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Though not an avowed feminist, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Deshpande's creative talent and accomplishment have established her credentials as a novelist of repute. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under male-dominated society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels highly successful.

A reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals a deep understanding of the female psyche particularly that of the educated, urban, middle-class woman. Deshpande is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist with four volumes of short stories, four children's books and six
novels to her credit. She was born and brought up in Dharwad, Karnataka, and is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Sriranga. She graduated in Economics from Elphinstone College, Bombay and in Law from the Government Law College, Bangalore. Much later, she took a postgraduate degree in English from the Mysore University. She married Dr. Deshpande, a neuro-pathologist in 1962 and the initial years of her marriage were largely given over to bringing up her two sons.

In an interview to Vanamala Vishwanath, Shashi Deshpande says that she began writing most casually and without any intention of settling down to a career in writing. She had accompanied her husband, a Commonwealth scholar, to England and lived there for a year. In order not to forget her experiences in England, she began writing them down. The fact that they were found worthy or being published encouraged her to try a career in journalism. A stint at *Onlooker* further encouraged her to try her hand at short stories and in a sudden burst of creativity. She wrote several short stories which were published in reputed magazines and which were later compiled into four volumes. Her first collection of short stories...
The Legacy, published in 1972, was prescribed for the graduate students in Columbia University. Other collections of short stories are It Was Dark, and It Was the Nightingale. Shashi Deshpande also tried her hand at detective writing and wrote three detective serials, two of which were subsequently expanded and published as regular novels—Collie Up and Be Dead and If I Die Today. The racy style of narration made these books quite popular but Deshpande herself considers them failures.

A close study of Deshpande's short stories and novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian author who has made a bold attempt to give voice to the frustrations and disappointments of women.

Roots and Shadows is the first full length novel written by Deshpande though it was published after The Dark Holds No Terrors, her second novel. The novel highlights the agony and suffocation
experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She finds herself alienated when she refuses to conform to the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings only disillusionment when she finds her educated and progressive-minded husband no different from the average Indian male. She is even ashamed of herself when she feels that she has all along been following the model of the ideal Indian wife. An extra-marital affair helps her to break free from the emotional bondage of matrimony and makes her aware of herself and realise that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage. *Roots and Shadows* also offers us scope to observe meaningless rituals and customs all of which help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority.¹

Deshpande’s second novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, seeks to discuss the male ego which refuses to accept a secondary position in marriage. The novel narrates the harrowing experience of the protagonist, Saru, who enjoys a greater economic and social status than her husband Manohar. The trauma of being the victim of her husband’s frustration...
which manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism is vividly portrayed. Deshpande also makes the readers aware of society’s reaction to the superior status of the wife in a marriage, which leads the husband to develop an inferiority complex. The novel also seeks to discuss the blatant gender discrimination which is shown even by parents towards their daughters. Deshpande effectively conveys the craving by parents for a male child and the disastrous effect it can have on a sensitive young girl. Denied of parental love and victim of her husband’s frustrations, Saru undergoes an arduous journey into herself and liberates herself from guilt, shame and humiliation.

Deshpande’s third novel, *That Long Silence*, brought her into limelight as it was published by the British feminist publishing house, Virago. The novel deals with the protagonist Jaya’s self-doubts and fears towards the affirmation of herself. A crisis in the middle-class family of the protagonist triggers off a chain of events which compel her to view her life in retrospection. What follows is an honest and frank account of Jaya’s life. In her anxiety to play the role of wife and mother to perfection,
Jaya realises that she does not do justice to her talents as a writer. Her constant fear of displeasing her husband and inviting the censure of society.

Jaya is representative of the modem young woman—educated and aware—nevertheless unable to break free from the hold of tradition. In the process of telling her story, she offers us a glimpse into the lives of contented housewives who are suppressed under the weight of male dominance. Deshpande, however, avoids the facile solution of laying the blame on men alone and tries to view the man-woman relation-ship objectively. She observes through her novel that both men and women, being products of their culture, find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles allotted to them by society.

In her fourth novel, The Binding Vine, Deshpande uses the personal tragedy of the narrator/protagonist Urmi to focus attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira—victims of man’s lust and woman’s helplessness. The novelist makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape—a theme which perhaps has not been touched upon by any other Indian writer in English. Urmi tries to reconstruct the pathetic story of a bright and attractive girl, Mira, who wrote poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage to alleviate her suffering. Urmi also
crusades for the cause of another victim, Kalpana, who is brutally raped and is on her death bed. The novelist handles the juxtaposition of the two situations—rape committed within the precincts of marriage and outside it. The novelist gives a moving account of the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence than be exposed to the humiliation and that of married women whose bodies are violated by their legally wedded husbands. They would rather stifle their voice of protest for the sake of social and moral security. Deshpande, through the voice of Urmii, also offers us a glimpse into the lives of myriad other women, who are ostensibly more liberated than their predecessors.

In her novel, *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande liberates herself from the narrow confines of women and their problems and enters into the metaphysical world of philosophy. The novel is essentially the story of three women from three generations from the same family and how they cope with the tragedy that over-whelms them. But in narrating their story a greater emphasis has been placed on Gopal the perpetrator of this tragedy and his view of life.

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Shashi Deshpande's latest novel, *Small Remedies* is the most confident assertion of her strength as a novelist with her deliberate denial of sentimentality. Structured as a biography within a biography, it is about Savitribai Indorekar, the ageing doyenne of Hindustani music, who denies a marriage and a home with a view to pursuing her genius. It also tells the story of Leela, who gives up her respectability in order to gain love and unhappiness in equal centre. At the centre of this narrative is Madhu who, in telling the stories of Savitribai, Leela and Munni, hopes to find a way out of her own despair.

*Come Up and Be Dead* and *If I Die Today*, two of Deshpande's detective serials which have been expanded and published as novels have not been included for study in this book because the very nature of their themes is totally at variance with the subject of this study. Shashi Deshpande's interest in detective fiction is obvious from her review of *A Woman’s Eye: New Stories by the Best Women Crime Writers*. Her remarkably sagacious assessment of the stories leaves one in no doubt about her love for the genre. But a reading of both her detective novels...
drives home the point that to review a book and to write one are two entirely different things. The books are at best amateurish as Deshpande herself has acknowledged.

Most of the short stories are reprinted in a single paperback edition entitled The Intrusion and Other Stories, published by Penguin India in 1993. Almost all her short stories are women-centered, dealing with woman in different roles-wife, mother, daughter and an individual in a society conditioned by the rigid codes laid down by man. The short stories are therefore as true to life and representative of the dilemma faced by modern women, as her novels. As G. S. Amur rightly observes:

"Woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories."^2

A comprehensive analysis of all her work leaves one in no doubt about where Deshpande's sympathies lie. It would be unfair to label her
'feminist' and categories her with several other writers who differ from her in varying degrees. She can at best be called an articulator of women who are caught at the cross-roads of change in a society which is undergoing the birthpangs of transition from tradition to modernity. It is a difficult job, indeed, to give voice to women who themselves are not sure of their own suffering and who stand in an unenviable position today. They are acutely aware of the injustices heaped on them but are condemned to live the life of suppression which was the lot of their predecessors. In many ways their condition is even more pitiable than that of women of earlier generations who unquestioningly accepted their secondary position in society. Her novels contain so much that is the material of feminist thought—myriad roles of woman as mother/wife/daughter, identity crisis and women's sexuality—that all those who have interviewed her so far have inevitably asked her as to what extent she considers herself a feminist. She says:

I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist.

In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly,
very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that actually read books about it.

Deshpande is equally uncomfortable about being categorised as a woman-writer and denies being a feminist writer with a mission. She does not trace the influence in her writing of the feminists like Simone de Beauvoir or Germaine Greer, though she agrees that they helped to place her confusions, and put them in order. She, however, maintains that she read the works of these feminists much after she started writing. The issues which she feels strongly about are the degradation that women experience and continue to experience and the subordination and inequality. According to her:

_Feminism is not a matter of theory. It is difficult to apply Kate Millett or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often_
think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it.4

Deshpande feels that women have a tremendous inner strength, but so much of that strength is used up in merely enduring. Her idea of feminism is best summed up in her words: “for me feminism is translating what is used up in endurance into something positive: a real strength.”5

Shashi Deshpande’s novels can broadly be divided into two groups. In the first group, we can include The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence and Roots and Shadows. In these three novels we can locate a particular pattern. The protagonists follow a route of self-realization—a process, which is set in mo-tion by some crisis. During this journey, the protagonists move back and forth in time. When the process of self-
realization is complete, the protagonist decides to change her way of life. For instance, Jaya (LS) decides to be more assertive, questioning and communicative. Indu (RS) becomes more courageous, conscientious and brings her family out of the cocoon. Saru (DHNT) probably decides to give Manohar another chance and take greater interest in her profession; she does not postpone her visit to a patient, although Manohar is expected any moment. In short, in all these novels the stress is on the decision to change, rather than on actual change. It is a world of thoughts, not of action. It is also an inner world of the psyche.

On the other hand, in the second group of novels we can include The Binding Vine, A Matter of Time and Small Remedies. In these novels, Shashi Deshpande emphasizes on action rather than on thought, because however much one may reflect, there is no guarantee that one will change. The protagonists of the novels in the first group decide to change, but there is no way of knowing whether they have really changed. But in the second group, the change is perceivable in their action. It must also be noted that the process of change cannot be separated into thought and...
action. In reality, these go together. Unless one thinks, one cannot act. Thus one changes through thoughtful action.

The protagonists in these three novels are different from those in the first group. Urmì’s (BV) coming to terms with the death of her daughter comes about through her action of giving voice to Mira and Shakutai. Shakutai herself changes through action. Sumi, Aru, Charu (MY) are all women of action; they do not brood. Leela, Madhu and Savitribai too are women of action and achieve their aims through good deeds.

There is also a difference in the mode of narration. In all the three novels in the first group, the first person narration, which gives primacy to the protagonist’s world-view, is used. In all the other novels, a fine balance has been drawn between protagonist’s view and that of others. One wonders who is the real protagonist in these novels. For instance, who is the real protagonist of The Binding Vine? Is it Mira, or Akka or Shakutai or Sulu or Kalpana? It is possible to argue in favour of every one of these characters and claim that they are protagonists. In A Matter
of Time, Aru, who decides to fight for Sumi, can also be called the protagonist. Kalyani’s silent suffering can make her too a heroine. In Small Remedies, Madhu, Savitribai and Leela can all claim to be the protagonists. Although the story is told from Madhu’s point of view, the lives of Savitribai and Leela are more eventful; they have paid greater price for choosing their way of life, than Madhu.

Let us consider the novel A Matter of Time and find out how the protagonist decolonises patriarchy and appropriates her marginality. Sumi is the protagonist of this novel. She is different from the protagonists of the novels in the first group in that, unlike them, she is not affected by crisis. The novel opens with Gopal’s walking out on Sumi, but she takes it with surprising equanimity. We can understand this if we compare Kalyani’s, Aru’s and Sumi’s visits to Gopal. The first urges him to resume his normal life. Aru at first solicits and then decides to take recourse to the law, but Sumi is with Gopal, not deliberately but accidentally, and only for a brief while. And even in this short visit they do not talk about Gopal’s desertion.
Sumi's life after Gopal's walking out on her is not that of a traumatized person. In fact Kalyani, Premi, Charu and Aru are more traumatized than her. Sumi, on the other hand, not only takes quick decision but also executes them. She first vacates the house and then gradually learns to drive a scooter, looks for a house so that she need not be a burden on her parents, takes up a job, and then even writes a play for children! Like the protagonists of the novels in the first group, she is not reduced to a weeping child who has lost its way.

What is the significance of her resolve? It is through action that she decolonises the patriarchy; her act of creative writing shows that she can also appropriate her marginality. Another reason for her equanimity is that she is not interested merely in the outward form, but in the inner spirit. Gopal's decision to walk out on her is enough for her to understand that they cannot get along; she does not find it necessary to question him any further or impose herself on him. Similarly, she does not want Gopal to stick to his job only for the sake of money.

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Another deviation from the earlier novels is that in *A Matter of Time*, men are portrayed with sympathy and sensitivity. Although Gopal walks out on Sumi, he does not intend to punish her. He is a sharp contrast to Shripati who tortures Kalyani. Men in the earlier novels are callous and insensitive. Manohar (*DHNT*) becomes a sadist when his wife outshines him. The husbands of Akka (*RS*) and Mira (*BV*) are perverts. Mohan (*LS*) is extremely self-centred and insensitive to others; so is Jayant (*RS*). But Gopal, with his sensitivity, knowledge, and maturity is far ahead of all his counterparts. In the earlier group of novels, men impose themselves on women. But the relations between Sumi and Gopal are full of emotional warmth, understanding and harmony. When they go out after marriage and Sumi gets tired, Gopal lets her rest. The next day she is refreshed and cheerful.

Thus, while the other protagonists only decide to create order out of disorder. Sumi actually does so. It is through her actions that she decolonises the patriarchy, and stands on her own by appropriating her marginality.
In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande goes a step further and creates very strong protagonists. In *A Matter of Time* Sumi becomes active after Gopal has walked out on her. But in *Small Remedies* the rebellion, hidden inside at first, finds a way out, so that the protagonists struggle against all odds to realize their inner self. An outward incident serves as a moment of recognition: the protagonists instinctively realize what they want and what they would like to reject. In Leela's case, for instance, a woman who comes to wear bangles on their wrists serves as a means to let her realize how irrational the caste-system is. The women who receive bangles have to wear old saris and have to have a bath after she has left. And yet, they have also to do the namaskar to the same woman who is supposed to have polluted them. The woman has a pleasant personality. Leela sees through the hypocrisy. This is enough for her to outgrow the caste system. In her later life, she marries a Christian.

In the case of Savitribai Indorekar, we see that her love for music surfaces when her father-in-law permits the women of the family to listen to musical performances from an adjoining room. This fuels her desire
and she attends such performances whenever possible, both in and out of the house. But her moment of recognition comes when she listens to Kashinath Buwa and re-solves to learn music from him. The Buwa does not accept her easily, because he thinks that for her music is no more than pas-time. For this, she can go to other teachers. But when he sees Savitribai’s determination, he agrees to teach her. Even then there are many difficulties. For example, she cannot stay with other men disciples, and has to travel and walk to and from home every day. But her determination is so strong that she overcomes all these obstacles.

In marrying her accompanist and Tabla player Ghulam Saab, she decolonises the patriarchy in more ways than one. Firstly, she is already a married woman from a respectable Brahmin family of Pune. Secondly, the man she married is a Muslim. Leela too marries out of her caste and her religion and decolonises the patriarchy.

But abrogating the authenticity of the centre is only one step towards liberation. This rebellion isn’t for its own sake; it is just a means, not an
end in itself. Ghulam Saab is not just a Muslim husband but a partner who shares and understands Savitribai’s love for music. Similarly, Joe too becomes an active life partner who supports Leela in her social work. This is what lifts their conscious rebellion far above the whims of a thrills recalcitrant.

Thus they appropriate their marginality in order to evolve their own independent identity. Leela is not known as someone’s wife or mother, but as a social worker who has dedicated several valuable years of her life to poor workers. Savitribai too is not known as wife or mother, but as a doyen of the Gwalior Gharana. She wants to be known for her contribution to the field of ITusic, which is why she does not refer to her daughter; nor does she identify Madhu as her Neemgaon neighbour, although they have several sittings together.

Madhu too has a hard life after her mother’s death. Brought up by liberated people like Joe and Leela, she develops a broad outlook on life. After her graduation she decides to become self-reliant, even though Joe offers her money for higher education. But she supports herself by working as a journalist. Later she writes Hamidbhai’s biography. But her greatest
test lies in coming to terms with the death of her son Adit, who becomes an innocent victim of communal riots. Unlike Savitribai and Leela, Madhu does not have to struggle much to abrogate the authenticity of the centre, but she certainly has to work hard for appropriating her marginality, which she does through her writing.

In our analysis of *Roots and Shadows*, we saw that Indu becomes a liberatory figure for her family. Similarly, Savitribai, Leela, Joe and Madhu become liberatory figure for others. Thus Savitribai’s art, Leela’s compassion and Madhu’s writing not only become the means of developing an independent identity for themselves but also for others. The protagonists in the earlier group of novels decide to alter their relationship with the persons they live with. But these later women break old bonds and develop new ones; they do not try to run away from commitment.

But the novel does not create a utopia in which all these liberated souls move about very gladly. The novelist shows an awareness of the realities of life. If there is liberation, there is also narrow-mindedness, It
is ironic that the son of a woman who writes the biography of a Muslim gets killed in a communal riot. Munni can never reconcile herself to the fact that her father is a Muslim; she breaks away from her mother. On the other hand, Savitribai, Kashinath Buwa, Madhu and Leela become immortal through their work, in the sense that Savitribai continues the tradition of Kashinath Buwa and Hasina in turn does the same for Savitribai. Similarly, Leela has also taken over from someone, as doubtless, some one will continue in her own footsteps.

REFERENCES


2. P. Ramamoorthy, “My Life is My Own: A Study of Shashi Deshpande’s Women,” *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, 115.


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