Chapter-VII

Conclusion
Chapter-VII

Conclusion

A close study of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals her deep concern for women and their travails. Though Deshpande refuses to be called a feminist writer, her novels are nearer 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. She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present-day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male dominance.

Deshpande's women are the products of a painful period of transition in society where they have a greater share of responsibilities than their predecessors. They also have a number of avenues open before them and, in many fields, they have also proved themselves better than

Ph.D. Thesis
their male counterparts. In spite of their remarkable achievements, the general attitude towards women has not changed.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's search for her identity—an exploration into the female psyche. Her protagonists undergo a tedious 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 Deshpande's novels the protagonists are married women. Hence 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. 

Marriage is perhaps the most complex of human relationships. It is defined as a "cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring."

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 categorically tells the woman:

_Wives submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord._

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 seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife ...” Thus it is clear that since time immemorial 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.

Shashi Deshpande presents the inequalities and in-justice heaped on woman because of her subordinate status. In _Roots and Shadows_ through the eyes of Indu, the protagonist, we are made aware of the plight

Ph.D. Thesis
of various women like her Kakis and Atyas. The heart-rending account of Akka’s child marriage reveals the appalling condition of women barely a couple of generations ago. The inferior position of a wife in any marriage is made obvious through glimpses into the marriages of Indu’s numerous aunts and uncles. It is clear that Indu, who is proud of her liberated outlook falls a prey to age-old tradition and unreasonable convention. Deshpande also exposes the sham and hypocrisy prevalent in the so-called urban, educated men like Jayant who are ostensibly influenced by the West and who pretend to possess progressive ideas, but are, in reality, as chauvinistic. He belongs to a society which prides itself on its sophistication and refinement, but at home he remains a conventional husband.

Saru’s husband Manohar, in That Long Silence, is a glaring 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 disastrous condition of Saru’s marriage. Manu, who already suffers from an inferiority complex, is further humiliated by the cruel 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 unflinching 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 retrospect, Jaya realizes how she had all along 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 dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. Jaya thinks that she has 'to keep the tree alive and nourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies ...'

In *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande makes a bold attempt to tackle the subject of marital rape. Through the character of Mira, she focuses attention on all those women who are doomed to silently suffer nightly assaults by...
their husbands because the very idea of a woman protesting against her husband’s sexual advances is unheard of in our society. Deshpande also hints at the lack of compatibility in Unni’s marriage even though hers is a love marriage. Through the character of Shakutai, Deshpande shows how at the lower level of society, marital vows are flouted most casually by men like Shakutai’s husband. He is a good-for-nothing drunkard who leaves his wife and three children to fend for themselves and hankers after another woman.

The monogamous nature of women is hinted at in almost all the works of Deshpande. 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. But 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 a dissatisfaction with his wife tries to lure Saru into a relationship. Vulnerable though she is, with the horrifying nocturnal attacks by her husband, Saru refuses to accept the advances made by him. 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 apparently he is 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 in his company and this sets him apart from all the other men she has known in her life. In course 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. Safeguarding her marriage is of such paramount interest to Jaya that on finding Kamat

Ph.D. Thesis
dead she prefers to remain silent for the fear of getting involved in a scandal.

Similarly, Urmi's association with Dr. Bhaskar in *The Binding Vine* develops into more than a platonic relationship. Urmi, 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 enticed into an extra-marital affair.

Another recurrent relationship in Deshpande's novels 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 down the ages have always glorified the mother figure. Much have also been written about a mother's love for her children. But the preference for a son is as old as Indian society itself. A wife's worth shoots up if she gives birth to a boy.

There are, of course, economic and religious reasons behind such an attitude. The presence of a son is absolutely 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, therefore, has not only a negligible
ritual significance but is also considered a financial burden inasmuch as
she does not contribute to the family income and instead takes away a
considerable part of her family fortune as dowry.

But despite the yeaming of all mothers to have sons, a mother’s
love for her daughter cannot be denied. Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists,
however, 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
delineation of the mother-daughter relationship. In *The Dark Holds No
Terrors*, however, this relationship has a significant place. The entire novel,
in fact, 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
the crucial years of puberty, Saru develops an aversion to all traditional
practices because of her mother’s cold and indifferent attitude. She studies
medicine to displease her mother and later marries out of caste to defy her. Even on her death-bed, Saru’s mother has only curses for her daughter. Saru, in turn, does not record 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 had been denied.

In *That Long Silence*, though 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, however, Jaya displays a stronger attachment towards her son.

In *The Binding Vine* too, it is obvious 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 bursts 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 illustrations reveal that the relationship between mother and daughter in Deshpande’s fiction is far from being warm-hearted.

A study of Deshpande’s novels from a feminist viewpoint also reveals the essential loneliness of the heroines bordering on alienation, reminding us of the plight of the protagonists of Anita Desai. In *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 a 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, Sara 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.”6 Sara’s own children are described as quite indifferent to mother, and Sara herself does not indulge in any sentimental feelings towards them. Social visits to their friends’ homes are described as routine and uninteresting and friends, both Sara’s and Manu’s, provide no comfort either.

In That 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 remain superficial and she seems to derive no satisfaction even from her children. The only person who offers her a satisfying companionship and who animates her dies abruptly, leaving a void in her life. Even the physical attraction she initially feels for her
husband gradually dwindles into routine and mechanical affair, making her feel that “love is a myth without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unbearable.”

In Deshpande’s sixth novel, *A Matter of Time*, the theme of alienation is even more pronounced. The author quotes extensively from the *Upanishads* to explain the sense of rootlessness and desolation experienced by the protagonist, Gopal, who abandons his wife and three teenaged daughters for some strange and 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 three daughters.

Deshpande’s latest novel, *Small Remedies*, is “a book about writing a book” with rejections on the impossibility of ever capturing in words the truth about any life. It examines, in retrieving memory, the complexities in encapsulating the life of Savitribai Indorekar, who is devoted to music. Running through the narrative of this remarkable woman is the saga of

*Ph.D. Thesis*
Leela, who defies conventional norms and remarries after her widowhood. It is through Madhu's eyes that we get to know the dark corners of Bai's life and the illuminating saga of Leela. In portraying the struggles of these women for identity, no overt postures of feminism are struck.

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

Deshpande's novels bear out and even demonstrate what she holds in theory. *Roots and Shadows* is mainly concerned with women who are given a raw deal. Beginning with the protagonist Indu, the novel is replete
with the private agonies of several women covering a wide cross section—
educated women, illiterate women, widows, child-brides, domestic
servants—all of whom have some genuine grouse or other. The Dark Holds
No Terrors is a typical example of a husband’s inability to come to terms
with his wife’s superior social and economic status. Deshpande gives a
vivid portrayal of a woman who falls a prey to her husband’s frustrations
when he realizes that she has overtaken him professionally. The novel
also traces the traumatic childhood of Saru who is the victim of gender
bias at the hands of an insensitive mother.

That Long Silence is an autobiographical account of Jaya, a gifted
writer, whose talent lies smothered under the disapproval of her husband.
Jaya seeks to erase the long silence by giving an honest and frank account
of the conditions which lead to her failure as a writer and the constraints
of society which result in the suppression of her self as an individual.

The Binding Vine is a tragic tale of rape sanctioned by marriage in
the case of Mira and the brutal rape of Kalpana. It reveals the trauma
involved in a rape whether committed within or outside the precincts of marriage. The novel, in a subtle way, also traces the martyrdom of women like Inni, Vanaa and Shakutai.

Thus, the novels of Shashi Deshpande clearly reveal the author’s perception of the endemic imbalance between the sexes. It is, however, obvious that the author stops short of trying to correct this imbalance. 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 however import to note that each of her novels ends on a note of determination by its protagonist who resolves to take the reins of her life into her hands. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* emerges in greater control over herself at the end of the novel. She puts Akka’s money to use according to the dictates of her conscience and does not bow to pressure from any quarter. She also gives up the job, where she had earlier worked only to avoid displeasing her husband, and settles down to pursue her writing, something which she had always wanted to do. With her new found sense of liberation also comes the realization
that any freedom she devises must be within the boundaries of her obligations and responsibilities. She is able to appreciate what Naren’s father says about rules adding grace and dignity to life.

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is finally liberated and she is no longer afraid of the dark. At the end of the novel, Saru stands poised to receive her husband secure in her new found confidence in herself. She successfully rids herself of her complexes and guils and comprehends the meaning of human life where she realizes that she is not the only one facing the predicament of loneliness.

*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 penning her story and she is able to view the situation more objectively.

*The Binding Vine* is, perhaps, the only novel where the heroine, Unni, is less wrapped in her own discontentment and, despite her recent

Ph.D. Thesis
bereavement, or because of it, gets 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.

Whether or not she is a feminist, Shashi Deshpande has de-finitely carved a niche for herself in voicing the thoughts and feelings of the educated, urban middle-class woman. Though Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal have all ventured into this area of writing, none has pursued it with the single-mindedness and relentlessness of Deshpande. She is basically interested in the issues, not just pertaining to women, but extended to all humanity. Despite her disapproval, she has been considered a ‘woman writer,’ rather than a writer who deals with “human issues” which are “of interest to all humanity.” This has been made clear by Shashi Deshpande herself most recently in her article ‘Of Concerns, of Anxieties,’ where she says:

_I have been put into the slot of woman writer, my writing has been categorized as 'writing about women' or 'feminist'_

Ph.D. Thesis
writing. In this process much in it has been missed. I have been denied the place and dignity of a writer who is dealing with issues that are human issues, of interest to all humanity.8

From this it is clear that Shashi Deshpande is more humanist than a womanist or a feminist.

REFERENCES


