CHAPTER-VI

A STUDY OF DESHPANDE’S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Writers use different techniques and styles in order to describe their experiences. As Jasbir Jain notes while discussing this in her article *Gender and Narrative Strategy*: “Women writers, while evolving narrative strategies, are faced with a double problem- how to step out of the framework defined by men and patriarchal values; and how to identify and create a tradition of their own” (32).

Women writers are faced with a double-mind situation when writing out their stories- the fact that they are writers, writing about unique experiences and feelings different from those of ordinary men, as well as the fact that they are women. When they aspire to succeed in their writing they have to rise above their feelings of gender inequality. This is more applicable to a feminist writer who tries to give expression to strong feelings of anger and intolerance against the injustice and oppression of women she sees around her. In order to render such observations authentically the woman writer resorts to various narrative strategies. Jasbir Jain continues:

When the experience which is being narrated moves against the current, is unconventional or unusual, is radical in its stand point, or displays a strength which may be best muted, for the time being strategy is resorted to. There is no hesitation in laying a false trail or employing subterfuge.More over, it is never the same, for then it would become a theory. It may be imagery, or landscape, or scriptural
reference or character, or subplot, or structure which is being used for this purpose- and waiting to be decoded (30).

The women writers use various techniques in order to create spaces for themselves at various levels. How far they differ from the writing of men is a question that is difficult to answer. But as Jasbir Jain says; “One cannot say that men write about external facts and women about internal life; one cannot also say that men write about thickly inhabited worlds and women about solitary figures – but women do write about the responses of women, of the shadows which they alone can see the anguish they alone can feel. It is a difference of perspective …”(36).

The most challenging task before the Indian English novelists has been the writing of their works in the English language as there is the danger of language getting distorted in giving voice to the Indian ethos. The problem stems from the great difference between the Indian and Western cultures.

Like earlier Indian English writers-men and women-who used the English language depending upon their talent and calibre, Shashi Deshpande also writes in this medium to give voice to women’s issues. She writes:

To those of us who write in English, it is neither a foreign language, nor the language of the colonizer, but the language of creativity. Whether the writing is rootless, alienated or elitist should be judged from the writing not from the language. My writing comes out of myself, the society I live in. It is shaped as I am, by my family, my ancestry, the place I was born in, the place I live in, the culture I am
steepled in, and the fact that the writing in English changes none of these things (*The Sunday Times of India*, 1985).

Shashi Deshpande writes in English and her novels have been translated into Indian languages. In a program to BBC World News Service, she articulates that writing in English has a dramatic effect on her style:

I think my style is really a very simple and stark style, which rarely draws attention to itself. I think I’m always very wary of melodrama, from florid flourishes. We have problems in writing in English which is not really our mother tongue, but I find that writing in English suits me fine. It’s a very utilitarian language and I think Indian languages are extremely flowery. I find myself much closer to English for my writing style and of course, I use English in a very natural way (*In the program: Woman writers*, 2003).

Shashi Deshpande came from a middle class, Marathi Karnadiga background and was educated in English at a local school in Dharwar, Karnataka. It is these influences which have played an important role in shaping her writing and her use of the English language.

In her fiction she has used language that is “simple” “realistic” and “transparent” (*Interview with Viswanatha*). She does not indulge in showy, bombastic or rhetorical English. It is very simple and direct. Deshpande’s concern has been the expression of the Indian middle class ethos. And her simple unassuming English reflects it. The English language she uses is of the kind used by
an average, middle-class, convent-educated individual. She writes about the middle-class people and the language used is also middle-class English, sometimes a little incorrect by the British standards.

Deshpande’s response is spontaneous on Vanamala Vishwanath’s observation that her writing is not obviously Indian. Deshpande’s says:

No, I don’t believe in making it obviously Indian. But all this is basically because 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 (Interview with Viswanatha.11).

Deshpande feels that writing in English is a drawback in this country as it alienates the writer from the mainstream. But she considers English as one of the Indian languages. She says:

I believe that English writing in this country is a part of our literary bhashas as Ganesh Devy calls them. I know that our writing comes out of an involvement with this society, out of our experiences here, our readership is now here, and happily our publishers are here as well.
Yet, I am disturbed by the recent trend in English writing which in its pursuit of role models outside, is alienating itself from its roots (108).

Deshpande differs from other Indian writers in the sense that she was never educated abroad and is firmly rooted in the Indian soil. She says:

My novels do not have any westerners, for example. They are first about Indian people and the complexities of our lives. Our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. My English is as we use it. I don’t make it easier for any one really. It I make any changes, it’s because the novel needs it, not because the reader needs it (26).

Shashi Deshpande is fully aware of the problems Indian writers in English face and is of the opinion that they should evolve a language of their own; this will remain distinctively Indian, and yet be English. She has always aimed at the Indian readers and not the western. Her creative use of the language has been greatly lauded in the *Times Literary Supplement*: “Deshpande eschews linguistic pyrotechnics and formal experimentation, but has sufficient command of her tradition to give the lie to the belief that the English language is incapable of expressing any Indian world other than a cosmopolitan one” (3).

It is a fact that the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of contemporary times. The originality of talent lies in the manner a writer uses this genre to bring home his ideas to the readers. Styles and techniques have kept changing with the times. In the past, much attention
was paid to the story or plot overlooking psychological aspects. But, now-a-days novelists resort to experimentation, often far removed from the methods of traditional story-telling. Such writers have been dubbed anti-novelists who as, Somerset Maugham writes “consider the telling of a story for its own sake as a debased from of fiction” (80). According to Paul Varghese, the principal features of the anti-novelists are “lack of an obvious plot; diffused episodes; minimal development of character, detailed surface analysis of objects; repetitions; experiments with vocabulary, punctuation and syntax, variations of time-sequence alternative endings and beginnings”(22).

In our Indian English Literature, different authors employ different methods of storytelling; hence a narrative technique used by an author holds great significance. The most common method used by the writers is the plain narrative or story telling wherein the novelist holds an omnipresent and omniscient position. Novelists who wish to lend a ring of authenticity or reality to their stories employ the first person narrative. But this method limits the writer from delving deep into the minds and motives of the other characters. Shashi Deshpande has used a combination of the first person and the third person narratives coupled with flashback devices to lend authenticity and credibility to her stories.

Deshpande’s development as a novelist requires a keen chronological study of the narrative techniques employed by her in her novels. *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande’s first novel deals essentially with the protagonist Indu’s painful self-analysis. She also tries to encompass several other themes in this novel. The theme of bohemianism has also been incorporated into the main theme of the novel through
the Indu-Naven episode. The lot of Indian women in general has been exposed through Indu’s observations. Madhu Singh is all praise for Deshpande’s skill in interweaving myriad themes into one close-knit narrative. Comparing *Roots and Shadows* with *That Long Silence*, she points out that the former “is the more powerful of the two. In its succinctness lies its strength and punch” (22).

Shashi Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straightforward narration and employs the flashback method. The first chapter deals with the present, but the later chapters move on chronologically with the final chapter ending in the present. This narrative strategy has earned adverse comment from some critics who feel that this leads to confusion in the minds of readers. In novels where the writer presents a gallery of characters along with their relationships and interactions, it becomes necessary for him/her to present things in their chronological order and not to indulge in too much of experimentation. Shama Futehally comments:

This is a device which is useful either when some element of suspense is needed, or for a novel with a non-narrative structure. For this novel chronological clarity is essential, as the reader already has to cope with an abundance of characters and their complex interactions. The first chapter, where we are faced with all of them simultaneously and without introduction, is rather confusing (12).

The entire novel is a first person narrative. The narrator is a young woman writer who returns to her childhood home and finds herself in the maelstrom of family intrigues. Since the protagonist is an educated young woman with liberated and progressive ideas, even ordinary incidents acquire a new meaning. The first person
narration helps the writer to probe deep into the mind of the protagonist, her fears and frustrations, aspirations etc, and thereby highlight the gross gender-discrimination prevalent in society. There are reviewers like C.W. Watson, who compare Deshpande to the master storyteller Chekhov:

Other South Indian writers have been compared to Chekhov. But Shashi Deshpande, in this novel at least, comes closest to the writer, and the tragic – comedy of The Cherry Orchard is constantly recalled in the description of the crumbling house and the squabbling of the family. The writing is beautifully controlled and avoids the temptation of sentimentality, which the subject might suggest and again this control is reminiscent of Chekhov (75).

Shashi Deshpande has also used literary devices in her fiction, to show the phenomenon of man’s loneliness. Although mythological allusions have been used in her novels, she does not consider their use to be conscious or deliberate. In an interview to Lakshmi Holmstorm she says:

I think a number of us do that in India all the time; we relate a great deal of our personal lives, to myths. We find parallels as a matter of course. And we do this with all the myths, any myth that seems appropriate, whether they were originally about men or women. In that sense it is a part of language, a grammar that one knows and understands, rather than a conscious literary device (Holmstrom.246).
Deshpande makes comprehensive use of irony and satire in her novels. She deliberately uses such literary elements in all her novels. Irony is the chief figure of speech used in the novel *That Long Silence* to show that in knowing, her characters seem not to know themselves. The most ironical situation in the novel is when Mohan gets the job of his choice; Jaya never questions the means by which he gets it. She says:

Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it.
If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly; I did not want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools that I could have the things we needed… (*TLS*, 61-62).

Another most striking example of irony from the same novel is the event in which Jaya’s husband, Mohan, accuses her of avoiding him in his most adverse situation. Jaya herself is undergoing great mental anguish, and such an allegation throws her off her balance. She, however, tries to control herself. She says: “I must not laugh, I must not laugh…even in the midst of my rising hysteria, a warning bell sounded long and clear, I had to control myself. I had to cork in, this laughter. But it was too late. I could not hold it any longer. Laughter bursts out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked helplessly” (*TLS*, 122).

Later, she breaks her silence by recoding her story, and thus regains her sanity by relieving herself of her pent-up frustrations. Another attempt at irony is Shashi Deshpande’s creation of the character, of Priti, in *The Binding Vine*. When Urmila
tells her that she is going to publish Mira’s story, she is extremely thrilled as the story is going to prove a sensational one. She even plans to adapt the story into a film. But Deshpande can also do without these literary ingredients, as her style shows the situation unambiguously, for all the use of irony and satire. She uses some devices of the stream of consciousness also such as flashback, flight of memory, interior monologue and so on to show the inner self of her characters, e.g. Jaya says at the end of That Long Silence. “All this I’ve written it’s like one of those multicoloured patchwork quilts the Kakis made for any new baby in the family. So bits and pieces – a crazy conglomeration of shapes, sizes and colours put together. What have I achieved by writing this?” (TLS, 188). Quoting this statement, Deshpande tells Lakshmi Holmstrom that this is how she views novel writing, “and I think that is how we really see our lives when we look back upon them” (Holmstrom, 248).

The ample use of metaphors is again an indication of Shashi Deshpande’s phenomenological concerns, particularly the metaphors of silence - that silence is more expressive than words. The metaphor of silence recurs forcefully in almost all her novels, especially in That Long Silence. Jaya’s silence, as that of Sartre, speaks for itself. The metaphors of silence also denote lack of communication, frigidity of feeling and want of understanding and emptiness. In The Binding Vine, Urmila adopts a posture of silence. On being asked by Bhaskar, her lover, about her unhappy marriage with Kishore, she replies “I can say nothing. The silence stretches between us” (TBV, 161).

In The Binding Vine, Deshpande interweaves three individual plots of three different stories about three women of different age, status and education. Urmi
narrates the entire story in the first person. To offer a realistic and objective representation of Urmi’s mother-in-law Mira’s marital experiences, Deshpande has made use of the poetry and writings in her diary and note books. She has commendably and brilliantly reconstructed Mira’s unspoken humiliation and anguish at being subjected to marital rape, through the mouthpiece of Urmi.

In *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande uses the first person narrative technique and adopts the tools of autobiographical narration. The novel has one main plot and two sub-plots. It is the autobiography of the protagonist. The stream of consciousness technique takes the reader back and forth from the past to present and vice versa. In the earlier two novels of Shashi Deshpande - *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows*,- the protagonists’ Saru and Indu go to their father’s place for reconciliation. In *The Binding Vine* no such shift is shown. The earlier novels stress more on change of place but in *Binding Vine* though the parental house is important, it nowhere helps the protagonist to change her lifestyle. The period of action in the novel is about four months. The time is when the children are busy going to schools and colleges.

Apart from the Stream of Consciousness technique, Shashi Deshpande adopts another significant technique in this novel- the technique of evasion and concealment. Mira, though an educated woman, has difficulty in voicing out her desires. She evades any open discussion of her tensions. She never discussed her writings with others for fear of being laughed at. She trusted no humans, her sole companion and confidant is her diary. Her father encouraged her to write poetry. Through them, Mira poured out all her feelings, desires and emotions, which lay trapped in her. The
books were lying in the attic unknown, hidden until Akka found them and gave them to Urmī.

Motherhood is the dominant motif in the narrative discourse. The stories of pregnancy, child birth and motherhood are not related as ordinary events in the life of a woman. They are treated as significant experiences, which have the capacity to destroy, nurture or reactivate the destiny of a woman. The narrative technique of *The Binding Vine* is that stories are interwoven with the experiences of three mothers—Urmī, Mīra and Shakutai. These events take on new meaning as the narrator realigns herself in relation to their diverse experience. Out of dissonance, a pattern of reintegration follows. She tells Vanaa, “I’ve been lucky, that’s all while these women…you understand what I’m saying Vanaa? They never had a chance. It’s not fair; at all. And we can’t go on pushing it—What happened to them—under the carpet forever because we’re afraid of disgrace” (*TBV*, 174)

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are a realistic representation of women’s oppression, and hence are highly susceptible to being labeled ‘feminist’. But she has all along denied any such conscious writing. Even the term ‘propaganda’ is anathema to her. While Mulk Raj Anand loves to be called a propagandist, Deshpande is against her work being labeled as ‘propaganda’. In an interview, she tells Sue Dickman: “Somebody once asked me if I have a social purpose in my writing and I very loudly said ‘No’, I have no social purpose, I write because it comes to me”(11).

Shashi Deshpande hates to write propaganda literature. She does not intend to moralize or set forth her own brand of feminism; she is genuinely concerned about people. In yet another interview, Deshpande says: “I hate to write propagandist
literature I think good literature and propaganda don’t go together. Any literature written with some view point of proving something rarely turns out to be good literature. Literature comes very spontaneously. When I write, I am concerned with people” (Stanley Carvalho, 11).

Gerard Genette, one of the most prominent narratologists, opines that we should focus not only on the tale but also on how it is told. Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time* is mimetic and digetic as well. The novel starts in a digetic manner. ‘Digetic’ literally means ‘telling’ or ‘relating’, the narrator gives us the idea of a house called ‘Vishwas’ and relates it to the character: “The house is called ‘Vishwas’, named not as one would imagine for the abstract quality of trust, but after an ancestor the man who came down south with the Vishwa’s invading army and established the family there” (*AMT*, 1).

The narrator adopts the mimetic technique in the novel and it lends a dramatic quality to the text:

Aru sits up, water streaming down her face, her dazed look turning to shame as she realizes what has happened. ‘She hasn’t had any breakfast, I’m sure that’s it’. ‘And nothing last night, neither’. ‘Sumi, could you?’ ‘Oh, God, don’t fuss everyone. I’m all right, I’m perfectly all right’. ‘Kalyani-mavshi, get her some coffee- with lots of sugar’. But Kalyani, standing in the doorway, looks petrified, she doesn’t move, she scarcely hears Devaki. (*AMT*, 32).
In the novel Shashi Deshpande adopts yet another technique of focalization. The word ‘Focalization’ means ‘view point’ or perspective from which the story is told. The novel is mainly externally focalized though there is some sort of internal focalization. Yet the story is mainly built up on the characters actions. The narrator leads us to a definite conclusion through what the character says or does rather than by what the character feels or thinks. Along with internal and external modes of focalization, the narrator adopts zero focalization also. The narrator intrudes into the minds of many characters:

When Shripati comes with Seema, Aru’s light-heartedness reaches out to her sisters and the three of them flit about the house calling out to one another, to their mother, exclaiming over things, laughing … The grandmother next door balances the child she is carrying on the wall and stares at … finally makes her get hold of Sumi, and Aru, seeing them together, wonders what Sumi is telling her. The truth, she thinks, knowing Sumi as as she does. As for Aru herself, she avoids people’s eyes. (AMT, 30-31).

Usually, Shashi Deshpande employs the first person and third person narratives. But in this novel Deshpande has experimented with something different. It is not in the form of an autobiographical first person narration by the protagonist. There is authorial narration mixed with streaks of first person narration as for example, when the male character, Gopal exhibits and explains his inner conflicts. For Shashi Deshpande, this is a combination of classical and modern narrative techniques. By convention every narrative has a narrator who may be an observer or
a participant. David Lodge says: “The simplest way of telling a story is in the voice of a story teller which may be the anonymous voice of folk tale or the voice of the epic bard or the confiding, companionable, sententious authorial voice of classic fiction” (*The Art of Fiction*, 1).

Analyzing the novel Susheela has appreciated the narrative approach of Shashi Deshpande. According to her, “Deshpande’s technique of narration is novel and most interesting. Brushing aside the usual sequential, chronological way of telling stories, characteristic of almost all better-known Indo-Anglican writers, Deshpande has successfully used what has been called ‘the double perspective’. This concept of using two narrative points of view – one, an I-narrator, and another a third person story teller – is a fascinating manner of unfolding the past and the present without using the conventional flashback method. The I-narrator, to boot, is a male one in what is essentially a woman’s novel about women, presumably to suggest the beginning of a new perspective on woman from man (*The Art of Fiction*, 94).

Deshpande uses simplest language that can fit the subject and theme of the novel. She uses a language which appears to be real and natural for middle class Indian society. To make it more sensible and to enrich the language of the novel, she uses many ordinary Hindi words, including Hindi songs as well. In the very beginning of the novel we seen an example of it, *Jeena yahan, Marna yahaa,iske siwa jana kahan.* (1). (A song from Raj Kapoor film *Mer Naam Joker*).

Some of Deshpande’s novels occasionally have an autobiographical strain, but her characters and incidents are not directly lifted from her own life. She makes a creative use of her experiences and memories in her works. This is particularly true
of her early writing. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan, she quotes Dom Moares approvingly, as she says: “Most of what a creative writer writes is his autobiography; if not of his life, of his thoughts. All one’s life doesn’t go into one’s writing and all one’s writing doesn’t consist of just one’s life” (Gangadharan.253).

Deshpande also adds, “… certainly, some of my thoughts are always there. They are, therefore, for the reader to pick and choose … all that I can say is ‘This is what I, as an individual, believe in’ (Gangadharan.253) It may, however, be remembered that the novelist does not always give her thoughts to the first person narrator. She believes that it is not the first person narrator who has her closest sympathy but it is someone else in the novel. It seems that her autobiographical flashes impart human interest and credibility to her works.

Music also plays a vital role in Shashi Deshpande’s novel Small Remedies. It is part of phenomenological manifestation, as perhaps no other art-form is. She thinks, however, only of Hindustani music. She could not have used Carnatic music, for Karnatic music where the Sahitya is equally important. She would not have been able to say, as she does in the novel, that when Savitribai sings, the words are not important at all, because she expresses her emotions through the singing itself, through the raga. When Vijay T.Kumar asked Deshpande what made her choose music as an organizing principle in Small Remedies, she replied that she did not make the choice consciously. She has not studied music formally and she further remarks:

… What interested me was the situation of the women artists. Music is something given to them, and yet they were in a way barred from it because they were not allowed to take it up seriously. So for me, it was
choosing your life that was important; a woman’s right to choose her life is central to the lives of the two women in the novel. Then there is the language of music, which, in a way, is more fascinating than the language of writing because it is such an emotional, rather than cerebral, experience. Actually, Small Remedies is more about words than music. It is a novel that is trying to understand language and words, and what escapes both (Muse India: The Literary Journal Jan-Feb 2007).

In terms of the narrative technique of phenomenology, Small Remedies, is the most successful of Deshpande’s novels so far. The main narrative concerns and the evocative style enable the reader to share Savitribai’s love of music. The trope of music dominates the singer’s life. The relationship between melody and rhythm between the singer and the tabla-player is an image expressive of human bonding.

Shashi Deshpande uses the technique of the double voice in Moving On. The first voice is of the woman protagonist Manjari (Jiji) and the second voice is that of her father’s speaking through his diary which the protagonist reads after his death. The writer, once again, adopts the stream of consciousness technique. The flash black technique is used in such a subtle manner that sometimes the reader has to literally search for the identification of these two voices whether it is male or female and past or present.

The first person single narration is replaced by the double voice narration. The minimal use of the flashback technique and the preference for the direct present
tense narration brings liveliness to the novel. Another innovation in this novel is the opportunity to read into the lives of parents.

Santwana Halder is right when she compliments Deshpande’s unique way of using symbols that has enabled her ideas to be rendered artistically in That Long Silences. He, further, says, “Shashi Deshpande’s extensive use of symbols and images helps to highlight the theme of the novel That Long Silence. It is an example of her perfect use of figurative language for clarifying her ideas” (Halder, 122).

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande is a good craftsperson. She comprehends the fact that art lies not in saying a thing but rather in displaying a thing. Hence, she is very careful in developing the plot and characters. She offers them proper interaction and her narration is enriched with psychological analyses of characters, as well as symbolism, imagery, and rhythm. All these are woven into a living whole.