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### **Redefinition of the Self: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande**

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### **Redefinition of the Self: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande**

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#### **Abstract**

Women's writing in the contemporary context is linked with exploring different modes of resistance to patriarchal politics and restructure women's experience with a focus on the redefinition of the self. More and more women writers are claiming the dignity of being a writer who speaks of human concerns and refuse being segregated on the pretext of gender. Shashi Deshpande is one writer who argues that women's concerns deserve the centre space as much as men's concerns. Her fictional narratives make a significant attempt to renegotiate the margins and redefine power and freedom in terms of female creativity. The fusion of traditional wisdom and modernity to facilitate the autonomy of the self is characteristic of her inclusive vision.

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**Keywords:** Marginalisation, subjugation, Resistance, Subtexts, renegotiation, Indocentric methodology, selfhood, centrestage, female sexuality, Redefinition

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**W**omen's writing has been a major strategy of restructuring women's experience and their cultural situation. The woman writer has come to discover in the text the power of protest and subversion. Women's writing reveals the historiography of their struggle to free themselves from the imposed social and literary confinement through a redefinition of the self. For Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, feminist scholarship undertakes the dual task of deconstructing predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstructing a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalised women (*Making Difference* 1). Feminist theory is concerned with power and freedom both of which are denied to women, placing them on the margins. Women writers and feminist critics, working towards a common end, are paving the way for a change of perspective and an opening out of concept, values and structures.

In spite of the fact that the feminist framework of reference has a history of protest against the attempts of religion and morality excluding women from power and knowledge, women's writing continues to be devalued. Jasbir Jain observes that most women writers who protest against being labelled as feminist are doing so for a variety of reasons; their subtexts are glossed over, the media and market confine them to female readership, research and review stereotype them (Indian Feminisms:2001, p 85). Shashi Deshpande is one of those writers who "would like to be recognised as a writer without the qualifier 'woman', or 'feminist' although in her works one may explore and underline gender-specific issues and the politics of negotiating stereotypes of gender and morality" (Naik 17). Some critics puzzled by her reluctance and unable to understand her position are bent on proving her

allegiance to the ideology. Her objections to the term ask for an opening out of the concept and the need to be interpreted within a broader context. She not only objects to the rigid categorisation implicit, but also questions the philosophy and the aesthetics of the creative process. Even as she expresses her sympathies with the feminist movement in her essay “Why am I a Feminist?”, she clarifies: “My writing originated in the fact of my being a woman in the society I live in ... The way I see the world is coloured by this fact of my being a woman, by the historical and social circumstances of women’s lives... Nevertheless, when I sit down to write, I am just a writer --- my gender ceases to matter to me. I am concerned with the same problems as any writer: the problems of language, narrative, structure, continuity” (*Writing from the Margin* 144). The writer wonders what is it that makes women’s subjects inferior and the reality of women’s lives trivial. Gerda Lerner writes in this context: “As long as the transmission and experience of power are its primary focus, as long as war and politics are seen as more significant to the history of humankind than child-rearing, women remain marginalised and invisible” (Lerner 160-7). Segregating the writing by women as “women’s writing” and setting it apart from the main stream is recognised as part of patriarchal politics. Deshpande is of the opinion, “Marginalisation begins here, for with this label one is edged away from the group of writers in general” (*Writing from the Margin* 145). Voicing her anxiety she says, “...it denies us the place and dignity of being a writer who is speaking of human concerns, it diminishes the human value of our work ... Equally untenable is the charge that, women’s experiences being limited, their works can never be great ... And all writers are limited to some degree or the other in their experiences. A writer writes about the slice of life s/he knows best ...” (*Writing from the Margin* 163-64).

There exists a universal belief that literature is concerned with human experience, and human reality and that it records the writer’s response to the society around. Shashi Deshpande strongly disagrees that women’s issues and narratives are inferior in any way and she employs all her rhetoric to argue that women’s concerns deserve the centre space as much as men’s concerns, as ultimately all these are human concerns. With her concern for the right to equality comes the blurring of the binary oppositions as she outlines: “As far as the marginal and the mainstream theory goes, I can put forth my own theories: that the mainstream is but the merging of the various streams and that each stream has its place in the ocean they create by coming together ..” (*Writing from the Margin* 164). She makes a significant attempt to renegotiate the margins and redefine power and freedom in terms of female creativity. Shashi Deshpande, both in her interviews and writings, has consistently claimed validity for alternative perspectives on the one hand, and has avoided celebrating women’s concerns to the exclusion of all other interests. She attempts to project the exploration of female predicaments as a significant concern without which the panorama of human reality would remain incomplete.

Shashi Deshpande, an important an important voice among the contemporary Indian novelists writing in English, has chosen to write in the realistic mode and works on an intricate pattern of human relationships. She interrogates the institutions of family and tradition in her complex narratives and maps the possibilities of the emergence of a feminine self free from the burden of a patriarchal order. Other writers like Krishna Sobti and Anita Desai have questioned family structures and are engaged in deconstructing and destabilising the concept of benevolent and nurturing motherhood, Shashi Deshpande focuses on family and marriage. She sees the web of family relationships as instrumental to the development of the self. The primary objective of her art has always been to “free difference from

subordination and exclusion to become equal” (*Indian Feminisms* 90). She gives voice to the subterranean life of silence which perhaps is more eloquent than the life lived on the surface. Her fictional narratives do not necessarily throw up images of a radical self. She does not seem to believe in mere gestures of rebellion and rejection as harbingers of change. The dawn of true freedom is seen in the realisation of one’s true self. Harmonious human relationships based on equality remain integral to her vision of family. In her essay “On the Writing of the Novel” she writes: “To love another and to retain yourself intact ---is that possible? To assert yourself and not to be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate?” (Dhawan35).

Even as Shashi Deshpande emphasises the need for individual space within relationships, she believes that the female has as much right to fulfil herself and shape her life according to her needs and the potential within her. Writing of the Indian responses to feminism, Malashri Lal observes: “Indian women, despite their acceptance of the intellectual message of the individual, gender based critique from the west, wish to remain in active link with family and community concepts in India ... The point to note is that Indocentric methodology cannot use the western feminist base of binary, male-female gender hostility” (*The Law of the Threshold* 28). Indian women writers in English critique patriarchy and sensitively delineate the intricacies of female thought space. But as Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan make it clear, feminism is not seen in India as strident, anti-family and destructive mode (*The Law of the Threshold* 166). Consciousness raising still occupies a major space and against the complex human reality rejection and rebellion are not seen as the ultimate options.

Shashi Deshpande’s fictional writings employ “a conscious strategy of embodying and embedding issues that are reflexive upon feminism’s anti-patriarchal stance in the narrative” (*Writing Difference* 83). The awakening of the self being a primary concern, her narratives are rooted in the memory of the major characters. Memory serves not only as a vibrant narrative strategy but facilitates the juxtaposition of the past and the present, and the encounter with the past liberates a new subjectivity. Her early novels like *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* share a common strategy of revisiting the past. This journey which is both physical as well as psychological, provides an opportunity to the protagonists, Indu and Sarita, to distance themselves from the pressure of the moment and interrogate their past, their emotions and reactions circumstances. It enables them to come to terms with the baffling present and opens up new avenues of self-realisation. *Roots and Shadows* is not only concerned with the family politics of inheritance and the succession of Indu after the demise of the matriarch, Akka. Indu’s own transgression of familial norms, her hope of finding fulfilment in her relationship with Jayant, her disappointment and emotional bewilderment are all woven into the fictional fabric. The family structures are seen here as the very constructs that generate individuality. Indu’s homecoming makes a reappraisal of her roots possible and this strategy which marks the genesis of a new self is also employed in *The Dark Holds No Terror* initiating the process of self-assertion and self-discovery. The assault on her body by her own husband has subjugated and silenced Sarita and the liberation of the body and the mind from domination and subjugation is initiated by her return to her father’s home. Her mother had accused her of her brother Dhruva’s death making her feel guilty. A reappraisal of the patriarchal norms, of marriage and motherhood, her own experience and the very act of distancing herself from the pressure of the present reality for a while enable her to transcend the emotional trauma and reorient herself. She makes an effort to understand herself and thereby gain the confidence to face reality in a better way. Memory dominates the

narrative structure of *That Long Silence* too. Jaya, jolted by the crisis of corruption charges against her husband is forced into a change of home which triggers a reappraisal of relationships and the reality of her situation. The enforced silence comes to an end with the revisiting of the past. Shashi Deshpande annexes the message from the Bhagavadgita --- “Yathecchasi tatha kuru” --- “Do as you desire”, to underscore the option of individual choice. The fusion of the traditional wisdom and modernity to facilitate the autonomy of the self is something characteristic of Shashi Deshpande’s inclusive vision.

In *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time* the focus of the narrative shifts to larger social issues like rape and estrangement. If *The Binding Vine* juxtaposes two kinds of rape – one that takes place within marriage, and another outside marriage, *A Matter of Time* deals with the dilemma of the desertion of wife and children. In *The Binding Vine* Urmila is not only grappling with her own private grief, but also reaches out to Shakutai in her tragedy and helps the voice of the dead Mira heard. In *A Matter of Time* Gopal’s desertion of his wife and children and his wife, Sumi’s efforts to cope with the consequences showcase an entire patriarchal structure and its value system. Located within the Indian cultural context, the two narratives debate the two social issues in terms of the traumatic impact on the female psyche. The novels critique the patriarchal norms laying emphasis on female bonding and resistance. In the next novel *Small Remedies*, there is a more conscious thrust towards the liberation of spirit and individual choice. It tells the story of women who refused to submit to the feminine code of conduct which suppresses the self and set out on a quest for freedom. The notions of conformity which alone guarantee social respect in return, are rejected, and the fulfilment of the self gains priority. Leela the social activist, Savitribai the musician and Madhu the writer achieve freedom outside the code of conformity and are women who dare to transgress at the risk of ostracism.

Shashi Deshpande writes: “To know yourself, it is said, is the beginning of wisdom. But when we set off on the journey of self-knowledge, we don’t start light; we are burdened with a baggage that has been given to us.” (*Writing from the Margin* 87) She goes on to create alternative narrative perspectives which lend dignity and identity to women. But it is also important to remember that her novels are not one-dimensional. She is a serious artist who invests her writing with complexity, irony, and the sense of compelling inevitability of existence. Freedom and formation of self are the focus of the ideological resistance her women characters put up. In her more recent novels, *Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit*, the effort to redefine power and freedom operates at yet another level. The family with its intricate pattern of relationships still remains the landscape for the enactment of the human action. To Shashi Deshpande, “The family is a timeless and universal institution – everything begins here, everything that happens outside the family mirrors what happens within it” (Literary Review, *The Hindu*, 5<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2004). The individual self is located within the complex network of family relationships. In *Moving On*, Manjari, while narrating the story of her parents, Badri Narayan and Vasu, also narrates her own story. The narrative follows a dialectical mode and memory plays an important role. Manjari is a young widow, her parents being dead and children away, is left alone do deal with the world around and her own sexuality. Female sexuality, a muted theme so far gains greater prominence in *Moving On*. Recollecting old memories, reading her father’s diary, Manjari discovers other truths of her parents’ life unknown to her till now. She wonders, “But can there be any one truth about people? People are complex, undecipherable, Protean – there is no absolute about them” (*Moving on* 21). Her thoughts add a philosophical dimension to the narrative and its scope is

enlarged to include existential issues even as the problematic of selfhood remains at the centre.

Shashi Deshpande's latest novel *In the Country of Deceit* is an extremely subtle and complex narrative in which she centrestages the motif of female sexuality. Devyani lives all by herself in Rajnur after the death of her parents (Commentaries on Living). and teaches English. She who has refused all traditional proposals of marriage, happens to meet Ashok Chinnappa, Rajnur's new District Superintendent of Police. The fact that Ashok is much older and married does not deter her from falling in love with him. But both acknowledge from the beginning the painful fact that it is a relationship with no future. They enter the country of deceit in search of love and are caught in a web of suffering, evasion, and subterfuge. For all the scars love leaves behind, the narrative still celebrates the beauty of love. The novel places the lines of J. Krishnamurti as epigraph: "Love is not mere pleasure, a thing of memory, it is a state of intense vulnerability and beauty" (Commentaries on Living). Devyani manages to break out of the notions of conformity by liberating her body and mind and assert her freedom though at a price. In the middle of unspeakable pain and suffering she is able to say, "Why must I forget that I too had a moment, a very brief moment, when I raised my arms and my fingertips brushed the sky?" (*In the Country of Deceit* 259). The autonomy of self is explicit in her determination to go on with life accepting the reality and continuity is upheld as a life-principle.

Shashi Deshpande is deeply concerned with the themes of autonomy, selfhood and self-realisation in all her fiction and foregrounds female sexuality and identity as major motifs in *In the Country of Deceit*. Kailash Baral writes, "The problem of liberating the female body from domination and subjugation is an area of critical focus within feminism" (*Writing Difference* 86). Feminist scholars have described the body as not only "a text of culture", but also "a practical, direct locus of social control" (*Writing Difference* 85). Shashi Deshpande offers in her later novels not tropes of subjugation and victimisation, but of eloquent assertions of individuality in a given context. "Helen Cixous exhorts women creative writers to write bodies into texts articulating and authenticating female experiences inscribed on the body" (*Writing Difference* 85). In *Moving On*, Manjari who refused the security of remarriage to the patriarchal upholder Raja, her efforts to fight back the property sharks, her exercise of autonomy in her sexual relation and in the novel, *In the Country of Deceit*, Devyani who comes from a traditional background, yet resists all proposals of marriage, prefers to live alone, supporting herself economically and exercises freedom in sexual relationship, are women who display transgressive potential violating the patriarchal concept of chastity. Manjari and Devyani in whom we may see the redefinition of freedom and relationships are the new women. They practice "relational autonomy, situated in family and bound by relationships, yet subservient to none" (Ibid., p.226-7). They live their lives on their own terms, allowing others their space. While refusing to be controlled in body and mind, they do not abandon their personal morality. As Chanchala Naik writes, "...the trajectory of feminist concerns that Shashi Deshpande travels doesn't necessarily correspond to that of the feminist writers in the West. In her case these concerns are relational whereas for most feminist women writers in the West they are individualistic" (Ibid, p.14). The novels of Shashi Deshpande depict many faces of female resistance but they do not provide any clear solutions; the author is able to subtly expose the male and female stereotypes and reveal different ways of female resistance, but never really severing the connections with family relationships which are seen as the existential location of the self.

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