Chapter-III

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It is widely accepted that "the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our time."\(^1\) The manner in which to write a good novel, however, remains highly debatable. Many modern critics believe that in the past too much attention was paid to the story or plot overlooking psychological aspects. Some modern novelists have written novels that are experimental and far removed from the traditional story-telling methods. According to Somerset Maugham, these writers who are dubbed anti-novelists, "consider the telling of a story for its own sake as a debased form of fiction."\(^2\) The principal features of the anti-novelist, according to Paul Verghese, are "lack of an obvious plot; diffused episode; minimal development of character; detailed surface analysis of objects; repetitions; experiments with vocabulary, punctuation and syntax, variations of time sequence, alternative endings and beginnings."\(^3\)

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The narrative technique employed by the novelist is also gaining importance, considering the gradual increase in the different methods of story telling. Plain narrative or story telling is still the most common method employed by the novelist who is omnipresent and omniscient in this type of writing. The first person narrative is usually employed by the novelist to make his story appear more realistic and more credible. While novels written in such a manner have a ring of authenticity to them, they do not enable the novelist to look deep into the minds and motives of the rest of the characters. Shashi Deshpande overcomes this problem by using a combination of the first person and third person narrative coupled with flashback devices to lend force and realism to the novel. A chronological analysis of Deshpande’s development as a novelist requires a keen study of the narrative techniques employed by her, beginning with her first full length novel, *Roots and Shadows*. The novel essentially deals with the protagonist Indu’s painful self-analysis. The author also tries to encompass several other themes in this slim novel. Apart from the obvious and central theme of Indu’s relentless probing to discover herself, there is the theme
of bohemianism in the person of Naren in stark contrast to the middle-class values of Indu’s family. There is the theme of woman’s fate in general which is brought to the reader’s notice, unobtrusively, in the form of Indu’s observations. There is also the theme of the old order giving way to the new-symbolised by the demolition of the old house to construct a hotel. As Shama Futehally observes: “this slender novel attempts, in a way, to encompass too many themes, and is unable to develop them beyond making reflections on each which are almost in the nature of asides.”

Other critics like Madhu Singh, however, are highly appreciative of her skill in interweaving myriad themes into a coherent whole. Comparing Roots and Shadows with That Long Silence, Madhu Singh points out that the forner “is the more powerful of the two. In its succinctness lies its strength and the punch.”

To capture the interest of the reader, Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straightforward narration, and instead employs the flashback method. While the first chapter deals with the present, the later chapters move backwards in time, culminating in the final chapter which again
ends in the present. This convoluted narration has come in for some criticism by reviewers who feel that it has only contributed to creating confusion in the minds of readers. For instance, 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." The entire novel is written in the first person, the narrator being a young woman writer who returns to her child-hood home and finds herself caught in the whirlpool of family intrigues. Seen through the eyes of a young woman with liberated and progressive ideas, ordinary everyday incidents acquire a new meaning and highlight the gross inequalities in society. The first person narration also allows the author to probe deep into the mind of the protagonist, exposing her fears and frustrations with admirable candour, inviting the praise of reviewers like C.W. Watson, who compares Deshpande to the master story
teller, Chekhov: "Other South Indian writers have been compared to Chekhov, but Shashi Deshpande, in this novel at least, comes closest to that writer, and the tragicomedy 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 the control is reminiscent of Chekhov."

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is commendable for its honest portrayal of the psychological problems faced by the protagonist, Sarita, a career woman, achieves a rare level of authenticity because of the use of a double perspective the shifting of the narrative from the first person to the third person in every alternate chapter. When asked by Lakshmi Holmstrom in an interview as to how she had hit upon this technique, Deshpande replied:

*The present is in the third person and the past is in the first person. I was doing it throughout in the first. But that's often a perspective I use in my short stories. I wanted to be more objective. So then I tried it in the third. But it wouldn't*
work at all. Yet I really needed to distance myself from the narrative in the present, otherwise it was going to be far too intense. And then I read an American novel by Lisa Alther where she uses this method. And the minute I came across her novel I thought—let me admit it freely—Oh god, this is how I am going to do my novel.7

This is how the novelist manages to tell the story objectively, and at the same time, “No summary will do justice to the intricate web the author has woven through the superimposition of the past over the present, through dreams, nightmares, flashback, introspection and simple straightforward thinl person narration.”8

The Sahitya Akademi Award winning That Long Silence is a complex novel of despair and triumph, of suppression and freedom, all played out for the better part in the heroine’s mind through memories and recollections. The narrative with its slow unknotting of memories and unravelling of the soul reads like an interior monologue quite similar to the stream of consciousness technique employed by the likes of Virginia
Woolf. A particularly bad patch in the narrator’s life makes her bring alive her past through ruminations. Prema Nandakumar, however, maintains that the novel “is not a forbidding stream of consciousness probe in the Virginia Woolf tradition. It is very much a conventional tale full of social realism evoked by links of memory. Not misty recollection but clear-eyed story ‘telling.’” The narrator achieves a kind of catharsis by an objective analysis of what went wrong with her marriage and why she had failed as a writer. According to the reviewer Rita Joshi: “The method is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett in plays such as That Time where the character sits centre stage while three voices go over his past.” The technique is, perhaps, best described by the narrator Jaya herself, who is telling her own story: “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 many bits and pieces a crazy conglomeration of sizes, shapes and colours put together.”

*The Binding Vine* differs in its mode of narration from her earlier novels. The narrative structure in *Roots and Shadows, The Dark Holds*...
No Terrors and That Long Silence does not progress chronologically, but instead moves back and forth thematically, gradually relating one incident after the other until the entire story is revealed. In The Binding Vine, however, individual plots of three different stories are interwoven, bringing together three women separated by age, status and education. The entire story is narrated in the first person by Urmi. To offer deep and intimate glimpses into the life of the narrator’s mother-in-law, Mira, Deshpande uses the poetry and writing in her diary and notebooks. Urmi is able to brilliantly recreate the story of Mira, her unspoken anguish and outrage at being subjected to rape within marriage.

Small Remedies, Deshpande’s most recent novel, works at different levels the personal, the worldly, women’s rights, communal violence, motherhood etc. It vacillates between the present and the past, delving into the lives of Savitribai Leela, Munni, and the narrator Madhu herself. It is structured as a biography within a biography, with the writer, Madhu, often in a dilemma about how to tell her story. She wonders if a biography is an exercise in truth telling, and if it is, whose version must it be?
In all her novels, Deshpande seeks to faithfully reflect life as it almost is without resorting to any personal commentary and explanation. Her novels, dealing as they do with women's oppression, are highly susceptible to feminist harangue. But, it is a rare achievement that she has not fallen a prey to this temptation. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand, who takes pleasure in being called a propagandist, Deshpande protests against her work being labelled 'propaganda.' She vehemently denies any attempt on her part to moralise as is evident from what she says in an interview to 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."  

In another interview to Stanley Carvalho, she once again emphatically states: "I hate to write propagandist literature. I think good literature and propaganda do not go together. Any literature written with some viewpoint of proving something rarely turns out to be good literature. Literature comes very spontaneously and when I write I am concerned with people."  

She takes pains to explain that her writing merely mirrors the world. She
finds that a lot of men are unsympathetic to her writing while a lot of women are sympathetic. The reason for this, according to her, is not difficult to analyse because in her writing, “women see a mirror image and men see, perhaps, a deformed image of themselves.”

But, as she matured as a writer, Shashi Deshpande has undergone a change of outlook regarding the scope of committed writing in literature. This is made clear when she candidly admits:

There was a time when I was scornful of what is called committed writing. I considered such writing flawed because its being message-oriented diminishes its artistic worth. But now I know that all good writing is socially committed writing, it comes out of a concern for the human predicament.

I believe, as Camus says, that the greatness of an artist is measured by the balance the writer maintains between the values of creation and the values of humanity.

It must be observed that Deshpande makes a sparing use of irony, satire or even humour which are the ingredients of great works of art.
Flashes of irony are evident in one or two incidents in a couple of novels but they do not seem to be included intentionally by the writer. The most obvious example which comes to mind is the scene in That Long Silence where Mohan, Jaya’s husband, accuses her of avoiding him during the crucial period when they are in hiding because of the fear of corruption charges being levelled at him. It is during this period that Jaya herself is facing a traumatic time and needs support. Her husband’s accusation, therefore, seems highly ironical and throws her off balance for sometime. She keeps telling herself:

*I must not laugh, I must not laugh... even in the midst of my rising hysteria, a wanting bell sounded loud 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 burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked helplessly.* (122)

She is able to regain her sanity only after she decides to break her silence and record her story.
Another example of Deshpande’s attempt at irony is her creation of the character, Priti, in *The Binding Vine*. Priti who at best can be called a psuedo-feminist provides a foil to the ever serious Urmi. Unni’s compassion for her long dead mother-in-law, Mira, makes her want to set Mira’s random writings to order and publish them. But Priti is more interested in the sensation which Mira’s story is likely to create and plans to adapt her life into a film. Her reaction to Kalpana’s tragedy also borders on hypocrisy because she is more concerned about the publicity which the case is sure to generate. The reviewer Shreya Cheravuri, however, feels that Deshpande’s novels could do without such devices because, as she says, “Deshpande’s style is essentially too straightforward for satire and thus in parts, the book lack as a certain elegance.”

Deshpande also, by her own admission, steers clear of sentiment and romance. Speaking at a seminar, she expresses her annoyance at not being taken seriously by publishers. One publisher happened to reject her story and advised her to send it to a woman’s magazine instead. This irked her and she began to wonder: “Why did the editor say that? It was a good Ph.D. Thesis
story. I knew that. I was pretty confident about it. It was not a sentimental, romantic love story either, the kind that would fit snugly into a woman’s magazine.” Deshpande probably feels that romance, sentimentality, and other such features merely diminish the serious concerns of a novel.

The use of myth is also recognised as an important literary device to enhance the artistic effect of the novel. While English poets and writers have relied heavily on Christian, pagan and classical myths, Indian writers in English have derived inspiration from the wealth of material available in the form of stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas and also local legends and folk-lore. The most often used symbol from Indian mythology, of course, is Sita, who is considered to be the ideal woman patient and submissive. Many other parallels are also drawn liberally from Indian mythology by Indian writers in English and other languages.

In The Dark Holds No Terrors, Deshpande draws a parallel from the Dlmlva story to highlight the sense of neglect experienced by Saru, whose parents show a blatant preference for her brother, Dhruva. Saru’s

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father also tells her how on her death bed her mother had made him repeat the episode of Duryodhana’s hiding in the lake at the end of the battle, waiting for the Pandavas to come and kill him. Saru identifies herself and her mother as Duryodhana figures—both lonely, unloved, defeated and filled with a sense of rejection.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya recollects the fable of the foolish crow and the wise sparrow which she had often heard as a child. She does not repeat the story to her children because of the fear that they might store it in their subconscious and eventually turn out to be like “that damably, insufferably, priggish sparrow looking after their homes, their babies... and to hell with the world. Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, and you’re safe.” (17) Deshpande hints at the way in which the seemingly harmless bedtime stories influence children at a tender age to believe that a woman’s job at all times is to protect her family even if she has to resort to treachery or deceit.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya also recalls the *pativrata*-Sita, Savitri and Draupadi—mythical symbols of ideal wifehood, ironically comparing...
herself to them. "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to declaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails." (11) She feels that she has unconsciously emulated their example by following her husband into hiding when he is faced with the threat of corruption charges. There are quite a few mythical allusions in Deshpande's novels but she does not believe that myth is used as a literary device. In reply to Lakshmi Holmstrom's question if myth is a kind of language she uses, Deshpande says: "I think so. I think a number of us do that in India all the time; we relate a great deal of our personal lives, our daily lives, to the 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 a language, a grammar that one knows and understands, rather than a conscious literary device."

Narrative techniques apart, the most obvious challenge for the Indian writer in English is the use of English language in a way that will be distinctively Indian, and yet remain English.
Deshpande's writing is unplanned and quite spontaneous. Replying to Vanamala Vishwanath's observation that her writing is not obviously Indian and does not draw attention to itself, Deshpande replies:

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.20

Deshpande, however, feels that writing in English in this country is a drawback because it alienates the writer from the mainstream. She seems to solve this problem by considering English, not a foreign language, but one of the Indian languages. She says:

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I believe that English writing in this country is a part of our literatures; I consider English as one more of our 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 pursuits of role models outside, is alienating itself from its roots.²¹

She feels that by writing in English she belongs to a small circle like the regional language writers and therefore, does not feel that it makes her non-Indian in any way. She does not approve of being categorised as Indian-English. She says: “I am an Indian writer. My language just happens to be English, which cannot be called a foreign language at all because it is so much used in India.”²²

Deshpande also very categorically rejects the use of Indian translations in her works to provide an Indian flavour, which was considered so essential by most of the earlier writers. She says:
I do not use Indianisms to make my writing look Indian. I
never try to make India look exotic. I do not think of a
western audience at all. I belong to Indian literature. I would
not like ever to be called an Indo-Anglian writer. I feel
strongly about that.23

Deshpande feels that she is different from other Indians who write in
English because she was never educated abroad and so her background is
firmly rooted here. Emphasising this, 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 anyone really. If I make any changes,
it's because the novel needs it, not because the reader needs
it.24

Shashi Deshpande is aware of the problem faced by the Indian writers in
English but feels that writers should work out their own language. She
expresses happiness with the present breed of Indian writers in English whose writing seems to be aimed at Indian readers more than western. She is also happy that the present day writers seem to have got away from the obsessions with East-West conflict which has little relevance today.

Deshpande, however, admits to failure at times to express the right emotion in a language alien to the characters she creates. She says: "I lose the range of nuances which are available in Marathi, for example, the richness of the phrases that make up that language."  

Deshpande's mind is ever alert to the issues related to contemporary society, and she has evolved literary skill in a manner which enables her to present these issues realistically. Small wonder if the *Times Literary Supplement* showered praise on her creative use of language: "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."
REFERENCES


3. Ibid., 80.


