Chapter Six

Summation

Woman can bear to die, but not
with a total lack of meaning.
So we invent meanings and
believe in them even if they
fall to pieces as we look at them.

- Margaret Laurence

Shashi Deshpande has attained a significant role among the Indian writers in English, not just because of her bold presentations of life experiences from a peculiar feminine perspective and her experimentation with themes and characters, but also because of the stances she has taken in her creative works and also in her critical writings about feminism and women’s role in the society.

The foregoing chapters show how Deshpande is primarily interested more than anything else in the predicament of women in the present chaotic world. It brings into focus all relevant issues which are useful for a gainful understanding of her responses to the sufferings of woman. The heroines of Deshpande enjoy security and economic independence but they are unable to enjoy certain privileges which a woman wishes to enjoy.
G. S. Amur praises Deshpande saying that “Women’s writings can be seen at its best in Shashi Desphande’s fiction” (84). An important reason for this is that its main motivation comes not from borrowed ideology but from authentic experience and understanding of what it means to be a woman in the Indian context. Compared to the fictional world of some of the other Indian woman writers in English, Nayantara Sahgal or Anita Desai, for example, the world of Deshpande’s stories and novels are essentially a woman’s world where men are relegated to the background or reduced to shadows, but are explored with a thoroughness and honesty not easily found elsewhere. 

The heroines of Deshpande suffer from an acute sense of emptiness in life. They are fragmented, lonely, rootless, alienated, and overpowered by anger, despair and a sense of helplessness. They suffer because of the brutishness of uncompromising and fickle husbands. They struggle to abolish gender discrimination and seek reciprocity and harmony in life. Deshpande is not against the institution of marriage, as her woman protagonists strive to make their marriages work in their endeavour to lead a meaningful existence. They seek social, mental and emotional freedom and for self-fulfilment. Prompted by an inner urge to make their existence a meaningful one, they demand a rightful place, recognition and regard. To them, “it is life’s precious obligation to rebel and humanity’s right to be free” (Agarwal 217).

Deshpande’s protagonists examine themselves from the stances of motherhood, mothering, marriage, individuals, class conflicts, marginalization, woman as wife, sister and lastly, yet significantly, woman as
a human being and not as a sex object. So they either take the path of alienation or plunge headlong into an encounter, unmindful of the outcome. In such instances they break out of the roles that society has prescribed and find power in novel roles that they create themselves by uniting images of masculine and feminine power. The allusion to Saru, Indu, Jaya and Urmila requires one to view the modern heroines as new avatars, archetypes of women who reject standard feminine roles in order to accomplish significant social action.

Deshpande delineates her protagonists as women who are aware of their strengths and limitations in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence and fetter them to their roles in the family. They question the subordinate status ordained to them by society. Deshpande’s sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels.

Deshpande’s protagonists’ quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences born of the prohibitive nature of the Indian patriarchal society. In her novels, the host of male characters — husbands, lovers, fathers and other relations — display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While, majority of the husbands are patriarchal in their approach, the older men, particularly, the fathers are broad minded. Deshpande, herself states that she does not “believe in a simple opposition of
bad bad men and good good women. I don’t believe the world is like that at all” (qtd. in Lakshmi Holmstrom 22). Thus Deshpande has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation.

Deshpande writes from her own experiences of the educated middle class Indian woman’s predicament and her novels tend to be gender – specific. She minutely analyses the unwholesome situation in which a sensitive woman has to live and move about, and is caught between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy, of terror and suppression. Such a woman is inescapably subjected to physical tortures and sexual assaults in society. Consequently, her personality is crushed, her voice is hushed up, and her instinct of self-assertion gets capitulated. The loss of personality, voice or self-assertion leads her to confusion and torment and ultimately to loss of self-identity. Hence, Deshpande makes her female protagonists search for ‘self’ or discover her identity.

Deshpande’s works passionately concentrate on the predicament of women and men are pushed towards the periphery. Her plots and sub-plots provide a pointer to the catatonic status of women in the tradition bound, male - dominated middle class society of contemporary India, in which they are struggling to overcome the constricting dilemmas of pre-fixed definitions and pre-set norms and thus attempt to redefine their status.

The backdrop of most of Deshpande’s novels has been prepared by women who are victims of such pathogenic misogyny. These women have
suffered the atrocities of men in silence and without protest, as they are not aware of protest as an option to change their world. Their inner turmoil, flabbergasted emotional resilience and relational bondage has been suggestively juxtaposed against the desperate struggle of her protagonists to define and obtain a self-hood, thus putting it in a sustained and sharpened focus to indicate the changing dynamics of man - woman relation. Rashmi Gaur’s observation is quite appropriate:

Deshpande’s narratives bear the authenticity of a woman’s signature. She has rejected the masculine dialect and the masculine perception of virtue, relationship and content, and laid bare before us the subversive role of women emphasizing the need of discrediting its legacies if women have to emerge as liberated and emancipated beings. (6)

In Deshpande’s march towards emancipation and self-hood, the contemporary Indian woman has to struggle against the intense fatality of options which endeavour to fashion her into the mould of ‘womanhood’ with a silent persistence.

Deshpande had portrayed women who exhibit the result of their indoctrination in their psyche and behaviour. Her Ajis and Kakis are the women who do not have the opportunity to develop and grow except in home and family related roles and have surrendered to the traditional clap-trap about the women’s place at home only. Deshpande’s novels sympathetically record the lives of such women as one of her themes. She has endeavoured to
transmit the basic anxiety, loneliness and helplessness of their situation. She has also scathingly attacked the myths which the Indian men hold about men. The notions which her male characters express about the status of girls and women, their education, liberty, socializing adjustment, marriage etc. reveal the crudity and insensitivity of the traditional ethos, which stifle and smother the individuality of women in a gradual and planned way. It is against these sketches of prevalent stereotypes and myths that Deshpande has balanced her portrayal of the realities of Indian womanhood.

Mothers share a very strange relationship with their daughters. A mother can be very affectionate and may saddle the girl-child with her own destiny, thinking that it is wiser to make a traditional woman of her and may also be hostile towards her daughter and treat her with a Freudian rivalry. The societal environment, which has moulded the psyche of the mother as a woman, also makes the young uninitiated girl child a special object of the mother’s persecution. Society treats the male offspring as an ultimate panacea to all problems, but the girl child in an unwanted burden, as she cannot fulfil the parental needs or ungratified ambitions within the given social calculus. The warmth and value given to a male child is denied to the girl, and this makes her either depressed or rebellious.

Suppressed by their own mothers the protagonists of Deshpande’s novels leave their parents to find solace in the company of their newly married husbands. It is a temporary relief but their ambition is not fulfilled with their independence in the single unit of family. They want to spread their wings
beyond the horizons of their own husband’s control, but their ambition is entrapped by the chains of their familial responsibilities. Neither their education nor their success in career provides enlightenment of their self-revelation.

Being an Indian writer Deshpande depicts the life of Indian women from different angles. The contentment in the life of an Indian woman cannot be achieved only by securing a better career in life but there is a life beyond. Deshpande focuses her attention towards physical, social, cultural, psychological, sexual and professional aspects of women in the modernized society.

The theme, structure and treatment of Deshpande in her novels are from experiences of womenfolk in contemporary Indian society. The suffering of women has been taken silently without protest for a long time. The heroine in the novels of Deshpande is the narrator while the author employs a sort of stream of consciousness technique making the narrative move back and forth in time thus enabling the narrator to describe events with the benefit of hindsight.

Deshpande’s women characters do not quite seem to fit into the traditional established accepted societal mode. There is in them a kind of compromise which enables them to endure a not always pleasant world. In her novels, the protagonist is usually an educated middle class married woman and a mother. Her mother figures are not the ones that can be venerated and idealized. In novel after novel, Deshpande explores the fragile human
relationships, that jealousies and rivalries, yet there is a bond which defies definition.

In Deshpande’s novels, families are ambivalent entities. At times, the protagonists are unable to communicate with their families. Marriage neither nurtures nor thwarts the development of an individual. They make adjustments in their lives. They grapple with problems involving the challenges of accommodating the needs of their selves, to the needs of their families and communities. They learn to discover the nature of their personal freedom and make compromises in this world. The pendulamatic notion of the good - bad - good feelings pervades the various relationships in nearly all the novels of Deshpande.

Thus the protagonists of Deshpande develop their personality with a new shield to their armour. They are better equipped with the shield of mental stamina and their responsibility in life. They anticipate a positive change in the attitudes of their husbands. Yet unmindful of the change of attitude from their husbands, they enter into new phases of life. Parvati Bhatnagar concludes the destiny of the protagonists stating, “Go home like a good girl. Don’t leave your homes and husbands. Retain your married status, maintain your marriage sensibility” (135).

The women in the novels of Deshpande explore their ability from their deeper self. Their problems are not at all glorified by the novelist. The blame for their suffering is not finger pointed at anybody. It is an exploration of the female psyche. The protagonists reconcile themselves with no intention to
change anybody but with a hope to build better relation on human values of love, concern, sacrifice and trust. The study makes it clear that though the Indian woman makes several attempts to liberate herself, ultimately she realises that the safest place for her is her family.

There are various possible areas for further research in Deshpande. The study of the novels of Deshpande shows that the works are concerned with the psyche of women and have the smell and touch of Indianness. So instead of just analysing the novels in the light of feminism, they can be viewed as social novels and as psychological novels which read the real psyche of women. Deshpande can be compared and studied with other Indian writers — Anitha Desai and Nayantara Saghal — as well as with the Canadian writer Margaret Laurence. Deshpande’s works of art lead themselves to layers of interpretations and form a rich canvas for further studies.