

# Concept of new women and her appearance in the novels of Shashi Deshpande

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**Abstract:** Shashi Deshpande has been recognized as a champion among the feminist writers of today. She is very popular among the fiction readers and lovers and has won many literary laurels for herself. She was stimulated by the leaders of the feminist movement. She could place her confusions in order with the help of the leading figures of the feminist movement. She writes about the women of the educated middle class and exposes their divided and broken selves. Her primary focus of attention is the world of women and their struggles in their patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** perversity, frustrations, claustrophobia, jeopardy.

Shashi Deshpande is a leading woman writer of today. She brings out women's grieves and sorrows, their isolation, loneliness and claustrophobia, their founded and unfounded fears and terrors, their neurosis, perversities, and aberrations, their physical and psychic ailments, their pre-marital and post-marital sex relationships, their life after love and arranged marriages, and their rapes by their husbands and strangers. Indira Nityananadam correctly remarks about her:

Being trapped in this woman's word of experience, Deshpande hopes to emerge as a kind of female Tolstoy who can create real, rounded characters and not merely women characters created for men.

Being a staunch feminist, Shashi Deshpande always pushes her women to the centre and keeps her men on the periphery because she feels that male writers have always subjected women to injustice by assigning them subordinate roles or removing them from the scene when they could perform their roles well.

One of the characters in her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* comments how Shakespeare has done injustice to his women:

Shall I tell you men one thing? He (Shakespeare) has a very limited vision. Now, now, let me explain. What I'm, saying is that his is a typical man's view of life - the man at the centre, the woman always on the periphery..... But it's not just their roles. It's the way he made the woman's personality merge into the stronger colours of man's personality. Look at Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and look at Ophelia, Cordelia, Desdemona, Poor feeble shadows. And when you come to a conflict or a climax, the woman recedes into the background. Just look at the way he disposed of Lady Macbeth. And how splendidly she starts off, really! But so much positiveness, so much action is too much for the poor female and so she bows out.

The term 'feminism' was first used by the nineteenth century French dramatist, Alexander Dumas to refer to the emerging movement for women's rights which was limited to politics. Later, it came to include complete rights for women political, social, economic and education in fact; the feminist movement started in the West in 1960's and went a long way in giving out justice to women. The credit for shaking the feminists from their sleep and providing them an impetus goes to Simone de Beauvoir who shattered the myth of femininity in her book, *The Second Sex* first published in French in 1949. This book sowed the seeds of revolution because it highlighted for the first time the issues like a girl's education, marriage, prostitution and domestic chores which she describes as unpaid drudgery. She has also frank discussion on those subjects which were regarded as taboos by society like sexual initiation, participation and orgasm for women. She also debunks those who are sentimental about the future of maternity in case of women's liberation from their age-old cycle of bearing and rearing children.

In the Indian English literature, the feminist movement begins with R. K. Narayan who pleaded for the regeneration and liberation of women through education and empowerment of women. R. K. Narayan is the first feminist to take up the cause of women against the backdrop of post-independence India. In the novels of Raj Rao and Bhabani Bhattacharya, women are presented either as a weaker sex or as an incarnation of all virtues. These

novelists have either highlighted their weaknesses or deified them putting them on the highest pedestal of life but making them unreal at the same time.

The very important issue in the novels of women writers in English is the finding of new identity and the painful process of pulling out of the culture of one's birth and then replanting oneself with another culture. Thus, their novels deal with a new kind of crisis which only immigrant Indians living abroad experience. Shashi Deshpande, on the other hand, deals with the women who are born and brought up in the Indian soil and who live and suffer in the same soil and culture. Indira Nityanandam rightly observes:

Shashi Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of women - the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Unable to fully defy traditional, patriarchal norms of society, these women characters attempt to realize and preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings. Being trapped in this woman's world of experience, Deshpande hopes to emerge as a kind of female Tolstoy who can create real, rounded characters and not only women characters created for men.

In fact, Shashi Deshpande began writing most casually and without any intention of settling down to a career in writing. When her husband was a Common Wealth scholar, she accompanied him to England and lived there for a year. In order to memorize her experiences in England, she began writing them down. She got them published also. Encouraged by her success, she tried her career in journalism. A stint at *Onlooker* further encouraged her to try her hand at short stories. 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* was published in 1972. Other collections of her short stories are: *It Was Dark*, *The Miracle* and *It was the Nightingale*. In between, the novelist also tried her hand at detective writing and wrote three detective serials, two of which were subsequently expanded and published as regular novels- *Come up and Be Dead* and *If I Die Today*, but Deshpande regarded them as failures.

A close study of her short stories and novels reveals an author who is relatively intelligent, articulate and free from the gender bias but at the same, highly sensitive to the issues involving women. Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian woman writer who has attempted to study the man-woman relationship and the love marriage versus the arranged marriage and voiced the frustrations, disappointments, grieves and personal problems of the middle class Indian women in her novels.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is Deshpande's first novel published in 1980. It is a psychological study of a young woman named Santa who is subjected to gender bias in her family by her cursing and unforgiving mother and later blamed for the death of her brother, Dhruva. She goes to study medicine against the wish of her mother and marries a boy of some lower caste against the wishes of her parents. When she becomes a successful lady doctor, she becomes a few inches higher in social respect than her husband, Manohar. Her husband feels inferior to her and in utter sadism; he inflicts nightly brutalities on his wife. When Santa hears about the death of her mother, she comes back home to meet her father after fifteen years of her marriage. It is then that she realizes that she is a failed sister, daughter and wife. However, she musters up her courage to face her husband whom her careerism has deprived of his manhood. She gradually realizes that there is more to life than dependency on marriage, parents and other institutions. She resolves to use her new found truths to make a better life for herself.

Deshpande's second novel published in 1983 is *Roots and Shadows* which is a study of a young woman named Indu who breaks the stranglehold of her ancestral family and tyrannical and traditional Akka only to be dominated completely by love for her husband, Jayant. When Akka, the rich family tyrant dies, she returns to her ancestral home after her ten years of marriage only to find that her family is all on the threshold of great change. She comes back again to her old family on the wedding of her cousin, Minni and tries to influence the women of her ancestral family with her position, education and career but the women of her family regard her simply as a childless woman. Though she is very much against the arranged marriage of Minni yet she also realizes that even her love marriage is not a success. She finds that even her progressive husband is not different from an average Indian male and she herself is also aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. Her extra marital affair with Naren makes her free from the emotional bondage of matrimony and realizes her sexual autonomy as an individual. But in the end, she feels that her two affairs with Naren are nothing more than shadows and she must go back to her roots for her family happiness.

*That Long Silence* is Deshpande's third novel and it was published by The Virgo Press in 1988 and it won the Sahitya Academy Award for her. It is a study of a woman named Jaya who is tired of her too much happy family life with her husband, Mohan. After seventeen years of her marriage, Jaya's life comes apart at the seams when her husband is asked to leave his job while allegations of business malpractice against him are investigated. Her familiar existence is disrupted. Her husband's reputation is in question. Her future as a wife in jeopardy. When she moves to her Dadar flat, her empty mind turns into a devil's shop. She is haunted by unfounded fears about her husband and children. The claustrophobia of her childhood and the things she has concealed from her husband so far begin to surface on her consciousness and frighten her in the dark and idle hours. Her terrors which appear from nowhere begin to disappear with the return of her husband and children and her effort to erase that long silence that began in her childhood begins to succeed.

The fourth novel of Deshpande, *The Binding Vine* was published by the Virgo Press in 1988 and is focused on the grieves and pains of Urmi, which she feels over the sudden death of her young girl baby without the company of her husband, Kishore. In order to tide over her emotional crisis, Urmi is caught up in the discovery of the long dead mother-in law's diary and poetry written when she was subjected to rape in marriage. She also helps out Kalpana, a young woman raped by one of her relatives and is hanging between life and death in a hospital ward. Thus, this novel is a study of Urmi who is subjected to grief on account of the loss of her baby daughter. It also studies other two women- Mira and Kalpana who are the victims of rape.

Deshpande's fifth novel, *A Matter of Time* was published in 1996. The novel is essentially a story of three women from three generations from the same family and their efforts to cope with the tragedy that overwhelms them. Kalyani's daughter, Sumitra married Gopal, a university lecturer on her own accord. She had three daughters from him, the eldest of them being Aru. All of a sudden, Gopal resigns from his university job and deserts his wife and children for reasons even he cannot articulate. Sumitra has been waiting for Gopal's return for a month or so, but when she gets no favorable response from him, she along with her three daughters comes back to her parents, Kalyani and Shripati who have been living in an oppressive silence without speaking to each other in the last thirty five years. While Aru struggles to understand her father's desertion and her mother's indifference, Aru's mother, Sumitra tries to seek a good job for herself. One day while going to the bank; she has an accident with a bus, in which she along with her father, Shripati dies leaving her three daughters to their own fate.

Deshpande's sixth novel, *Small Remedies* which was published in 2000 is a study of the lives of two women, one obsessed with music and the other a passionate believer in communism. Savitri bai was born in an orthodox Hindu family but in order to pursue her career in music, she eloped with her accompanist, Gularn Saheb who was her lover. Leela, on the other hand, devoted herself to the party and worked with the factory workers of Bombay. After fifty years of these events, Leela's niece, Madhu loses her only son, Aditya and is caught up in her own despair and grief. In order to seek her emotional rehabilitation, she travels to Bhawanipur where Savitribai is passing the last years of her life. She seeks interviews with her and begins to write her biography along with her own autobiography in order to find a way out of her own grief. The seventh novel of Deshpande is *Moving On* published in 2004. It is focused on the grieves and problems of a widow named Manjari who is living with two children, one by herself and another by her younger sister born after she had been raped by Manjari's husband. While she is going through the diary left behind by her father, Badri Narayan after his death, the fractured memories of her past life surface on her consciousness. It is through the diary of Badri Narayan written two years before his death that we come to know about his parents, wife, sister, daughters and relatives.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's search for her identity-an exploration into the female psyche. Her protagonists undergo an arduous journey to discover themselves and this leads them through a maze of self-doubts and fears. In her novels, she depicts to a woman in myriad roles- wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right. The monogamous nature of women is hinted at in almost all the works of Deshpande. In most of her stories, the protagonist shares a greater level of compatibility with a man other than her husband. Deshpande's women are the products of a painful period of transition in society where they have a greater share of responsibilities than their predecessors. They also have a number of avenues open before them and, in many fields; they have also proved themselves better than their male counterparts. In spite of their remarkable achievements, the general attitude towards women has not changed correspondingly. In the institution of marriage, the age-old rules with regard to the accepted behaviour of husband and wife remains almost unchanged, despite an overt display of Western influence.

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