

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

A close study of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals her enormous sympathy for women and their travail, provoking reviewers and critics to assume that she has joined the group of feminist writers who have achieved much popularity in the West. She, however, does not approve of being labelled a feminist writer. Though Deshpande refuses to be called a feminist writer, her novels are susceptible to a feminist approach. She has a remarkable insight into the working of a woman's mind. As a writer she highlights the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation which is inevitable in a male-dominated society. She gives us a peep into the state of condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male-chauvinism.

Though Deshpande writes for women, presents their problems, lets the world know the problems that women of today are facing, yet she cannot be categorised among feminist writers. She, in an interview with Vanamala Vishwanatha, makes it clear that "hers is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as a cause of all troubles."¹ Rather her writings deal with the inner mind of the women.

Education and experience in foreign countries sets the women writers apart from the traditional Indian women. The traditional Indian

women suffer, submit and adjust themselves to the circumstances. The women novelists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala have in their novels, portrayed this aspect of women's life without having the first hand experience of it. Shashi Deshpande has projected this aspect of Indian women with more sensitivity and instinctive understanding as she belongs to this category, in the sense that, unlike other women writers, she is born and brought up on this soil, gained her education in India itself and wrote about India. The projection of the women world in her novels is more authentic, credible and realistic. She knows what Indian women feel. Shashi Deshpande does not want to be categorised with other writers of Indian writing in English. She has a unique place among the novelists writing in English. She declares that she is just like any other regional writer but her medium of writing happens to be English, as it is the only language she knows well. Explaining her position, Shashi Deshpande says:

I'm isolated—I'm not part of any movement and not conscious of readers to impress. To get wider recognition here and abroad, you have to be in the university and places like that with the right contacts. I'm an ordinary woman who writes sitting at home. None of these things are within my reach. This has, I believe, done me good. It has given me great freedom. I'm happy with this anonymity. Once you get publicity-conscious, your writing becomes affected. I'm truly happy with this freedom.²

Deshpande writes not for publicity, but to mirror the society as she observes it. She is least bothered about name and fame. That is the

reason why in spite of the fact that she has been writing for quite a long period, she still was unknown to many until her novel *The Long Silence* got published by the Virago Feminist Press, London. She says:

It's meaningless that people know me as a person and not know what I've written. I feel publicity is not a good thing for a writer. It detracts from your work. You become more interested in yourself as a person than as a writer. I'd rather be known for my books than for myself.³

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's search for her identity—an exploration into the female psyche. Her protagonists undergo a hard journey to discover themselves and this leads them through a maze of self-doubts and fears. In her novels she depicts woman in myriad roles—wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right.

In all her novels except *Come Up and Be Dead*, the protagonists are married women. So her depiction of woman as wife requires special mention. According to Rani Dharkar, "the importance that our society attaches to marriage is reflected in our literature. It is the central concern of Deshpande whose heroines, caught in the quagmire of marriage, struggle to come up for air."⁴ Perhaps, marriage is the most complex of human relationships. *The Dictionary of Sociology* defines marriage as a "cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring."⁵ Marriage is not simply a social institution. It is inextricably linked to religion, and religion, being a potent force in our country, determines more or less the code of conduct in marital relationships.

Almost all the religions of the world give sanction to female subjugation by the male members of society, thereby perpetuating the myth of female servitude. The Bible tells the woman: "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord."⁶

The ancient Hindu law-giver, Manu, whose philosophy occupies a prominent place in the mainstream of Hindu ideology and culture, proclaims: "Even though the husband be of bad character and seek pleasure elsewhere he must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife."⁷ Thus, it is clear that since the beginning of time woman has been given an inferior position in society. It is also obvious that woman has been defined most exclusively in her role as wife. This view is substantiated by Susan Wadley who, in her essay, "Women and the Hindu Tradition," says: "The dominant norm for the Hindu woman concern her role as wife. Classical Hindu laws focus almost exclusively on this aspect of the woman. Role models and norms for mothers, daughters, sisters etc., are less prominent and are more apt to appear in folklore and vernacular tradition."⁸

Shashi Deshpande presents the inequalities and injustice heaped on woman because of her subordinate status. In *Roots and Shadows*, through Indu, the protagonist, we are made aware of the plight of various women like *Kakis* and *Atyas*. The heart-rending tale of *Akka's* child marriage reveals the appalling condition of women barely a couple of generation ago. The inferior position of a wife in any marriage is made obvious through glimpses into the marriage of Indu's numerous aunts and uncles. It is clear that Indu, who, is proud of her liberated outlook, becomes a victim of age-old tradition and

unreasonable convention. Deshpande also exposes the hypocrisy prevalent in the so-called urban, educated men like Jayant who are influenced by the West and who pretend to possess progressive ideas, but are, in reality, as chauvinistic and fettered to time-worn conventions as their less educated and exposed counterparts. He belongs to a society which prides itself on its sophistication and refinement, but at home he remains a conventional husband expecting his wife to play a very submissive role.

Saru's husband, Manohar, in *That Long Silence*, is a nice example of men with fragile egos, who find it difficult to accept the superior status of their wives in society. Deshpande also holds society responsible for the worst condition of Saru's marriage. Manu, who already suffers from an inferiority complex, is further humiliated by the sarcastic remarks of his colleague's wife and those of the girl who interviews Saru.

Mohan, Jaya's husband in *That Long Silence*, is a typical Indian husband who takes his wife's support for granted. When threatened with charges of corruption, he expects his wife to follow him into hiding without a murmur of protest. He does not mind using his wife as a crutch in his hour of crisis and the slightest hint of deviation from her role of a subservient wife is enough to provoke a terrifying outburst with which he walks out of the home. Deshpande also shows how Jaya herself is to be blamed for the state of her marriage. In retrospection, Jaya realizes how she had followed her Vanita mami's advice that a husband is like a 'sheltering tree' which must be kept alive at any cost because without the tree the wife becomes unprotected and vulnerable.

Jaya thinks that she has “to keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.”⁹

Deshpande makes a bold attempt to tackle the subject of marital-rape in her novel *The Binding Vine*. Through the character of Mira, she focuses attention on all those women who silently suffer nightly assault by their husbands because the idea of a woman protesting against the sexual assault by her husband is not paid attention in our society. Deshpande also hints at the lack of compatibility in Urmi’s marriage even though hers is a love marriage. Through the character of Shakutai, Shashi Deshpande shows how at the lower level of society, marital vows are flouted most casually by men like Shakutai’s husband. He is good-for-nothing drunkard who leaves his wife and three children to fend for themselves and hankers after another woman.

The women of Shashi Deshpande are of monogamous nature, which is clear from most of her works. In most of her stories, the protagonist shares a greater level of compatibility with a man other than her husband. This compatibility often leads towards crossing of the boundary of platonic friendship and progresses towards physical attraction. However, Deshpande’s women do not overstep the limits of propriety except in the case of Indu in *Roots and Shadows* who resorts to an extra-marital relationship with Naren in an attempt to assert herself.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru meets her former class-mate Padmakar Rao and the renewal of their friendship seems to border on an affair. Padmakar Rao who reveals dissatisfaction with his wife tries to lure Saru into a relationship. Vulnerable though she is, with the horrifying nocturnal assaults by her husband, Saru refuses to accept the

advances made by Padmakar Rao. She is however not averse to being flaunted around by Boozie who, she is aware, is using her as a cover to his homosexuality.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya finds a perfect match in Kamat, a widower who lives in a flat above hers. He is well-read, and a good critic. So he is able to offer her constructive criticism with regard to her writing. She is perfectly at ease in his company and confides all her problems in him. She is never made to suffer any condescension in his company and this sets him apart from all the other men she has known in her life. With the passage of time, their friendship progresses towards physical attraction, but Jaya controls herself and suppresses her desires, in spite of the ample opportunity provided in the seclusion of his apartment. Jaya is conscious of safeguarding her marriage. She does not go to pay homage when Kamat is found dead in his flat.

Similarly, Urmī's association with Dr. Bhaskar in *The Binding Vine* develops into more than a platonic relationship. Urmī, whose husband is a naval officer and away for many months in a year, yearns at times for physical gratification. Dr. Bhaskar's self-admitted interest in her and her own attraction towards him offer her an opportunity to indulge in a physical union. But she refuses to let herself be involved into an extra-marital affair.

Another recurrent relationship in Deshpande's novel is that between a mother and a daughter. Love and devotion to the mother is an integral part of the Indian psyche. Mythologies and literatures since long past have always glorified the mother figure. Much has been written about mother's selfless love for her children. However, the

preference for a son is as old as Indian society itself. A wife becomes glorified when she gives birth to a boy. Vedic verses pray that sons should be followed by more sons, not by the daughters. A prayer in the *Atharvaveda* reads:

The birth of a girl grants it elsewhere, here grant a son.

Of course, there are religious and economic reasons behind such an attitude. The presence of a son is necessary to perform many rituals, the most important ones being those that are carried out upon the death of the parents and which are considered imperative for the well being of their souls. The daughter has not only a negligible ritual significance but is also considered an enormous financial burden inasmuch as she does not contribute to the family income and instead takes away a heavy dowry.

But despite the yearning of all mothers to have sons, a mother's love for her daughter cannot be denied. Sudhir Kakar in an article "Feminine Identity in India" says that "the special maternal affection reserved for daughters, contrary to expectations derived from social and cultural prescriptions, is partly to be explained by the fact that another's unconscious identification with her daughter is normally stronger than with her son."¹⁰ Shashi Deshpande's protagonists never seem to be on cordial terms with their mothers. In *Roots and Shadows* Indu's mother dies in childbirth and so, there is no revelation of the mother-daughter relationship. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, this relationship has a significant place. The entire novel revolves around Saru's relationship with her mother. It is Saru's antagonism towards her mother and her rejection of the age-old traditional values

represented by her that drive Saru into the arms of Manohar. During her puberty, Saru develops an aversion to all traditional practices because of her mother's indifferent attitude. She studies medicine to displease her mother and later marries out of caste to defy her. Even on her deathbed, Saru's mother has only curses for her daughter. Saru, in turn, does not notice any warm feelings of her daughter in her recollections, though she makes sure to provide her daughter with all the material comforts and luxuries that she herself has been denied.

In *That Long Silence*, there is no overt display of hostility between Jaya and her mother. It is evident that they do not share the same level of cordiality as Jaya and her father. Like Saru, Jaya too agrees to marry Mohan at the slightest hint of disapproval from her mother, and like her again she does not seem to have any strong maternal feelings towards her daughter. In a couple of instances, Jaya displays a stronger attachment towards her son. This leads critic Subhash K. Jha to comment, "being intellectually equipped to scrutinize male prejudice, she (Jaya) still reveals an unmistakable partiality towards her son. The daughter is a mere blur in the narration, while the son (the heir apparent, the procreator) is described in glowing terms."¹¹

In *The Binding Vine*, it is clear that there is no compatibility between the sophisticated Inni and her daughter, Urmi, the protagonist. At one point, in a choked and guilt-laden voice, Inni burst out that Urmi had been sent to Ranidurg as a child to be brought up by her grandparents, because Urmi's father did not approve of the way his wife was bringing up the child. Shakutai also shares a love-hate

relationship with her daughter, Kalpana. She keeps vacillating between praising her daughter and blaming her for the catastrophe.

These descriptions reveal that the relationship between mother and daughter in Deshpande's fiction is far from being warm-hearted. Adele King rightly comments: "In all Deshpande's work there is no mother who could serve as a model for the daughter."¹² In an interview to Vanamala Vishwanath, Shashi Deshpande admits that she does not believe in painting a rosy picture of motherhood. She says:

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 writing what I don't agree with is the idealization of motherhood – the false and sentimental notes that accompany it.¹³

Therefore, Deshpande rejects the stereotyped image of mother and refuses to use any mawkishly sentimental language to describe the mother-child relationship.

A study of Deshpande's novels from a feminist viewpoint also reveals the essential loneliness of the heroines boarding on alienation. In the *The Dark Holds No Terrors* where Saru as a child grows up almost resenting her mother, while her father remains a shadowy figure in the background. The man she falls in love with and marries, eventually turns out to be a psychological wreck with whom she cannot have a meaningful relationship. Her guru, Boozie, turns out to be homosexual who had been merely using her as a pawn to hide his sexual

preferences. Padmakar has his own selfish reasons for wanting to develop a more intimate relationship with her. He likes to meet her because he finds no companionship in his wife who cannot think beyond mundane needs of everyday life. In her disillusionment, Saru thinks, "Love...how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against futilely, the very futility turning into the thing they called love."¹⁴ Saru's own children are described as quite indifferent to mother, and Saru herself does not indulge in any sentimental feelings towards them.

In *The Long Silence* too, Jaya stands alone in her hour of crisis. It is evident that after seventeen years of marriage, Jaya's relationship with Mohan goes no deeper than physical attachment. Her relationship with the other members of her family remains superficial and she seems to derive no satisfaction even from her children. Initially she takes interest in physical attachment but she feels bored when it becomes a routine and mechanical affair. She feels that "love is a myth without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unbearable."¹⁵

In *A Matter of Time* the theme of alienation is more pronounced. The author quotes extensively from the *Upanishads* to explain the sense of ruthlessness experienced by the protagonist, Gopal, who abandons his wife and daughters for some inexplicable reason. The author also describes the pain and humiliation of Sumi, his wife, who copes with the situation admirably and tries to provide emotional and financial security for her daughters.

Deshpande's latest novel *Small Remedies* examines the lives of two women Savitribai Indorekar and Leela. These women are highly conscious of their public image. They are against social customs and traditions. Leela defies conventional norms and remarries after her widowhood. Savitribai Indorekar also walks on her family and elopes with her table accompanist. Although in portraying the struggles of these women for identity, no overt postures of feminism are struck.

Shashi Deshpande's frank discussion on a wide range of topics concerning women has promoted several reviewers to categorize her as a feminist. A close study of her work also reveals that she is highly sensitive writer who is aware of the male-female imbalance in society. Her male characters conform to the feminist description of a middle-class husband who is insensitive, egoistic and often over-ambitious. But at the same time, most of her women characters too suffer from same weakness or other so much so that it becomes difficult to level her work.

The term 'feminism' itself is a broader term, which has a broader definition. In a simple term it is a movement to support the demand for equal, social, political and economic rights with men. Feminism connotes not only an awareness of women's plight but also a determination to change the situation. The treatise 'Half The Sky' rightly defines feminism as "the awareness of the women's position in society as one of disadvantages or inequality compared with that of men and also a desire to remove those disadvantages."¹⁶ We may wonder whether Deshpande as a novelist fulfils these two requirements so as to be termed a feminist writer. We may not be sure of her strong desire to remove the disadvantages of women in society, but a casual

reading of her novels convinces us that they abound in her acute awareness of women's disadvantages and unequal position in society. She writes:

Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman.¹⁷

Thus, the novels of Shashi Deshpande clearly reveal the author's perception of the endemic imbalance between the sexes. The numerous minor characters in the novels suffer in silence or accept their fate with resignation but do not take any step which might jeopardize their marriage or reputation in society. It is important to note that each of her protagonists are much determined and hold the reins of her life into their hands. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* holds control over herself at the end of the novel. She uses Akka's money according to the dictates of her conscience. She also gives up the job, where she had earlier worked only to avoid displeasing her husband, and settles down to pursue her writing.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is finally liberated and she is no longer afraid of the dark. She stands poised to receive her husband secure in her new found confidence in herself. She successfully rids

herself of complexes and guilt and comprehends the meaning of human life where she realizes that she is not the only one facing the predicament of loneliness: "Alright, so I am alone. But so's every one else. Human beings...they're going to fail you. But because there is just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk."¹⁸

That Long Silence too ends on a note of hope, with the protagonist Jaya's realization that she is no less to be blamed for allowing herself to be dictated by her husband and by the conventions of society. She achieves a kind of catharsis by pinning her story and she is able to view the situation more objectively. She says: "I'm Mohan's wife I thought, and cut off bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible."¹⁹ This awareness helps her to cast aside the role she had willingly played all her life.

The Binding Vine is, perhaps, the only novel where the heroine, Urmi is less wrapped in her own discontentment and despite her recent bereavement, or because of it, get involved in the misfortunes of others. She shows a positive attitude towards the victims around her. She resolves to get Mira's poems published and is determined to draw society's attention to the predicament of the rape victim, Kalpana. It is the only novel in which one woman has a desire to help the other woman. In this sense, the novel is a refreshing change from the earlier novels of Deshpande.

Shashi Deshpande does not take the radical view of the early western feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer and Kate Millett. The opinion of most of these feminists with regard to marriage

remains more or less the same. In her famous book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes: "It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates woman."²⁰ Germaine Greer suggests, "if independence is a necessary concomitant of freedom, woman must not marry."²¹ Kate Millett feels that marriage reduces the status of woman to a mere object for decoration and a tool to be used for man's sexual gratification. Deshpande's protagonist's are, no doubt, victims of this unequal power structure in marriage, but in all her novels she shows how one can rise above such injustice and lead a meaningful existence. In the end, her protagonists almost always strive to make their marriages work. As J. Bhavani observes:

This is not a negative but a realistic end to the novels. Deshpande upholds marriage as the backbone of society, what is stifling in the persona of the wife and not the institution of marriage.²²

Shashi Deshpande's views coincide with modern feminist thought which has changed much since the radical feminism of the 1960s. But it is equally obvious that Deshpande never intends to subscribe to the views of any feminist. Her characters, though urban and educated, are firmly rooted in India with the weight of centuries of tradition and culture behind them. In his essay, "Problematising Feminism," Jaidev says: "It is very necessary for us to have feminism in this country but then this feminism has to be authentic, rooted and context-bound. One does not mind if our feminists are not too clever or good at quoting western critics or weaving intricate post-structuralist cobwebs."²³

The women of Shashi Deshpande are not very brave but women struggling to find their own voice. The protagonists—Jaya in *The Long Silence*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Urmi in *The Binding Vine* and Savitribai and Leela in *Small Remedies* – continually search to define themselves and ask themselves if there is any “self” to be found. Her women are from a world of “interdependent parts”. They all are appendages to men. Though in the beginning, they question the social mores, yet due to their emotional pull towards the traditions, they finally try their best to conform to their roles. In spite of being open-minded, educated, outspoken Deshpande’s women try their best to make a balance between tradition and modernity. As they are born and bred in India, Indian tradition is deeply rooted in their minds. They partially reject their tradition, accept modernism, and try to create a proper balance between the two.

Notes and References

¹ Shashi Deshpande, Interview with Vanamala Vishwanatha, "A Woman's World...", *Literature Alive*, I, 3 (December 1987).

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴ Rani Dharkar, "Marriage as Purdah: Fictional Rendering of a Social Reality," *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Sub-Continental Novel in English*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1995), p. 50.

⁵ Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *Dictionary of Sociology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 127.

⁶ *The Bible*, Ephesians, 5:22.

⁷ *Manusmriti V*, 154, *Manav Dharm Shastra*, trans and ed. Graves Chamnen Haughtoll, Vol. III (New Delhi: Cosmo, 1982).

⁸ Susan Wadley, "Women and the Hindu Tradition," *Women in Indian Society*, ed. Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988), p. 29.

⁹ Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), p. 32.

¹⁰ Sudhir Kalkar, "Feminine Identity in India," *Women in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Penguin, 19....), p. 49.

¹¹ Subhash K. Jha, "A Region of Uneasy Peace," Review of *That Long Silence*.

¹² Adele King, "Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman," *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, ed. Viney Kirpal (New Delhi: Allied, 1990), p. 164.

¹³ Shashi Deshpande in an interview to Vanamala Vishwanatha, "A Woman's World... All the Way," *Literature Alive*, Vol. I, No. 3, Dec. 1997), p. 10.

¹⁴ Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1990), p. 72.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁶ The Bristol Women's Studies Group, ed. *Half the Sky: An Introduction to Women's Studies* (London: Virago, 1970), p. 03.

¹⁷ Shashi Deshpande, "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties," *Indian Literature*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 5, Sep.-Oct., 1999.

¹⁸ Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1990), p. 220.

¹⁹ Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), p. 191.

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 496.

²¹ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (Albama: Paladin, 1976), p. 320.

²² J. Bhavani, "Nirduandva: Individuation and Integration as the Heroine's Quest: Shashi Deshpande's Women," *Indian Women Novelists*, Vol. V (New Delhi: Prestige, 1995), p. 23.

²³ Jaidev, "Problematizing Feminism," *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, ed. Sushila Singh (New Delhi: Prestige, 1991), p. 57.