande as a novelist.

The researcher has also endeavored to study Shashi Deshpande’s concerns and predilections as a novelist. The interplay of the past and the present, using first and third person narrations is an effective technique employed by the novelist. This technique enables the novelist to represent women’s life and sufferings realistically.
and objectively which is also her main preoccupation. Because of this, her treatment of women characters is clouded with darkness, but a close look reveals the silver lining too. If she depicts a dark picture of the contemporary women’s lives extensively, it may be because she would like to mirror the actual happenings and conditions of the society where women are subjected to hardships and suffering. Here she seems to share the views of Joyce Carol Oates when she says, regarding the task of an artist, “I wish the world were a prettier place but I wouldn’t be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me.” (qtd. Sushila Singh, *Feminism, Theory, Criticism, Analysis*, p.131)

The novelist’s attempt to deconstruct man-made ideas, rules and system is also made. Men of all ages, consciously or unconsciously, conspire to relegate and push women to the margin while they enjoy every advantage and privilege at the centre. In our country, because of the social and traditional factors, women’s exploitation is multi-layered. Shashi Deshpande like Anita Desai focuses mainly on the disturbed and hypersensitive women of middle class and Shobha De who exposes the reality, plight and prejudices of elite class women, unfolds the sexual politics at all levels and in all sections of the society.

The study has attempted to study the novelist’s awareness of women’s problems and predicaments, their said and unsaid thoughts and feelings, their dilemmas, hopes and frustrations as reflected in her novels. As a woman writer, she tries to unfold the untold stories of women, especially those belonging to the middle class who is walking on the tightrope between tradition and transitional thinking. These educated, young women are highly aware of the prevailing customs and traditions that bind them and also deeply conscious of their rights as individuals. As a result, they live an ambivalent and self-contradictory life. They suffer mainly because they are trapped in a puzzling maze created by the labyrinths of traditional and modern values and outlooks. Their inner conflict and their battle within create a lot of tension, confusion and frustration that force them to live a life of suppression and alienation.

Alienation is another factor that keeps human relationships strangulated in modern society. Edmund Fuller rightly states, “Man suffers not only from wars, persecution, famine and ruin but from inner problems-isolation, randomness and
meaninglessness in his way of existence.” (qtd. L. Manjula Davidson, *Alienation in Indian Novels in English*, vol. 20 p. 19) In Deshpande’s novels, the theme of alienation is widely dispersed, especially in her later novels *A Matter of Time* and *Moving On*. One of the main causes of alienation is lack of communication.

Modern civilization has brought news from far off corners of the world within seconds but we fail to know what happens to our near and dear ones and next door neighbors who have been with us for years. Women protagonists in the novels of Shashi Deshpande suffer from double alienation—alienation from self and alienation from others/society. They are alienated from their selves as they are torn apart between the traditional norms and their modern concepts. The second alienation from others/society may be attributed to their lack of participation, initiation and communication. For example, Sarita and Manohar in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* might have solved their problems and differences, had Sarita opened and talked to her husband in time.

The exclusion of women in important discussions and activities in and outside family, marriage, childbirth, strict role-division between men and women, separate social and moral codes of conduct, etc. further alienate women. Thus women’s alienation culminates in their identity crisis. To combat such alienation and identity crisis, Shashi Deshpande seems to suggest the need to have solidarity among women, instead of their being hostile to one another, and build male-female bonding with understanding for a better and more secure life for both, based on common welfare besides encouraging women to share things, take initiatives, to communicate and participate in domestic and social activities. Both men and women should try to bridge the gap instead of building walls between them as done by Shripati and his wife Kalyani in *A Matter of Time* who have not been on talking terms for more than thirty-five years.

Women need moral support from their men in their attempt to liberate themselves. Geeta, in Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*, perhaps, goes through everything and manages to reform the traditional people of the ‘Haveli’ slowly but surely in her own way because she gets the much-needed support, encouragement and understanding of her husband who says:
I know, it is difficult for you here, but, Geeta, by being depressed, you will not change things.... This life in purdah is not meant for you. Help me to try and see what you could do in this atmosphere. You must always have confidence in me that I will support you in whatever you decide to do. (Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*, pp.52-53)

Unfortunately, Shashi Deshpande’s heroines do not have such understanding husbands and they find consolation and companionship in other men. This leads them to develop extra-marital affairs with other men as in the cases of Sarita and Boozie in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu and Naren in *Roots and Shadows*, Jaya and Kamat in *That Long Silence*, Urmila and Bhasker in *The Binding Vine*, though the novelist does not let such an extra marital relationship go further and develop into a full-fledged one. The revelation of Boozie as a gay, the sudden and untimely deaths of Naren and Kamat and the conscious departure of Urmil seem to say that the novelist does not consider such relationships as ideal alternatives.

The focus is on how Shashi Deshpande’s women characters react and respond to various oppressive systems of patriarchy as they have experienced growth and development of their personality from being immature, inexperienced to mature, experienced individuals. First, like stem feminists, the protagonists are ready to smite everything that threatens their independence. In the second phase, they suffer from post-marriage syndromes-submissiveness, timidity, selfless sacrifice and total silence-syndromes most married women in Indian society undergo.

They imprison their educated and modern outlook in their self-created shells and follow the dictates of the society much against their will. They are not happy and satisfied with their life as they feel suffocated because of their bottled-up emotions and feelings. They take a long time before they finally self-examine and attain self-discovery, which according to the novelist is the basis of women’s emancipation, and this constitutes the last phase of the growth of their personality.

The researcher studies and analyzes various problems and predicaments faced by women, how and why women are being suppressed and victimized in our society. As discussed in the earlier chapter, the novelist is highly sensitive to the inequalities
and injustices meted out to women in the name of culture and tradition. In assuming new roles or new altitudes towards old roles, they break the mental barriers, which they had initially built around themselves.

The novelist realizes that women as a group suffer not because of their sex but because of the social and cultural attitudes attached to their sex by the patriarchal society. Women’s suffering starts from womb and ends in their tombs. Most of the problems arise because men are not ready to accept women as their fellow beings, companions and individuals, other than being their daughters, wives and mothers. The need to deconstruct and dismantle such traditional and outdated mindset of people, both educated and uneducated alike that reduces women to merely sexual objects, childbearing machines and twenty-four hours help-maids has been emphasized in her novels.

Further, the researcher also discusses how the novels of Shashi Deshpande expose various social, cultural and gender inequalities in all sections of the society. An in-depth study of how social and religious institutions perpetuate women’s victimization in a country like India has also been made. Marriage, for example, becomes bondage where women have to surrender and sacrifice endlessly, even their names and surnames, habits, hopes and aspirations, careers, etc. Preference of male child and negligence of girl child is very much prevalent in the society. One important reason for this may be the financial factor as already discussed. Parents have to spend a lot of money on bringing them up, educating them and finally getting them married without any return.

On the other hand, they enrich themselves with the money or the dowry they get from their son’s marriage. If women are earning, the attitudes towards them may change in the course of time. In this way, women can be equally responsible on both domestic and social fronts. Only then the preference for male child will be replaced. Here the novelist stresses the importance of education that would change and question the age-old man-made concepts and notions that were to magnify man’s image by relegating women to secondary status.
Many eminent personalities and feminists emphasize imparting of education as the solution to most problems of life faced by women (and men). We need the kind of education that creates awareness and consciousness among women of the existing social and cultural imbalance. Acquiring degrees and bookish knowledge should not be the only aim of education. Education should be able to change men and women internally and externally, and be able to achieve socially beneficial goals for both men and women. Women’s education will bring about changes in the society while making them aware of their rights and privileges, and of their role and responsibility in the society, and of removing social evils and gender discrimination. Swami Vivekananda once said:

Educate your women first and leave them for we want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one’s own feet. With such education women will solve their own problems. (qtd. Prasanna Sree, R.K. Dhawan Indian Women Novelists vol.4, p.18)

Education is all the more important for women to face the multi-layered problems and sufferings they have gone through under patriarchy. They have been excluded and isolated from various private and public activities for ages, and education is the only outlet from their secluded life. What African feminist Buchi Emecheta writes about African women is applicable to all women, emphasizing the role of women in the family and society: “I want very much to further the education of women in Africa, because I know that education really helps them to rear a generation. It is true that if one educates a woman, one educates a community: whereas if we educate a man one educates a man”. (qtd. Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, p.96)

Unlike most of Anita Desai’s heroines who, unable to face the harsh realities of life and the subjective treatment under patriarchy, seek to find an escape either by committing suicide as in the case of Maya in Cry, The Peacock, Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? or seeking space outside the society by residing in a secluded place as in the case of Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain, Shashi Deshpande’s heroines do not seem to believe in this narrow freedom if one can call it freedom at
all. They search for a broader and deeper freedom demanding their place and position in the society almost equal to their male counterparts. In fact, each of her protagonists has struggled for a long time, undergone the birth-pangs before she finally gives birth to a new liberated self. Here, liberation does not mean walking out of relationship, marriage or society as Shashi Deshpande, when asked why her women, who are so troubled by patriarchy, don’t rebel, replies:

The problem is that rebelling is generally understood to mean walking out on a marriage (the echoes of the door Nora banged behind her seem to haunt us!) the problem lies in thinking that walking out is a liberating process. Whereas, to me, it is always clear that an understanding of oneself is what really liberates, it is this that opens out a number of possibilities. To walk out, or away, is to carry the old self with oneself. (*Writing from the Margin and other Essays*, p.159)

It is observed that Shahsi Deshpande’s women characters constantly fight not only against the oppressive system outside but also within themselves with their inner conflicts. Towards the end of the novels, these women come out of their inner turmoil and are ready to face anyone and any situation without any fear, insecurity and hesitation. All her novels end with hope not for just survival but for living a meaningful and better life.

Most of the protagonists engage themselves, at the very beginning of her novels, in introspection of their past lives; they study and analyze their problems and at the end, they discover their true self. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has been afraid and frightened of the dark, of failure and rejection. She turns her back to the problems and silently endures with constant fear. At last, she is no longer afraid of the dark, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* as she asserts herself.

In Roots and Shadows, Indu is able to realize towards the end that the house has been a trap, binding her to the past, she has to move from (here, the house becomes the symbol of old values and tradition). She is able to find her 'roots' as an individual and differentiate them from the ‘shadows’ she has been clinging to all the past years. She feels free but not detached as she has “cut away all the unnecessary,
uneven edges” (p.44). At last, she too, is able to assert herself and drive away all kinds of fear: "How can I live without fear . . . fears of being unloved, misjudged, misunderstood, displeasing. “Without the fear of failure” (p.44).

In the same way, Jaya is able to break “That Long Silence” and head for a better life, full of hope and positive thoughts as she says, "But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible (p.193). In The Binding Vine, Urmi who has been grieving over the death of her baby daughter discovers the suffering of others—of her long dead mother-in-law, of Akka, of Kalpana, Shakutai, Sulu, etc. In spite of all their suffering, they are bound by “The Binding Vine” of love and compassion. This novel explores the theme of female solidarity to a greater extent.

The novel, A Matter of Time also ends with love, sympathy and compassion. Aru finally accepts her father's wandering life with “dignity and strength.” (p.42) In Small Remedies, as the title suggests, the protagonist Madhu, who has been in great despair over the death of her only son Aditya, is able to find some “small remedies” that can heal the wounds and sufferings of life. Moving On ends with a desire of the protagonist, Jiji, to move on with life despite so many deaths and sufferings.

Self-discovery and self-realization become very important as that can turn the whole situation. All this leads to a new beginning, a new life with hopes. Whether they will be successful or not in their battle of life, whether their solution to their problems are right or wrong, is not what the novelist is trying to project; hers is to show their will, determination and spirit to have a good fight against all odds. Like a true soldier, they prepare themselves for the battles of life without relying on others. To have and develop such spirit is what is needed for our society.

As it is observed, all the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are well-educated and most of them are economically independent when the novels open, but they are still subjected to sexual violence, gender discrimination, unequal and unjust treatment in the society before they attain self-realization and liberate themselves. This infers that being educated and financially independent is not the only requisite for attainment of women’s emancipation, especially in a society like that of India where women’s oppression is often multi-layered and discussed.
Most Indian women novelists are concerned with the depiction of women’s suffering—women as a sexual group. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De highlight women's plight, women of all castes and classes. For example, Mikki in Shobha De’s *Sisters* suffers very badly, in spite of her education and financial position, at the dominating hands of her husband, Binny Malhotra. What the husband says very proudly by quoting the family’s tradition while he himself enjoys many affairs may be observed:

> In our family women are trained to obey their husbands . . . you will never I repeat, never, question me or complain where I go, what I do, when and with whom, is my business . . . your job is to look beautiful. I told you that when I married you. Buy clothes. Buy jewellery. Go to the beauty parlour. Play bridge. Learn golf. Attend cooking classes. That is all. But no question— you don’t have the right. (Shobha De’s *Sisters*, p.113)

The same age-old notions and attitudes are still observed by both men and women, educated or uneducated. Hence there is a need to change such out-dated and gender-based ideas.

The study also explores the novelist’s efforts to bring to light women's victimization, marginalization and exploitation at all levels—physical, psychological, emotional, social, political, cultural and domestic—under patriarchy. She goes on to expose how from laymen to the most revered learned men of all ages, barring a few, consciously or unconsciously join hands in degrading women with the ideas, opinions and institutions formulated and established by them. The novelist also shows how men and women today are victims of such biased visions and discrepancies. The novelist’s sympathetic and objective treatment of her male characters drives home the point that Shashi Deshpande’s feminism does not target individual men but exposes the system.

Shashi Deshpande’s awareness of women’s life and problems makes her probe into the depth of their psyche so troubled by patriarchy and also by their own follies and weaknesses as individuals. She seems to urge women to assert themselves, raise
their voice and fight against all forms of oppression in the way best suited to their situation instead of bearing it stoically and silently. They should learn to say “no” and put a full stop to their suffering. Self-examination and introspection of how, where and why they went wrong would be the road to women’s self-discovery.

It is high time women learned to rely on themselves as individuals instead of depending on their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, though there is room for mutual help and co-operation between men and women. Yes, it is true that patriarchal system binds them and curbs their freedom but it is up to them whether they would submit to it or fight against it. For this, women need proper education, economic independence and self-reliance. In the end, women like Saru, Indu, Jaya, Urmia, Sumi, Madhu and Jiji are able to liberate themselves from the clutches of patriarchy and their self-created shells because they attain all the above-mentioned qualities but sadly there are so many Shakutai’s, Sulu’s, Jeeja’s, Nayana’s etc. who are still struggling and suffering because of the lack of the same.

Lastly, Shashi Deshpande as a feminist writer bears no stamp of a separatist stance. She is quite different from radical and militant feminists that discard all established social and cultural values. Her reaction and opposition does not target social institutions like marriage or roles like motherhood, but the endless restrictions and constraints, the strict role-division, numerous expectations, surrender and sacrifices imposed on women by the patriarchy. As a woman novelist, Deshpande realizes the impracticability of planting Western Feminism in Indian soil. Her feminism is moderate, considerate and sensible and context-bound.

Her emphasis on the need to stay within relationship and at the same time her insistence on being self-independent, her attempts to synthesize tradition and modernity and reorientation of modern Feminism in conformity with Indian culture for a well-balanced, meaningful and harmonious relationship between men and women in the society by dismantling all imbalances earn her a niche among the Indian women writers writing in English. The significance, relevance and practicability of her feminist concern, reflected in her novels and the humanistic and universal approaches to which she is committed, invariably underscore the success of Shashi Deshpande as a novelist.
Her novels expose sexist biases and discriminations faced by women. Her rational thinking believes in abolishing the said inequality and gender-roles assigned to women, and motivating them to discover their hidden potential. She is aware of the constricting forces of social norms which suppress the female voice in the middle class society. The novelist has highlighted the plight of the middle class Indian women who are carriers of both the ethnic and moral values of Indian society.

As educated and modern women, they find a void in their lives and a feeling of incompleteness in them due to the dogmas associated with the female world. Their economic independence helps them to analyze their plight and put them on the path of liberation from social and traditional exploitation. This is the unique contribution of Shashi Deshpande to the contemporary Indian English literature. Her conceptualization of feminism and its delineation in her novels is basically Indian. She has taken up the problems faced by average middle class women and has convincingly represented them in her fictional works. As a writer she has exposed the oblivious attitude of the society towards the predicament of women. She points out to Geetha Gangadharam in an interview:

“We have women going about with ghunghat on their faces. And women who have no choice even to decide about having children. We have many people who still advocate Sati, who consider dowry a necessity, who count it a loss when a girl is born and profit when a boy is born. It is this abysmal difference that I want to do away with, as a feminist. We all have a certain inherent potential, within us, maybe for different things, but we have a right to put it to use” (p.254).

This belief is shared by other feminist writers and critics too. Simone de Beauvoir believes that the societal mores are unfavorable towards the emancipation of women. She states in The Second Sex, “As long as complete economic equality is not realized in the society and as long as the mores authorize women to profit as wife or mistress from the privileges held by certain men, so long will her dream of unearned success remain and hamper her own accomplishment” (p.98).
The novels of Shashi Deshpande have stated various factors, which are responsible for women’s subjugation and suppression. They are: to rear a girl-child by inculcating feminine traits, gender discrimination-acceptance of being the second sex, traditional system of marriage-leading to an identity-crisis, sexploitation, stifling conventional norms and establishing the monopoly of male dictum. The novelist reflects the strange incoherence manifested by the idea of femininity. The upbringing of girl-children introduces them to their femininity. It is at this stage that they realize the difference of being a girl.

Almost all the middle-class Indian girls have to endure the humiliating experience of gender- discrimination which makes them feel inferior to the extent that they sometimes develop revulsion towards their own femininity. They get so terribly accustomed to concealment and suppression that they accept themselves as the weaker sex born to serve and submit. The customs imposing restrictions with the attainment of puberty, and humiliations associated with it add to their frustration. The rudimentary stage of girlhood daubs their psyche with reticence, patience and silence.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels unhesitatingly propagate and prove that the social conditioning is responsible for reducing women to a secondary status in the society. Her work also exposes the complex and complicated system of traditional Indian marriages. These marriages are consummated on the basis of dowry system without seeking the consent of the girls who submit to their parents’ decision and accept the proposal without exhibiting any desire, as they have been conditioned to accept marriage as the ultimate goal of their lives. The whole patriarchal system overlooks their existence and marginalizes their power of expression. Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande advocates a change in the society is required where a girl should be reared up, dealt with and treated as a human being first rather than as a girl or woman always.

It is a fact that the woman of today no longer wants to be a Cinderella, a Lachingada, and a Madison. But she wants to be Kalpana Chawla, Bachendari Pal and Kiran Bedi etc. who have touched the crest of success. Today, the suppressed female voice is articulated. To a certain extent, the dignity of women is affirmed. She has a greater share of social responsibility and a greater readiness, to author her own authority.
The woman of today is educated and exposed to Western thoughts. She is extremely aware of the prejudice heaped on her. She does not believe that woman is an inferior being in any way and must remain passive and submissive. She is waking up to the releasing knowledge that there is more to life than dependency on husband or parents and social acceptance. The woman is self-sufficient in all aspects. The only need for woman is to feel self-assured, assert herself be self-reliant and have holistic-solidarity. The biggest inadequacy for women empowerment is no other than the lack of solidarity among them. They do not bond with one another. Charlotte Whitten, a feminist rightly said, “Whatever women do, they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult.”

Thus, Shashi Deshpande creates through her fiction, the new woman moving towards freedom and has been trying to learn bonding with one another. She concentrates on the theme of meaninglessness and sexual confusion suffered by her in tradition-oriented society, asserting thereby that the inequality of sexes is neither a biological given, nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct. She is aware that her life is a succession of traps created by mothers, lovers and finally herself, by accepting the confinement of marriage. She is for self-fulfillment and full development of woman’s varied faculties-physical, emotional, moral, and intellectual.