

Women in the Literary Corpus of Shashi Deshpande

L. V. Padmarani Rao

With a style marked by economy, brevity, concentration and vivid clarity, Shashi Deshpande presents the life of middleclass Indian women in her fiction. The changed post modern society and the adjustments that a woman has to make to fit into the paradigm, with an comparatively traditional cultural outlook is wonderfully presented by Shashi Deshpande in her creative writing. The heroines of Deshpande strive for and obtain certain autonomy and there by realize their immense potentialities for action and self-actualization. Their return home is not defeatism but the triumph of the independence of women. They learn to live in the modern society with self-identity and self-realization.

Shashi Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straightforward narration and employs the flash back method instead to draw her needs and attention. Her novels are a realistic representation of women's oppression, and hence are highly susceptible to being labeled feminist literature. She feels that sentimentality and romance mar the serious concerns of a novel. Her novels are the natural depiction of Indian people and the complexities of Indian life. She no doubt has a genuine concern for women who are acutely aware of their smothered and faltered existence in an orthodox, male-dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for their identity with in marriage. The realistic delineation of women as wife, mother and daughter, their search for identity and sexuality as well lays her real sympathies for women. Her novels are concerned with self-assertion and loveliness of woman in the Indian society. Her novels deal with the middle class Indian women, with a special and serious attention to the disharmony in their sexual, cultural and natural roles. These women are educated, sophisticated, married, intelligent, bold, assertive independent and familiar with the problems of changing world and life.

Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and shadows* (1983) opens with Indu, a middle class orthodox Brahmin girl, returning to her ancestral place after 11 years in order to attend the funeral ceremony of Akka, the old rich family tyrant. Indu's experiences teach her that one should listen to the voice of one's conscience and be faithful to it. Freedom with in marriage is possible if one dares to do what one believes is right and tenaciously follow it. So she decides to go back to Jayant with the hope that she would do what she thinks correct and not be dishonest to her inner-self. According to Indu, an emancipated woman should be listening to her inner voice. So she takes a firm decision regarding her job and life.

There were other things I had to tell him (Jayant). That I was resigning my job. That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing, that I could not enrich myself with Akka's money. That I would on the other hand, pay for Mini's wedding. (205).

Thus Indu learns to see her life independent of Jayant. The novel is affirmative of the individuality of Indu and also the principle of life, which is endless. It is in this understanding, realization and reconciliation that she goes back to Jayant. She also realizes that Akka is not a sadist.

Though the novel gains its feminist slant, it goes beyond the limits of feminists and touches the very predicament of human existence. Though Deshpande provided the compromise attitude, it is a beautiful presentation of the inner psyche of a typical modern middle class woman in India.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) tells the harrowing tale of Sarita often referred to as Saru-an educated economically independent, middle class wife- who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relation with her husband lead her to an agonizing search for identity. Here also Saru returns after 15 years to her parents' house. Her relation with her husband becomes unbearably strained and she returns for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva. The mature Saru takes a practical view of the circumstances. She is neither a completely Western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. In quest for the whole man of identity, she does not advocate separation from the spouse but a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage. Thus Saru is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification; from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence and this is what makes her go to back to her husband, Manu.

And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can. (202)

This is the assertion of her individuality, her willingness to confront reality and not to run away from it. Saru epitomizes the struggle of the modern Indian working woman and her struggle for the liberation of the self.

It is said that literature of any country is the storehouse of information on the cultural and sociological aspects of its people. The role of the writer is to feel the pulse of the society know its sickness and struggle such cares as are in consonance with its culture and feminists argue that literature all along has been turned to the point of view of the male element, woman is often 'marginalized', 'repressed' or silenced in literary works. An idealized woman is presented in literature concealing the bitter reality of her position in patriarchal society. Hence when women write they write from women's point of view, write boldly about their own emotions and experiences.

In her novel *That Long Silence* (1988), Shashi Deshpande presents the story of man and woman from woman's point of view; and of wife and husband, from the wife's point of view. Completely enmeshed in the Indian family system that husband is a sheltering tree, and the happiness of wife lies in keeping her husband happy, Jaya, the protagonist has lost her authority as a human being. She has shaped herself to the wishes of Mohan. She has given up the job she wanted to take; the baby she wanted to adopt and the anti-price campaign she had wanted to take part in.

For seventeen years of her marriage, she successfully manages to suppress her felling, as she thought it more important to be a good wife than being a good writer. She not only suppresses her writing career but also her association with her one time neighbor, Kamat. She adjusts to Mohan from all angles. She does not say anything or resist while changing her name from Jaya to Suhasini. Even her dressing and her appearance bring out Jaya's taught values of the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family, family as security and as a source of emotional strength.

But after Mohan's office begins to affect the affairs at home, Jaya realized that Mohan has lost interest in her. She also realizes that she is a non-entity in his eyes. Even in her family tree, she is shocked to see the name of women missing as it is a "patriarchal family tree". The climax is reached when Mohan wants to use Jaya as a conclusion in the business crises. Jaya's aunt's counsel and father's advice-never to hurt Mohan have made her bear things without opposition and from then on, she begins to use silence as a strategy to avoid any confrontation. The bubble of this long silence gets so bloated that the unexpected crises burst it. She had been lulled into silence till Mohan was a "sheltering tree". But the sudden inquiry against him makes her feel

insecure. When she herself wanted a shoulder to rest, Mohan accuses Jaya and they get news that their son Rahul had disappeared while holidaying. She literally goes into a traumatic state during which her innermost thought, her fears, her doubts and all that she suppressed for the last 17 years come out and he undergoes a sort of catharsis. She had decided not to be passive and silent.

The other women characters presented also are the victims of gross gender inequality. Mohan's mother and his sister, Vimala, too are such victims. Mohan's father was a drunkard and used to beat her up and she made a living by cooking for wedding feasts. Mohan's mother dies tragically and so also Vimala, who died because of the ovarian tumor. Vimala doesn't even tell this fact of over bleeding to her mother, as she knew it would be of no use. Kusum, Jaya's mad cousin is a deserted wife. In spite of every body's opposition, Jaya takes care of Kusum, makes her normal but just before one day to go to her husband, Kusum commits suicide. Jaya's help-maid Jeeja also is a victim because of her drunkard husband who used to beat her, as she could not bear a child to him. So Jeeja willingly accepts her husband to remarry and brings up their boy after their death in an accident. Even the son is no different from his father as he too is a drunkard and begins to beat his wife. Surprisingly, Jeeja supports the son. Jaya's Vanita mami is childless and does all poojas and tries every possible ritual, but all in vein. Thus Shashi Deshpande presents an Indian society and raised her voice against the strait jacketed role models of wife and mother and rebels against the suppression of the age-old patriarchal set up.

Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1992) is about Urmil; an educated middle-class wife grieving over the death of her one-year-old daughter Anu and in the process becomes very sensitive to the sufferings and sorrows of people. As well, the narrative comprises of three tales, one about herself, the other about Shakuntala, a rape victim's mother and Urmil's mother-in-law, Mira a victim of marital rape. For Urmil, the loss is terrible and she feels that forgetting the loss would be a betrayal. In her highly depressed state, she happens to meet Shakuntala in a hospital, where Urmil's sister-in-law Vanaa works. Shakuntala's daughter Kalpana has been brutally raped on learning which Shakuntala's agony, anger, helplessness and shame with fear crowd around her. Shakuntala is all praise for her daughter's nature and physical charms but blames Kalpana herself for the incident. Neither she wants the matter to be complained to police nor does she want it to be leaked in public freely for the fear of miserable future in society thereafter. But Urmil wants Justice to be done to Kalpana by bringing the culprit to back. Despite opposition from Vanaa and Urmil's mother, she takes the matter to the press and gets the case reopened. And thereby finds out that the rapist was Prabhakar, Shakuntala's sister's husband. Sulu, Shakuntala's sister commits suicide at the revelation.

Thus Shashi Deshpande has presented Urmil as a chaste wife whose sympathy for the less fortunate women is sparkled off by her daughter's death. Life is a process, which demands change and not the status quo. The rejection of the mother in a way is necessary for the assertion and development of a daughter's personality. However, when it is the daughter's turn to become a mother, she discovers in her turn, that she cannot escape the binding vine of love and the fears and vulnerability that come in the wake of love. Urmil, who has rejected her mother's dreams for herself, cannot help succumbing to the same weakness as that of her mother's.

I wanted so much for Anu, now, it's all gone, We dream so much for our daughters than we do for our sons, we want to give them the world we dreamt of for ourselves. I wanted Kalpana to have all that I hadn't' Shakuntala told me. But Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams. She had her own. (124).

Mira, in fact, had wanted to asked her mother why do you want me to repeat your history when despair your own. (126)

Deshpande's protagonists often end up discovering good traits in people whom they had earlier dismissed as selfish or cruel. Similarly they also discover the seamy side of those whom they had all along, taken as angles of loves or fair play. Urmi, too, as she comes into the possession of the knowledge of human frailty and strength, kindness and cruelty, opens her heart to the love of her mother and for her mother, she takes up the burden of the latter's long standing grief upon herself, becomes a sort of mother to her mother. The *Binding Vine* completely affirms the mother-daughter symbiosis. The novel also is a critique of the patriarchal ideology, which ignores women's aspiration for individuality beyond the confines of home and family. The greater binding factor for every woman is the need for love and relationships.

Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. Deshpande makes a man the protagonist of the novel, at the same time giving the expressions to the pain, suffering and endurance of a woman in marriage. The novel veers around an urban, middle-class family of Gopal and Sumi and their three daughters-Aru, Charu and Seema. It begins with Gopal entering the house and telling Sumi that he is leaving the house for good. She is so shocked with Gopal's action that she lapses into complete silence, trying simultaneously to keep things normal for her daughters. After Gopal's desertion, Shirpati, Sumi's father brings them to "Big House" – the parental home. For Sumi's mother Kalyani, it is not only a tragedy but also a matter of shame and disgrace, while Sumi expresses her sense of loss and humiliation with a note of stoicism.

That my husband has left me and I don't know why and maybe he doesn't really know, either. And that I am angry and humiliated and confused. (107)

Though their marriage is a love marriage it is devoid of any initial romance, but is the inevitable outcome of a matter-of-fact relationship. In the absence of any obvious reasons Kalyani, Sumi's mother, Premi, Sumi's sister and Sumi's daughters try to elicit a tenable reason from Gopal, which proves futile. Deshpande suggests that probably Gopal himself is not sure about the reasons behind his decisive act.

One plausible reason for Gopal's decision may be his sense of alienation born out of his abnormal childhood. He is unable to come to terms with the fact that he was born of the union of his father and father's brother's wife. A conflict rages in his adolescent mind like "Hamlet" for the reason that led to this marriage. While his father was alive, he was unable to relate himself to his father as he considered him as his mother's guilty partner. Later, their death leaves a sense of great void in his life. He gets completely shattered at the realization that his sister Sudha and he did not share the same father. It is perhaps this realization that has led to his walking out of his family. But Deshpande does not suggest any reason for his renunciation.

This sudden crisis in Sumi's life brings out her great inner strength and self-respect and strong character. Not only does she stoically accept the humiliation and disgrace of a deserted wife, she refuses all monetary help from close relatives. She moves into a rented small house with her daughters and takes up a temporary teaching job to fend for herself and her daughters. She even decides against putting pressure on Gopal to return home though he has been a loving husband and father.

Kalyani-Shripati marriage is even more a failure. Kalyani is an intelligent girl with a promising future but circumstances lead her to marry Shripati, Kalyani's maternal uncle, for the sake of property. Manorama, Kalyani's mother, fails to get a male child and feared that her husband would marry a second time. She is opposed to Kalyani marrying into a new family, as the property would then go to them. Three children are born of this marriage-Sumi, Premi and Madhav a mentally retarded child. Kalyani's real tragedy begins when her four years old son,

Madhav is lost at the railway station while he is to board the train to Bangalore. A son, even though retarded, holds so great an importance in the Indian social set up that Shripati doesn't talk to Kalyani for next 30 years. Soon after the incident, Shripati sends Kalyani with her daughter back to her parent's house. He returns only after his promise to return to Manorama on her deathbed. His return makes no difference to her life or her existence as they live under the same roof as two separate individuals.

Along with various feministic issues like, property ownership to women, a woman's place in the family tree, man's duty towards maintaining a daughter, the deep rooted desire for a son, female sexuality and the like, the novel also presents the mother-son bond through Gopal's alienation. Earlier, before marriage, he felt himself like an outsider and even after marriage the feeling does not leave him. I saw it when Sumi put the baby to her breast.... when I looked at them, that they belonged together as I never did. They were together in that magic circle, woman and child. And I was outside. The man is always an outsider. (68) The mother-son bond is so deep rooted in a man's psyche that it is nearly impossible to extricate oneself from it. When Shankar expresses his inability to protect his wife from his mother's sharp tongue saying, she gave me birth, she brought me up and looked after me. (216), Gopal reflects - that's a debt we can never repay it's a burden we can never lay down. (216).

The novel ends with Gopal returning to Sumi and children. His presence makes difference to the others and her daughters, but for herself she realizes that they can "never be together again" (88). She feels "our lives have diverged, they now move separately" (85).

She has come to terms with her present with a new born understanding to move ahead in life without any bitterness for the man who had been the cause of her humiliation and suffering. Now she is a new woman with a new understanding and consciousness, all set to begin her life a new and confidently as a teacher and creative writer. But the tragic death of Sumi and her father in a road accident gives the novel a philosophical dimension. Probably, Shashi Deshpande wants to suggest that those characters that cannot reconcile with life (Shripati and Sumi) cannot have a place in this world.

In *Small Remedies* (2000) Shashi Deshpande adopts the structure of a biography within a biography. Madhu Saptarishi, the protagonist, is a housewife, besotted with her love for her son Aditya and complacent in the happiness of her home. She plans to write the biography of Savitribai Indorekar, the doyen of the Gwalior Gharana. She goes to a small town Bhavanipur, in the wake of her adolescent son Aditya's death, carrying with her the bleeding wound of that loss. In a sense, she is escaping to piece together her shattered life. But Deshpande's main concern is not Hindustani Classical music but the gross gender discrimination prevailing not only in society but the field of classical music as well.

Shashi Deshpande also gives the picture of Leela, Madhu's aunt, who is a communist and a very independent woman. She was very patriotic and had participated in the Quit India Movement. Being a leftist, she was against Gandhiji's principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha, as she considers that allowing to be beaten up is ridiculous. She believed in communist ideology of equality to one and all, equality to man and woman. But when she finds that the party is a victim to male chauvinism, which ignores merit in favour of gender, she resigns from the party. After the death of her first husband Vasanth, she takes up a job to become economically independent and also to educate her brother-in-law. She also decides to become a social worker by serving women who suffer from T.B. This led to coming into contact with Joe, who had set up a clinic for TB patients. He was a widower with two children, and besides medicine, he loved literature and music. Despite the vast difference in their inherent natures, and their castes, they both

married. Madhu, herself had had a tragic past. Being motherless, she had been brought up by her father and a male servant. She always wanted mother's love and has idealized it through pictures. But slowly she learns that the women around her do not confirm to white-clad, sacrificing and sobbing mother of the movie. (183).

She finds Savitribai neglecting her daughter, Munni, Ketaki's mother unduly partial to her sons, Sunanda manipulating and scheming and her own mother-in-law as very demanding in nature. Her marriage with Som also is disintegrating even before the death of their son Aditya. Once, Madhu, waking up after a nightmare, discloses Som a secret that she had slept with a man when she was fifteen. Although the man had later committed suicide, Som is unable to come into terms with her act. In contrast, we have the lives of Savitribai and Leela with more relationships. This novel is essentially a story of void, of blankness in Madhu's life, but it shows how she learns to live it, accept it and sometimes grope for and grapple with means to fill that emptiness.

Six collections of short stories are penned by Shashi Deshpande and her *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993) is a masterpiece. She started her career as a short story writer and gradually became a novelist. Her first story *The Legacy* appeared in 1977 and *Independence Day* appeared in 1997. Thus she presents in her short stories the thematic and technical concerns of the Indian Fiction writers of the pre and post-Rushdie phases. The 1980s female short story writers presented women's stance in the society from a woman's point of view. The dominant patriarchal tradition and the helpless predicament of a women and her mental trauma are presented by many writers including Anita Desai. In Deshpande's writings, one finds the stronger women characters that are bold enough to face the hostile conditions and live according to themselves. Her female characters neither are so self-dissipating, mentally imbalanced like Desai's characters nor are so westernized as the characters of Shobha De or Namita Gokhale. The dominant trends of the post Rushdie writings like magic realism are untouched in Deshpande's writings. She combines the trend of the domestic fiction with features of feminism excluding recent radicalism. M.K. Naik (2004, 84) opines,

She shows how traditional Indian society is biased against woman but she recognizes that it is very often women who oppress their sisters,.....

Her corpus of writing is full of social realism with a blend of tradition and modernity. Her women characters are modern, educated, middle class and young women who find themselves constrained in male dominated society. She believes in authenticity of the experiences of her characters as they grow out of her own assessment of their situation as she herself has passed through them. She presents the man-woman relationships in her stories with absolute objectivity. Her characters have Indian cultural impact and try to adjust to the changing Indian society. G.S. Amur quotes about her short stories (1978:10)

Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society to find and preserve her identity as a 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.

Relationships between mother and daughter, wife and husband are the most common portrayals in her short stories. The silences in her stories remind one the communication gaps in the modern wasteland. But her women characters are strong enough to overcome these indifferences and fight out for their right place. Her characters are universal and represent the psyche of married women who are modern enough to live their life according to their own way than to be subservient to the traditional role models.

Thus Shashi Deshpande succeeds in creating an awareness of the issues of women of the 70s, 80s and 90s very aptly in the globalized India. The short story *Why a Robin?* Opens with 'peacock' and ends with robin. Peacock is the symbol of tradition and Robin is the symbol of modernity. In *Intrusion* the helplessness of a girl and a married woman in front of father and husband respectively are presented.

No one had asked me if I had agreed (to the marriage). If I had agreed, I had taken it for granted myself, when suddenly a few days before the wedding, I had gone to my father, stricken by doubts, 'why ?' he had asked me, again and again. And, 'what will you do then? (37)

She realized that she cannot do anything even if asked. Similarly is her husband who is not bothered to know her, understand her or even talk to her.

... And the cry I gave was not for the physical pain, but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself. (41)

All women novelists today portray the world of the women in the present day. They create women characters that struggle hard against the social setup to acquire an identity and individuality of their own. Deshpande's protagonists are more realistic and mature than Anita Desai or Bharati Mukherjee. The three deal with marital relationships, the protagonist moving out of the house in search of identity. Mukherjee's heroines move out of India as well. These heroines lack a cordial relationship with their mother. While Desai's protagonists from Maya to Tara and Bim stay at home physically for self-realization, Deshpande's protagonists are stronger, move out of their home, while Mukherjee's heroines move into the wider world by leaving Indian shores for abroad. Anita Desai's protagonists seek a harmony that they cannot obtain; Mukherjee's *Jasmine* alone is successful in creating her own harmony. But Shashi Deshpande's greatness lies in the fact that her protagonists seek and find harmony within the traditional set up. Shashi Deshpande feels that woman must be true to her own self if she wants to realize herself.

Works Cited:

- Amur, G.S. 1996. *Perceptions of Modern Indian Literature*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop.
- Chakravorty, Gayatri Spivak. 1987. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen.
- Cowper, John Powys. 1960. *The Meaning of Culture*. New Delhi: Rupa and Co.
- Deshpande, Shashi. 1980. *The Dark Holds No Terror*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- _____. 1983. *Roots and Shadows*. Madras: Sangam Books.
- _____. 1988. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- _____. 1992. *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- _____. 1996. *A Matter of Time*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- _____. 2000. *Small Remedies*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- _____. 1993. *The Intrusion and Other Stories*. New Delhi: Penguin.

(All references are from these texts)

Eliot, T.S. 1948. *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber.

Kirpal, Viney. 1989. *The Third World Novel of Expatriation*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

- _____. 1990. *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd.
- _____. 1996. ed. *The Post Modern Indian English Novel: Interrogating the 1980s and 1990s*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.
- _____ and Atre, Mukta. 1998. *Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of her Fiction*. New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Mathur, O.P. 1993. *Modern Indian English Fiction*. Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Naik, M.K. 1979. Editor. *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*. Delhi: Macmillan.
- _____. 1982. *History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy.
- _____ and Narayan, Shyamala A. 2001. *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey*. New Delhi: Pencraft International.
- Nityanandam, Indira. 2000. *Three Indian Women Novelists: Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee*. New Delhi: Creative.
- _____. 2002. *Indo-English Fiction: The Last Decade*. New Delhi: Creative.
- Prasad, Amarnath. 2003. *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*. Vol. I New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.
- Reddy Venkata K. and Bayapa Reddy P. 1999. Editors. *The Indian Novel with a Social Purpose*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishes.
- Singh, Sushila. 1997. *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*. New Delhi: Pencraft International.
- Surendran, K.V. 2002. *Indian English Fiction: New Perspectives*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.