

Patriarchal Constructs and Feminist Critique in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande: Analyzing Gender Dynamics and Societal Norms

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Abstract

This paper delves into the realms of feminist critiques and will review the roles of women in Shashi Deshpande's numerous fiction like 'The Binding Vine'¹, 'That Long Silence'², 'A Matter Of Time'³ and many more. It is believed that this study will be able to describe the patriarchal constructs that defined women's roles and identities during the time the story was composed. The study analyzes the way all the fiction showcases that, to maintain their power, men have created boundaries and obstacles for women, thus making it even harder for women to retain power. Pragmatic evidence and critical analysis of oppressions, controls, and limited securities created for women in traditional societies are depicted in this paper. Furthermore, how societal conservative norms would affect the preferences made by characters and influence their relationship and identity are further researched. Supporting a thorough analysis of the chosen fictions, the current research will contribute to both feminist criticism studies and the representation of women in traditional societies in comparison to the current scenarios. This series therefore aims to delve into the deeper complexities of gender dynamics and societal expectations and thereby search for ways in which one might seek a conclusive understanding of how these structures challenge women and how literature conveys and sustains them.

Keywords- Patriarchal, Shashi Deshpande, conservative, feminist, traditional.

Introduction

This study attempts to analyze five major novels written by Shashi Deshpande. They are: 'That Long Silence', 'A Matter of Time', 'The Binding Vine', 'In the Country of Deceit' and 'Roots and Shadows' from a feminist point of view, specifically in the Indian context. Shashi Deshpande is a prize-winning Indian Novelist. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981, for the novel 'That Long Silence'. She writes about the situation of women and their failures in the fast-changing and dynamic socio-economic milieu of India. She also focuses on the conflict between tradition and modernity as far as it concerns women in middle-class society. The very dullness of her characters, the normalcy with which she poses them at the start, gradually works to their advantage. As a result, more and more woman writers begin articulating anxieties and concerns concentrating on women's issues creating a body of 'Literature of their own'. Feminist issues have transcended all the limits of nationality, race, creed, sex, etc. Woman writers have been echoing the feeling of marginality and expressing their revolt, silently against the exaggerated masculine world. The major concerns of contemporary literature all around the world have been to illustrate the misery of women, the increasing problems, their physical, financial and emotional

¹ Deshpande, S. (1992). The binding vine. Penguin Books

² Deshpande, S. (1989). That long silence. Penguin Books.

³ Deshpande, S. (1996). A matter of time. Penguin Books

exploitation, and their mental anguish in a male-dominated society, in every sphere of life. Her female characters are not victims, nor are her male characters the guilty parties. The female protagonists in her books speak up against women's tyranny and male dominance because they are aware of their rights. She addresses a range of topics about women and their place in human society in her novels.

● **Feminism in India**

The word "feminism," which refers to the school of thought that emphasizes women's presence, rights, and powers, comes from the Latin word "Femina," which means "woman." It is an organized movement that supports women's equality in the political, economic, and social spheres and was started by Eastern women. Stated differently, it might be characterized as a political, social, cultural, and economic movement advocating for women's equal rights and safeguarding them against sexual harassment and domestic abuse. Feminism addresses gender indifference and holds that because patriarchy is the foundation of society, women are suppressed only because of their sex. Women's status is extremely poor in all societies dominated by men, and this is also true in India. Women's evolving status and position throughout history and civilizations have had a significant impact on their upbringing and educational opportunities. Women's status was significantly higher during the Vedic era. The community's intellectual and spiritual life included women. The earth mother goddess was revered by the Vedic community. Before the Vedas, society was essentially matriarchal. If we read through the writings of the ancients, we will find that many famous people and entire clans got their names from their mothers rather than their fathers. During the Rig Vedic era, women were viewed as the family's life force and breath.

Even while women enjoyed freedom, equality, and authority throughout the early Vedic period, their standing decline with time, particularly following the Muslim invasion and the Smritis. Manu states in the Manu Smriti:

"Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons⁴."(The Laws of Manu 5.148) Child marriages, the Sati tradition, widow marriage confinement, the prohibition on girls' education, sexual exploitation, and the Pardah system all gained prominence in society. The worst situation for women was made worse by Muslim invasions, foreign conquests, etc. Despite the negative effects of adversity on society, women were able to regain their standing by demonstrating their excellence in the domains of religion, politics, education, and literature. The status of Indian women under British rule was influenced by the feminist movement in the West. British colonization in the nineteenth century forced women to become more visible and vocal. The education and culture of the West have given the Indian woman a fresh lease on life.

Historically, women have been seen as less intelligent and physically capable than men. They were ruled by the male family members and were unable to own property in their names, operate a company, or decide how to dispose of their bodies or even those of their children. However, as time went on, women started to realize their rights and begin advocating for them in a world where men predominate. The woman must empower herself to challenge various institutional systems and cultural norms that

⁴ Manu. (1991). *The laws of Manu* (W. Doniger & B. K. Smith, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 200 BCE)

subject her to patriarchal dominance and control if she is to free herself and advance in life. Traditional cultural spaces and patriarchal culture both accommodate the image of women as powerful. Another thing to keep in mind is that women are characterized as "born free yet everywhere in chains" in the West, where the concept of the self is based on competitive individualism. In India, on the other hand, people typically view the individual as merely a component of a broader social collective that depends on cooperation and self-denial for the benefit of everyone. Conversely, feminists in the West place a high value on sexuality, sexual practices, and the impact of sexual culture; in fact, a new movement known as "sexualism" has emerged.

- **Shash Deshpande: Views On 'The Women'**

It is necessary to examine Shashi Deshpande's depiction of women from a feminist perspective as *The Study Attempts to Study Her Women Characters*. As a writer from the 1970s and 1980s, she presents a realistic image of the modern, educated, metropolitan Indian lady from the middle class. In addition to analyzing how little their lot has improved even in the twentieth century, her works depict the sad situation of the modern Indian middle-class urban lady. Even though Shashi Deshpande vehemently denies being a feminist, she has made audacious attempts to give voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women. Examining her books will highlight how she handles strong female characters and demonstrate how the themes speak to issues facing women.

Shashi Deshpande's first book was *The Dark Holds No Tenors*, published in 1980. Her novels are firmly rooted in India; the characters, settings, and conflicts are all intrinsically Indian. Because of the literary atmosphere in the family, she was able to gain a very balanced and transparent view of many omnipresent dilemmas of the human mind. Shashi Deshpande explores individual and universal predicaments through the lens of the female psyche. Her book *That Long Silence* brought her a great deal of praise and appreciation. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 and the NanjangudThirumalamba Award for her outstanding work in the book. In 2009, she was honored with the Padma Shri award for this novel.

There's a prize of ThiruniathiRangamal , especially for the Best Indian Novel of 1982–1983 was given to her other book, *Roots and Shadows*. Her books address the emotional neglect of women. She has written four children's books so far and has been actively involved in the writing of books for young readers. In addition, she translated a play and wrote the story and screenplay for the award-winning Hindi feature film "Drishti".

These books delve into more imaginative realms and pose important questions regarding the nature of reality. Still, the made-up universe encompasses a lot of territory. It works with "reality" in a variety of ways, including experiential narratives, detailed descriptions of landscapes, the recreation of visual memories reflecting concern for the environment, the combining and integrating of multiple events, psychological realism, which deals with human emotions and responses, and at some point, fantasy and other imaginary constructs that do not fall under magic realism. All of these techniques are employed even as they work with history, memory, and the past, even as they shape nostalgia into a narrative or project the world into future time.

Even while memories are selective and subjectively viewed, recurring dreams, psychological anxieties, and even selective memory are genuine enough in and of themselves, they detract from the realistic

story. We can also find a diversity of characters in Shashi Deshpande's works. Characters from nearly every walk of life can be found in Deshpande's literary universe. They are writers and doctors, housewives with education and without, maidservants, and housewives with ignorance. Some sources of sorrow are unique to women, in addition to poverty, grief, and other general misfortunes. Deshpande depicts the range of hardships that a woman has to go through with compassionate understanding. Sometimes the pain is associated with social taboos, and other times women are forced to endure torture to maintain family honor and are silenced.

● Other Aspects

By challenging societal norms and adding a rich texture to her literary discourse, Deshpande's narrative focus seeks to provide readers with a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies of the feminine experience. She has contributed more to literature than just critical analysis. They act as conduits for resiliency and optimism, offering a glimmer of hope that engenders the prospect of challenging and upending long-standing social systems. Consequently, Deshpande's books have made a substantial impact on the contemporary Indian literary landscape by offering crucial insights into the nuanced realities of women's lives and advancing the discussion of potential societal improvements.

The main characters in Deshpande's works usually experience an internal conflict between maintaining the status quo and rebelling against it. While modern men believe fate is mostly determined by chance or decision, ancient men believed fate was inescapable. Weber⁵ claims that the fundamental tenet of modernity is the belief that advances in science, politics, and economics have the potential to improve human circumstances. Ages. Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of Hindu-Indian culture is rather conventional. Her books are typically related to a common theme. The female heroines in Deshpande's works face the same challenges in their quest for intellectual equality with men as many women do in the US and Europe. The Binding Vine is a textbook example of patriarchy, with its emphasis on rigid social norms and male dominance. At Mira, Kalpana, Urmila, and many other places, the majority is male. Deshpande shows tough masculine heroes who are getting more and more chances to live free despite their criminal history. One male abuser named Pravakar assaults his own relative Kalpana, putting her in a coma and causing her to lose her memory. To enable society to punish him severely, he gets away with it easily. When Sulu, his wife, commits suicide rather than accept the shame she believes she deserves for what happened, their marriage comes to an end tragically. But the mother in law, Mira, of the narrator, dies in childbirth. Men like Pravakar and Mira's spouse can be assured that they are leading fulfilling lives and benefiting significantly from the hard work of women like Kalpana, Sulu, and Mira. The person conducting the investigation has utilized the term "Waltz" in a figurative manner.

● Objectives of the Study:

(i) To research feminist literary theory, its meaning, its significance and the distinction between the terms 'feminist, female and 'feminine'.

Feminism is often regarded as an entity of the 19th and 20th centuries. It would try to distinguish Liberal

⁵ Weber, M. (2001). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (T. Parsons, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1930)

feminism, Classical Marxist feminism Radical feminism, Ecofeminism and cultural feminism.

(ii) To study the image of women in general and to describe how the change, in the position and status of women has occurred through the centuries, in India especially. They have to prove how the women folk have been treated in male-dominated societies across the whole world, why women have feelings of resentment against the patriarchal society, to resist equal rights in education, wealth, and jobs.

● **Review of Literature:**

Since time immemorial, women have been fighting for the freedom of half portion of the total population of this world from male domination. Innumerable numbers of writers have written regarding women's emancipation. Shashi Deshpande is also one of them. Many researchers have studied her works from diverse points of view.

The book “Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments⁶” by Mrinalini Sebastian deals with the novels of Shashi Deshpande from the postcolonial perspective. Such a juxtaposition of the theory and the text leads to the fascinating reading of the novels of Shashi Deshpande uses a non-traditional approach. This book discusses the possibility of postcolonial readings of literary text.

S. Prasanna Sree⁷, the most famous author in his work “Women in the Novels of Shashi” studies the novels of Shashi Deshpande and the women protagonists portrayed by her, to understand and appreciate their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity and to critically analyze their response to the emerging situation in life to fit themselves in the contemporary society. Portrayal of Womanhood in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande edited by Mukta M. Atrey⁸ in 1993. In this book, Atrey depicts the woman characters presented by Shashi Deshpande in her works.

This work deals with Shashi Deshpande's fiction that was published before 1993. “Reconfiguring the Sentence of Her Life⁹”, A critical study of Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale and Shobha De by Geetanjali Rajput under the mentorship of Dr. Deepshikha Kotwal in 2005.

● **Research Methodology**

During the research, the following methods and tools of research were used to write the paper and to reach the conclusion:

(i) By eliciting the literary material on the fiction of Shashi Deshpande, after the study of books and treatise of learned scholars available for the study, it will be tried to prove her a feminist writer. This will include both the primary books as well as the secondary books¹⁰ available and analyze her fiction after close study. Biographical sources will also be examined to gain knowledge about the life and

⁶ Sebastian, M. (2005). Novels of Shashi Deshpande in postcolonial arguments. Atlantic Publishers

⁷ Sree, S. P. (2003). Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Sarup & Sons

⁸ Atrey, M. M. (1993). Portrayal of womanhood in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande. Northern Book Centre.

⁹ Rajput, G. (2005). Reconfiguring the sentence of her life: A critical study of Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale, and Shobha De (Unpublished dissertation). Dr. Deepshikha Kotwal, University of Rajasthan

¹⁰ Beauvoir, S. de. (1953). The second sex (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Knopf. (Original work published 1949).

works of Shashi Deshpande.

(ii) The study of various articles in literary journals and magazines, published in India and Abroad, will be done to gain information on the fiction of Shashi Deshpande and on the feminist approach. Knowledge will be acquired after the study of various articles, reviews, and editorials published in scholarly journals and magazines. Articles will be searched with the help of reference works, like indexes and bibliographies, which provide data about research material.

(iii) In various newspaper¹¹ articles and literary reviews are published and the study of these reviews provides good knowledge. These newspaper articles are of great help as they provide knowledge of contemporary feminine issues and female problems, modern society and its needs, problems faced by modern working women, husband-wife roles in modern society, and the reasons for disputes between them. During the research, information will be acquired by the study of various articles published in newspapers, in India as well as abroad, on female problems and the novels of Shashi Deshpande.

(iv) Next is the inviting considerate opinions of critics and scholars at present living in India and abroad and by using e-mail discussion groups it will be tried to authenticate the research work. As the internet has become a good source of knowledge nowadays and people share their views and opinions through different internet sources like e-mail discussion groups help will be taken from them and an effort will be made to know the views of critics and scholars.

(v) All the necessary information will be obtained through a minute study of unpublished e-journals¹², web-references, research sites and web indexes. Through these internet sources, information will be gathered about feminism (its theory and definition), work done for the emancipation of women, feminism in India and the works of Shashi Deshpande.

Conclusion

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande, that is, “The Binding Vine”, “That Long Silence”, “A Matter of Time”, “In the Country of Deceit”, and “Roots and Shadows”, raises crucial questions about patriarchal formations within a feminist context. The novels brought for analysis deal with the lives of modern Indian women—mostly belonging to the urban middle class their resistance to such entrenched values of society along with male domination in institutions. Even though she has taken her writing out of the ambit of overt feminism, the intricacies of the challenges that the women would be facing while hunting for identity, personal sovereignty, and dignity in that society which binds their roles by patriarchal definitions are found in her stories.

In this respect, the exploration of gender dynamics¹³ in Deshpande as represented in the study points toward the tension of tradition and modernity. She often depicts this in her female protagonists: she makes them struggle to break out of what is imposed on them by society yet break under the pressure

¹¹ Banerjee, S. (2019, September 22). Literature as resistance: Women’s voices in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>

¹² Krishnaswamy, S. (2010). Feminism and the postcolonial condition in Indian women’s writing. *Feminist Review*, 96(1), 72-89. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2010.9>

¹³ Tandon, N. (2008). Gender dynamics and societal pressures in Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*. *International Journal of Social Science & Humanity*, 7(4), 221-227. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJSSH.2008.V7.200>

of modern society's demands. Far from being damsels in distress, these women pose challenges, resistances, and questions at structures attempting to check their agency. They know all too well the unfair practices that pattern their experiences and voice out freely their dissatisfaction with gendered expectations that pattern their lives.

Women's autonomy is one of the major themes in Deshpande's works and how patriarchal constructs limit them to roles defined by men. For instance, in *That Long Silence*, the heroine, Jaya, turns herself around and reflects upon her life and how societal expectations have molded her into a quiet one who is silent and submissive. This novel showcases how patriarchal expectations have caused women to criminalize their desires and aspirations for the sake of social peace. Jaya's introspection describes the internalized oppression of various Indian women between responsibility towards society and the same individual desires.

Similarly, in *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande examines the female subject of suffering and resilience with the link of characters' lives. Such a novel explains how women's voices are silenced as well as their trauma overlooked or dismissed. It deals with the psychological and emotional problems of women, especially regarding their motherhood, marriage, or personal identity issues. Through the characters of Urmi and Mira, Deshpande unfolds how patriarchal structures not only regulate women's bodies but also their emotions and minds: putting them into preordained roles and repositioning them as instruments to serve masculine interests.

While creating such characters, Deshpande doesn't draw a picture where men are villains and women are perpetual victims. On the other hand, she portrays the complexities of human relationships and specifically proclaims that men and women are products of a patriarchal system that molds their identities and representations. Such a subtle direction makes her difference from more radical feminist writers since her focus is placed on the day-to-day struggle of women rather than overt political action. Deshpande's work, on the other hand, looks into wider feminist issues in India, which, with its highly linked cultural and historical contexts, is characterized by huge gender disparities. Studying her novels will bring out problems unique to Indian women, such as those stemming from conservative attitudes and expectations in social settings. For instance, *Manusmriti dictum* which directs women to always live under the authority of men continues to be an actuality in Indian women's lives and forms the backcloth of Deshpande's fiction. Women can never stay out of their effort to fight patriarchal values while trying to establish their independence in life.

Further, it studies how Deshpande's characters try to find answers to identity, self-respect, and empowerment in the contemporary context. For example, in *Roots and Shadows*, the protagonist Indu is caught up in a struggle between personal desire and societal expectations. Here's the novel telling of her movement towards self-realization: 'She as a woman is not free to take all decisions at any time in a situation'. Indu's story, presented by Deshpande, is used to study issues of rebellion and conformity, focusing on problems that women pose in achieving autonomy in a patriarchal society.

Beyond the personal conflicts, Deshpande also engages with feminist themes. She explores the larger social implications of patriarchy in society. Her novels expose the systemic inequalities¹⁴ that nurture

¹⁴ Chatterjee, P. (1990). The nationalist resolution of the women's question. In K. Sangari & S. Vaid (Eds.), *Recasting women: Essays in Indian colonial history* (pp. 233-253). Rutgers University Press

women's subjugation- illiteracy, economic independence, and legal rights. Through her characters, Deshpande raises very important questions regarding the configuration of social, cultural, and political structures that preserve patriarchy and gives them some ways to resist and subvert these systems.

An important aspect of these plays is that Deshpande would throw light upon the struggle of women within the brief academic discussion. Class and gender dimensions in terms of oppression take a corner for this powerful writer. Most of the characters in her plays belong to the urban middle class, but again they are oppressed from other angles - be it caste, their economic status, or family expectations. Their research further underlines the complexity of the lives of women into impermeable variables with the need to add more strain on women's empowerment quests.

This methodology combines literary analysis with feminist theory for the deconstruction of the role of women through Deshpande's novels. It analyzes primary texts of literature together with critical feminist scholarship within the framework of feminist literary theory and shows on what cultural and historical grounds her depiction of Indian women differs. The literature review makes use of a critical perspective on different sources, such as biographical information, literary critique, and feminist theory, to offer a detailed account of the contribution that Shashi Deshpande makes to feminist writing.

Shashi Deshpande's fiction is strongly symbolic of the critique of patriarchal constructs and their impacts on women's lives. Through the subtle representation of female characters, Deshpande has underlined the psychological and social struggles in women's pursuit of identity and empowerment. Her works seem to resonate with what happens among and through Indian women and, simultaneously, add to the global feminist discourse by touching upon some universal themes of gender inequality, oppression, and resistance. Deshpande's novels challenge the reader to rethink and truly open his or her mind up to thinking about something other than what has been traditionally thought about in terms of the roles of genders. It is a vision of resiliency and hope for that vision of women who take their agency and are unconfined by that which seeks to capture them. So in-depth in the complexities of gender dynamics and social values, Deshpande's writing continues to have a definite role in feminist literary studies and is an important voice in the battle for gender equality that still lingers today.