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Making of the New Women in Shashi Deshpande's Novels – A Brief Analytical Study

T. Manason, Ph.D.



Shashi Deshpande
Courtesy: outlook.com

The General Status of Indian Women and Shashi Deshpande

Indian women, unlike their western counterparts, have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually enslaved, and biologically subjugated against a male-dominant social set-up. Any attempt by a woman to rise above the oppressive forces rooted in the middle class margins has either been curbed mercilessly, or ignored in the name of

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social dignity. Shashi Deshpande all through the gamut of her ever-expanding creative horizon, makes it a point to constantly provide a separate space for her characters.

Though Deshpande does not like to be labeled as a feminist writer she mostly focuses on the issues relating to the ‘rainbow coalition of rights, desires, agendas, struggles, victories’, speaking for all the women (Sattar, 1993). Just like a staunch feminist she seeks to discover the female authors’ quest for empowerment through self-expression by escaping the controlling authority of the male in the realm of social/sexual power” and examines the ‘double colonization’ of women under imperial and patriarchic condition. She also dares to “expose, question and challenge the age-old traditions and prejudices in male-dominated society” (Kaur, 2009:15- 20). Her novels eclectically employ the post-modern technique of deconstructing the patriarchic culture and customs, and revealing these to be man-made constructs (Atrey and Kirpal, 15).

Harmonizing Man-Woman Relationship

Deshpande sees the need to harmonize the man-woman relationship as equal partners. There is no victory in the subjugation and destruction of the male. The need is to see each other’s need for space, freedom of expression and love (Kaur, 2009: 24). Atrey and Kirpal also reinforce this by quoting Deshpande from her interview with Malini Nair, “aggressive feminism does not ring true in the Indian context and that for Indian women selfhood will only come from ‘probing and thinking for oneself’(07). Deshpande doesn’t believe in taking ‘the militant anti-men and anti-marriage stance’. We can also hear an echo of this in the following lines from Beena Agarwal, “The fictional world of Shashi Deshpande is not directed towards the annihilation of the existing order, but it seeks a reorientation of society where a more balanced relationship might have been possible” (217).

Female Protagonists

Female protagonists in Deshpande’s novels stand apart from that of their counterparts in the writings of many contemporary women writers. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, illusion and reality, and the mask and the face, they lead a life of restlessness. Progressing along the axis of delimiting restrictions, self-analysis, protest and self-discovery, they try to create both physical as well as psychological space for themselves to grow on their own.

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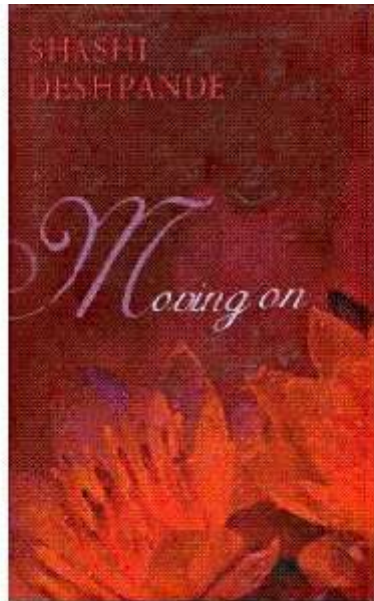
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Like the archetypal New-Woman, Deshpande's protagonists are all educated, proactive and progressive, moving on undaunted. They rebel against the dictates of their domestic duties and social sanctions, challenge 'male -devised orthodoxies about women's nature, capacities and roles' (Kaur, 56) and existential insecurity. Transgressing the socially conditioned boundaries of the body, they frankly and frequently enter into a dialogic relationship with their bodies, both within and without; represent values, beliefs and ideas which are modern, and stand in opposition to the traditional ones. Being the representatives of the new generation of self-actualizing women, they seek to figure out new ways of dealing with their problems, instead of running away from them, and realizing that the solutions lie within themselves. They have a balanced, practical approach to their problems. They realize that victory does not lie in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather than bringing him to see the indispensability of each other's space (Kaur, 91). They start up as rebellious and discontented, but end up renewed and rejuvenated.

Disrespect for the Taboos

Disrespect for the social taboos concerning the human body is one of the challenging issues that Deshpande picks up to show how the New Woman conducts herself. The present paper attempts to analyze the progression of women from passive resistance to self-discovery in some of her selected novels.

Moving On



The plot of *Moving On* spanning over four generations presents a kaleidoscope of relationships – evolving, expanding and dissolving, because of the inherent contradictions. The spirit of rebellion provides the right impetus to the characters to move on with confidence, at least with self-awareness. Vasu, Badrinath’s wife, widely known for her shyness and reticence, was an ardent advocate of freedom, always wanted ‘to be on her own’, freedom from the constant demands on her, from the claims, from the need to be ‘aamchi mai’(125)”. She spews out her suppressed anger in the form of the stories that she writes. Writing becomes an important means for her to fight the patriarchic set up. It’s being a symbol of rebellion, Deshpande’s protagonists employ it as one of the ways to liberation, to establish independent identity and ‘break up of shackles that chain women’s creativity and individual talent’ as is presented in the novels *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *Roots and Shadows*, *A Matter of Time* and *Moving On* (Kaur, 60 and 93).

Manjari, Vasu’s daughter, also opposes the things which she doesn’t like, and expresses her desire for freedom. Initially she was a nice girl who ‘needed everybody’s approval’ for doing anything and ‘was willing to do anything to please others’ (69) but she turns into a rebel in the later part of her life. The socialization process in patriarchic societies desexualizes not only the body of a woman, but also her mind and feelings. Thus the ideal woman is a castrated creature: a female eunuch. Germaine Greer advises women to take possession of their body and to use it to attain emancipation (Kaur, 27).

Shashi Deshpande seems to follow her advice closely and prepare her protagonists to claim

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their right over their body and sexuality, and pave the route to emancipation. Just like a post-modern, progressive woman Manjari makes the desires of her body open before all. She remarks, ‘all the confusion had vanished. My body is clear now about what it wanted: it wanted Shyam. It wanted Shyam’s love, it wanted his body.’”(187). She transgresses by crossing beyond the defined domains of her parents and marries Shyam. Towards the end of his life, Badrinath himself justifies disobedience and rebellion as an indication of growth. In his own words,

To me, disobedience is not the original sin; in fact I don’t see it as a sin at all. It is a part of growing up, of moving on. Without the serpent we would have remained forever our child-selves, living in a state of innocence, nothing happening, our story stalled. We need the serpent to keep the story moving (205).

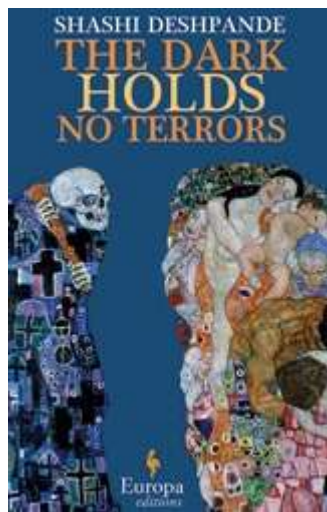
The beauty and boldness of the body over the mind is so fervidly established in this novel that it comes between the mind and the heart time and again, and shakes the foundation of all relationships. In the character of Manjari, we find the body pulling the strings of her life. She herself delightfully recollects her childhood when she had ‘an innocent relationship with her body, with her unexpressed sexual desires and her body’s needs’ (71). After Shyam’s death she thinks of getting united with Raja, her old paramour, but Sachi’s abhorrence for any relationship with a male member stops her from going ahead. She is completely aware of all the things that she lost because of her relationship with Shyam, because of her obsession with the desires of the body. Hence she doesn’t want to negate her life again by getting into a new relationship with Raja. Frightened by the repeated calls from the property sharks, she seeks the help of Raja but doesn’t leave the house. She boldly faces the problems of life, and tries her best to remain self-sufficient all along.

After Shyam’s death Manjari tries to give all attention to her children, but the desires of her body distract her again. She tries to compensate her loss through her physical communion with other people. Face to face with Sachi, she thinks that she had wronged both of her children by making herself invulnerable, by being self-sufficient (311). At the end of the novel she isn’t successful in going back to Raja, but she is contented that her children have found a family in Raja’s family. In spite of failures on all sides, she doesn’t

give in. Like a staunch optimist she still believes in the potentiality that life has to spur us to move on and onIn her own words:

The search is doomed to failure. Yes, Baba, you are right, we will never find what we are looking for, and we will never get what we are seeking for in other humans. We will continue to be incomplete, ampersands all of us, each one of us. Yet the search is what it's all about, don't you see, Baba, the search is the thing (343).

The Dark Holds No Terrors



The Dark Holds No Terrors by Shashi Deshpande, is a totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man's unquestionable superiority, and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues (Paul Premila, 30). Remarkable for the exploration of the inner landscape, it unravels the many questions haunting the female mind. It projects the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her identity and individuality. Saru, the protagonist in the novel, is a symbol of a progressive woman who tries to exercise her influence over whatever she does, wherever she goes. She always prefers to take the road less travelled. She doesn't like women friends who mould themselves into the traditional stereotypes and remain the silent, nameless waiter at the dining table. On the contrary, she has great respect for the dignified, self-reliant teacher-friend Nalu, who despises all compromises, and remains single to lead a meaningful life of convictions.

At home she always tries to control Dhruva, her brother and views her mother as a rival

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in the game of power as her mother always resisted all the progressive moves she undertook, and had disproportionate love for her son. She reacts in the same aggressive tone when she attains puberty, and her mother tells her that she is a woman now. Saru doesn't want to be placed in the class of her mother. She considers economic independence as an insurance against any subordination. She leaves her parental abode to start her life on her own, taking the first step towards independence. Her marital life is not smooth. Manohar, her husband, was the master of the family before she got recognition as a doctor. Earlier she was known as the wife of Manohar, but now after the explosion in the factory people recognized Manohar as the doctor's husband. The remarks of Atrey and Kirpal are noticeable:

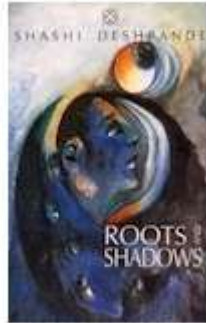
Unable to assert his 'manliness' over her (Saru) like a traditional male (that is, in economic terms), he resorts to sexual molestation of her nightly while playing the loving husband during the day. His purpose, though repressed in the subconscious, is to 'punish' her for taking on the 'male' role, and to assert his superiority and power through physical violence (43).

Saru has a tough time during this period because Manu basks in her glory during the daytime, but ill-treats her in the nights. Manu's indifference to her becomes intolerable, and she uses sex as a tool of revenge and final estrangement. With her responsibilities increasing outside home, she recoils from Manu's love-making and he takes her rejection of sex as a rejection of himself.

In spite of this incompatibility and role-reversal, Saru clings on to this 'tenuous shadow of marriage' whose 'substance had long been disintegrated'. She doesn't want to prove her mother right. Not getting disheartened over this, she takes a bold step, puts an end to this façade by moving away from home. This physical displacement from her own home results in her psychological enlightenment, gives her a chance to review her relationship with all. Making a rational analysis of the situation she understands that the problem lies as much within as outside. Earlier it was Manu's inadequacy that she saw. Now she sees her own inadequacy too – her inability to combine roles, and be a source of love as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. With the self-realization comes the strength and decision to confront the problems. The metaphor of 'home' used twice in the novel shows

her experiments with life, the challenges, the apparent successes and failures which lead to her final reconciliation with her family.

Roots and Shadows



Roots and Shadows, as the title suggests, is a symbolic representation of the dialectical nature of man and woman set against each other in material terms for power struggle. Indu, the female protagonist in the novel, is like a bridge between the ‘Roots’ and ‘Shadows’. When the shadows start surfacing at the death of Akka, it is the roots that start disintegrating. The authority and monopoly associated with the roots die a natural death, when Indu takes over as the owner of Akka’s house. The past, a tradition of unity, of respect and of allegiance, comes to an end and the illusory future sparkles upon the seamy present, full of doubts and questions. Meitel rephrases this in the following words:

“Roots” stands for tradition and “shadows” signifies the marginal culture. The dying tradition is soon to become shadows against a backdrop of apocalyptic change. Also it suggests that if ever the root is removed, life is bereft of the binding force that gives way to new possibilities (79).

Indu, an indomitable feminist is independent, uninhibited and insulated against the family influence. She doesn’t like the dominance that Akka exercises over the other members of the family, despises all the superstitious traditions, class and caste consciousness which the family strongly encouraged. Indu does not even hesitate to hate her father who deserted her when she was hardly fifteen days old, only because she was a girl. She had been rebellious right from her childhood. Though she was trained to be obedient, accepting, meek and submissive, she swore that she ‘would never pretend to be what she

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was not' (158). She strongly resents the Hindu tradition of women patiently clearing up the mess with their bare hands after every meal, and women like Kaki even eating off the same dirty plate their husbands had used. She questions herself "Martyrs, heroines or just fools?" and boldly challenges a tradition like this (73).

Non-conformist Ideas

Indu's non-conformist ideas are not directed against Akka, the person but the system of authoritarian ideas, conventional views and superstitions that she represented. When Akka puts her confidence in Indu by making her the heir to her property, all the other male members of the family accept her, but not without reservation. She is educated and is successful as a journalist, but for them she is a married woman, an outsider. The women folk in her family treat her as a childless woman, not knowing the fact that Indu and her husband had opted out of it for domestic and personal reasons.

Marital Life

As a young girl, just like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, she liberated herself from the infringing and destructive influence of the family by running away from home, as her ancestral home represented 'an authoritative male voice'(6). She hated and challenged Akka's domination, and too much of authority on matters of love, marriage, education. Everybody at home, except Indu, admired Akka very much because of her leadership qualities, and her way of assuring happiness for everybody. But Indu revolted against Akka and decolonized herself by marrying Jayant, a man of different caste, speaking a different language. Unfortunately her marital life doesn't follow the path she visualizes. It turns into something unpalatable, where the wife is supposed to dance to the tune of the husband. What she demands from her husband is not judgment but suggestion, not criticism but appreciation, emphasis on virtues, not weaknesses. At the beginning of the novel Indu scorns the institution of marriage which involves no sacred tie between two souls, but a conjugation of two bodies with the purpose of sexual gratification.

Her marriage with Jayant was apparently successful initially. With Jayant she experienced a sense of completion and wholeness. But gradually it faltered, and finally resulted in

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their estrangement. There was disillusion as well as disorientation which forced her to believe that she was an outsider who was not affected by ‘the waves of sorrow, sympathy and comradeship’ rippling around her. Jayant betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, peace and happiness.

In spite of being married to Jayant, she doesn’t hesitate to use words like ‘kiss’, ‘rape’, ‘deflowered’ and ‘orgasm’ while talking to Naren. She even dares to have physical relationship with Naren more than once, and is not at all apologetic about it. Affair with Naren becomes a metaphor for her rebellion against Jayant’s humiliation of her for being the initiator in their sexual relationship. The affair acts as a catharsis and frees her of self-imposed limits (Atrey and Kirpal, 18). Everywhere, both in her personal life and her professional life, she encounters people who restrict her freedom, and force her to submit to their dictates.

Voice of Liberated Women

The novel is a manifesto of a liberated woman’s voice, expressed through her body, her consciousness and her pen. Indu uses these weapons one after another to challenge the male power structure closing in on her from all sides. She tries to redefine herself in relation to others, particularly after inheriting a major chunk of Akka’s property, and bridges the gap between the two generations. Her enhanced economic position provides her opportunity to have the reins over others.

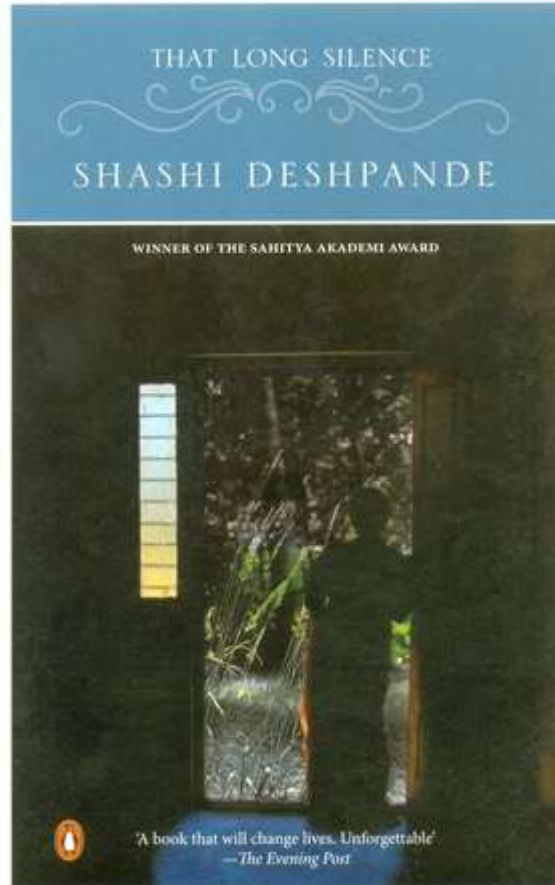
At the end of her journey away from home she, just like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror*, and Jaya in *That Long Silence*, realizes that it is she who was to blame for the marital discord that separated her from her husband. Her uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self finally finds its roots in her husband’s home, with all the shadows disappearing. Coming out of the emotional wreckage that had shattered her, she decides to start a meaningful life of peace and harmony with her husband. She is very much confident of an existence full of hope. She declares towards the end of the novel:

If not this stump, there is another. If not this tree, there will be others.

Other trees will grow, other flowers will bloom, and other fragrances

will pervade other airsI felt as if I was watching life itself
....endless, limitless, formless and full of grace (202).

That Long Silence



That Long Silence is apparently different from the other novels as far the theme is concerned, but the motif remains the same. Here also we find the novelist projecting a character that hails from a conservative, middle-class family background, possesses the inherent strength of character but is inhibited by constricting traditional influences.

Jaya tries to fall into the pattern by suppressing her own wishes and acting according to her husband's intentions. She follows him so closely that finally she's left with no identity of her own, 'just emptiness and silence' (144). She is up in arms against the traditional notion of an ideal marriage. She violently projects her resistance to such a tradition:

If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband
could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my

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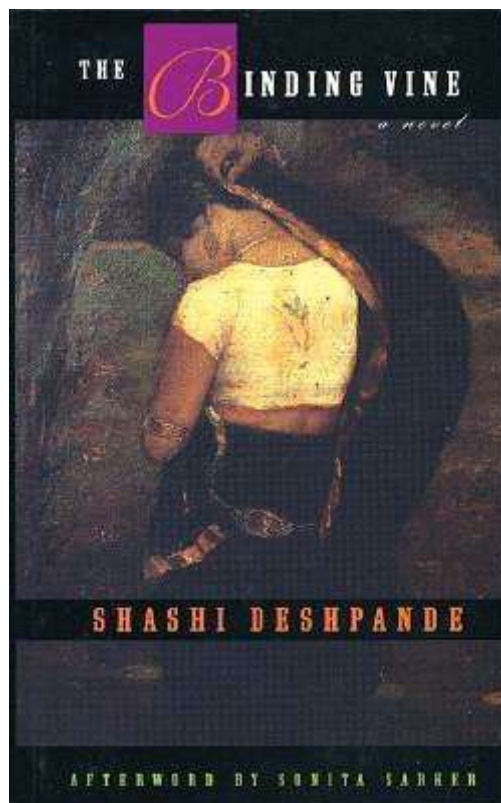
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eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything (61).

The Binding Vine



The Binding Vine is another venture in the same direction, showing the trajectory of a woman's predicament, perseverance, perspicacity and victory in a male-dominated world. It is through the consciousness of the female protagonist that the novelist describes her search for love, meaning and happiness in life. The fine fusion of psychological suffering, physical pain, and the exposition of social reality makes this text as a perfect voice of a subaltern who passes through the stage of silence to self-realization (Agarwal, 98).

The New Woman

The New Woman looks at sex without a spiritual and emotional base from a different perspective, and sees absolutely no difference between rape, and this kind of forced physical relationship. Gender discrimination is another ailment that women in most traditional societies are subjected to. The women in Deshpande's novels go through rebellion, separation from family, and many different experiences that define who they

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are as individuals before they become empowered women who can balance their many roles in a home very well. They need to be respected and loved, not subjugated and abused. Only then love and family life can go hand in hand, in complete harmony; then we can say, love, the binding vine, sustains all relationships, and that will provide the strength to survive.

Women in Their Trajectory

An in-depth analysis of Deshpande's female characters reveals the trajectory of the physical, intellectual and psychological growth of the New Woman through their constant resistance, struggle and success. The apparent failures at different phases of their lives do not jeopardize their inherent strength; on the contrary, they awaken their superior selves and provide them the impetus to look forward for newer ways of living their lives. Notwithstanding their improved socio-economic position they always try their best to maintain a balanced social relationship. From the quagmire of their troubles and tribulations, they always rise victorious, not vanquished, rejuvenated, not refurbished.

Deshpande, unlike the feminists, does not make her characters become all time rebels against patriarchic hegemony; she makes them grow with the renewed knowledge of their own selves *vis-à-vis* the world they live in.

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