

Exploring the Female Psyche: A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's Fiction

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award, is celebrated for her sincerity and skill in voicing the concerns of urban, educated, middle-class women. Deshpande has emerged as a writer with profound insight into the female psyche, seeking to understand the mysteries of life and her protagonist's place within it. Deshpande's fiction reflects the advancements of feminism alongside the harsh realities existing in a patriarchal society. This paper undertakes a feminist reading of Deshpande's novels to explore the quest for identity and the need for physical and emotional space that define her protagonists, as well as their awareness of the impossibility of a unified, monolithic identity and a fixed narrative position. Most importantly, there is a movement towards self-knowledge, which involves a long and painful process of introspection and analysis.

Key Words: Female psyche, feminine consciousness, patriarchal norms, feminism.

Introduction

Feminist critique has predominantly focused on the feminine mind as explored in literature. Particularly post-independence, Indian English literature has seen a surge of women writers whose stories challenge patriarchal institutions and redefine female subjectivity. Among them,

Shashi Deshpande distinguishes herself with her psychological depth and realistic portrayal of women grappling with personal desires and social expectations. Her protagonists are highly educated urban middle-class women who strive hard to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. They are not heroic ideals or ordinary victims; rather, they are ordinary women who face the challenges of everyday life as well as difficult emotional and existential dilemmas.

Shashi Deshpande's Feminist Vision

Shashi Deshpande's genuine concern for women's issues is evident in her novels, which are firmly rooted in the realm of socio-moral sexual fiction. Each of her novels, in the words of A.K. Awasthi, "catches on the subtle psychological complexity of the individual mind." They critique the individualistic outlook of women. The point upheld in her novels is the perspective that "a woman, even when she is talented and highly educated, has to realise social responsibilities and think also of those who are around her, rather than lead an insular existence." Deshpande presents the world of mothers, daughters, and wives, while also indirectly portraying fathers, sons, and husbands, examining the relationships between men and women, as well as those among women themselves.

Literature Review

This study employs a multi-dimensional feminist framework, primarily utilising liberal, existential, and psychoanalytic feminist theories to analyse the intricate representation of the female mind in the works of Shashi Deshpande. The existential feminist perspective of Simone de Beauvoir, whose influential work, *The Second Sex* (1949), emphasises that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This highlights the centrality of identity development as influenced by social and cultural structures in this research. This paper examines Deshpande's protagonists who endeavour to reconcile tradition and modernity, undergoing analogous processes of becoming, through which their voices manifest via introspection and silent resistance.

Elaine Showalter's gynocritical approach (1979) posits the examination of women's writing as a unique literary tradition, which also guides this study by prompting an introspective analysis of Deshpande's female characters and their tales. Toril Moi's feminist literary theory advances this discourse by differentiating between female, feminist, and feminine writing, thereby contextualising Deshpande's narratives within both Western and Indian feminist frameworks.

The Dark Holds No Terrors: Trauma and Identity

Shashi Deshpande's first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a compelling story about a well-educated, financially independent woman battling various obstacles. It narrates the tale of Saru, her relationships with her husband and parents, and her agonising journey of self-discovery. The novel explores Saru's frustrations, her understanding of her issues, her recognition of the crisis in her life, and her efforts to find resolution. Saru enjoys a respectable financial and social status than her husband, for which she becomes a victim of his sexual sadism. His sexual sadism stems from his wounded male ego, which cannot handle Saru's higher social and financial standing. This illustrates how fragile masculinity is in a patriarchal society. The work critically examines the gendered power dynamics within marriage, where love and violence coexist, revealing the contradictions of a culture that symbolically venerates women while suppressing them in practice.

Roots and Shadows: A Feminist Exploration of Female Identity and Autonomy

Shashi Deshpande's second novel, *Roots and Shadows*, was awarded the Thirumathi Rangammal prize. The book criticises the institution of marriage and the false idea of women's freedom, especially through Indu's disappointment with her husband Jayant, who seems liberal but holds her to traditional standards. Deshpande discreetly shows how women like Indu go through psychological anguish when they want to express their power but are held back by invisible emotional and cultural expectations. The novel also shows how women pass down silence and sacrifice from one generation to the next, and how both revolt and conformity can exist in the minds of women. Indu attempts to regain her voice by writing and reflecting about herself, and Deshpande offers a strong critique of patriarchal involvement, presenting a complex portrayal of feminine awareness that is neither entirely free nor completely oppressed. So, *Roots and Shadows* is a significant feminist novel that looks at how gender, identity, tradition, and resistance come together in the lives of modern Indian women.

The novel also explores the unfulfilled wishes and unhappy marriages among women living in a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household. Through Akka, the young sister of Indu's grandfather, who returns to her parental house as a wealthy widow after the death of her husband, it depicts a common feature of deprived womanhood. Deshpande boldly addresses the so-called arranged marriages through Akka's marriage. Stories by Deshpande have the genuineness of women's voices. The novel tells the tale not of a person but of the institution of marriage, threatened by shifting forces and the potential for dissolution.

It also highlights the agony and suffocation experienced by Indu, who feels trapped by the rigid rules imposed by a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Indu chooses an inter-caste marriage with Jayanth, a man of her choice. Escaping the familial constraints of tradition and religiosity, she finds herself in another realm—one characterised by the extreme middle-class pressures to achieve upward mobility in a materialistic society. Although she married a man of her choice, she encounters difficulties as her so-called progressive husband is not different from an ordinary Indian male. The novel takes a feminist stance as Indu strives to establish her identity. Deshpande, in her essay, 'The Writing of a Novel', writes about Indu, "Indu sprang out of the claustrophobic world with a courage I admired. She was free. But often to be free is to be lonely. I shared this bleak thought with Indu: 'Even Indu realizes, we flatter ourselves that we've escaped the compulsions of the past, but we are still pinned to it by little things.'"

That Long Silence: Voice, Silence, and the Struggle for Selfhood

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, is an important feminist novel. The publication of *That Long Silence* by the Virago Publishing House, London, brought fame to Shashi Deshpande. The story is about Jaya, a middle-class woman who wants to be a writer and is educated, and strives hard to hide her feelings after her marriage to Mohan starts an arduous path of self-discovery. After seventeen long years, Jaya feels the need to break the silence, to revolt, and to re-establish her identity. Deshpande uses Jaya's concepts to show how the gendered demands of silence, obedience, and sacrifice can harm people's mental health. 'Long silence' is a strong feminist theme that highlights how the main character's voice is silent and how women in patriarchal societies don't have a voice. Jaya's understanding that "I had learnt it at last, no questions, no retorts, only silence" exemplifies how silence functions as both an acquired behaviour and a survival mechanism ingrained in her psyche. Drawing from Elaine Showalter's theory of feminist writing, which underlines the need to reclaim female narratives from inside, Jaya's eventual return to writing symbolises a timid step towards empowerment and self-reclamation. Feminist psychoanalysis posits that Jaya's fragmented self represents the internal struggle between societal roles and personal identity, a notion that aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. Deshpande does not depict Jaya's waking as a triumph but says that it is a small but essential transition from just putting up with things to thinking about them. *That Long Silence* offers a nuanced look into the mind of a woman who is striving to fit in, be creative, and figure out who she is.

The Binding Vine: Giving Voice to Silenced Trauma and Female Solidarity

Shashi Deshpande's The Binding Vine presents a profound feminist exploration of the female psyche, focusing on the trials and tribulations, suppressed creativity and emotional complexities of womanhood. The main character, Urmila (Urmi), who is raped by her husband, exposes to us the most intimate portions of a woman's heart. The main character tries hard to put together Mira's sad story, which she made up on her own. There is also a story of Kalpana, a young girl from a poor family who was raped. This expands the feminist perspective to include the interaction between class and gender. As Urmi emotionally connects with these women, her journey transforms into one of giving witness, thereby reinstating dignity to the voiceless and interrogating her role in social silence. The novel highlights the desire of one woman to help another less fortunate woman and draws the attention of society to the plight of rape victims, both inside and outside marriage.

Matter of Time: Intergenerational Womanhood and the Quiet Strength of Endurance

Shashi Deshpande's fifth novel, *A Matter of Time*, published in 1996, offers a fascinating exploration of the feminine psyche via the experiences of three generations of women from the same family—Manorama, Kalyani, and Sumi, each grappling with their identities under the constraints of traditional familial expectations. The women have their values and mindset, and a well-defined individualized unconventional relationship with the others with whom they interact in a meaningful way. The novel begins with Gopal walking away from home, deserting his wife, Sumi, and three teenage daughters. Through him, Deshpande tries to present the special status and prerogative enjoyed by men. The whole novel portrays the silent, brooding woman, unhappy yet satisfied, adhering to tradition, though living in the present. Though men do not play an active role, they are the root cause of most of the suffering of women.

Small Remedies: Reclaiming Voice, Creativity, and Feminine Agency

In *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande examines how loss, memory, and creative identity influence women. She depicts a complex portrait of a woman reclaiming her power through narrative reconstruction. The novel offers an engaging read as the author seeks to free women from the bonds of tradition and enable them to exercise their rights for personal growth. Deshpande emphasises the transformative potential of art and storytelling as a means of healing,

self-discovery, and feminist resistance through the interconnected lives of Madhu and Savitribai. The novel explores the gendered constraints imposed on women's creative expression and autonomy, aligning with Elaine Showalter's gynocritical approach, which advocates analysing women's writing as a way to understand female experience and identity. It follows Madhu Saptarishi, who loses her son in the devastating bomb blast that rocked Bombay after the Babri Masjid episode. Madhu writes the biography of Savitribai Indorekar, the last doyenne of the Gwalior Gharana. The novel seeks to reconcile the different facets of this woman's life, who is on her deathbed, as narrated by Madhu, through the character of Savitribai. Deshpande highlights the courage of a woman who defies the established norms of a patriarchal society.

Moving On: Memory, Emotional Inheritance, and the Inner Life of Women

Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On*, published in 2004, is in many ways a departure from Deshpande's earlier novels. In this novel, she explores the inner workings of the mind as familial relationships become fractured. The two distinctive voices belong to *Jiji*, the protagonist, and *Baba*, her father. This intriguing tale reveals the past through *Baba's* diary, which *Jiji* discovers following his death. As *Jiji* grapples with a challenging present, she reflects on past events through the retrospective lens of *Baba's* self-discourse. *Jiji's* eventual declaration of selfhood, quiet yet resolute, mirrors Deshpande's persistent theme of female empowerment via self-understanding rather than rebellion. *Moving On* is a powerful look at the psychological landscape of Indian femininity. It shows how remembering and reinterpreting the past helps to heal and affirm one's outlook. While Deshpande acknowledges that she has taken the utmost care to give *Baba* and *Jiji* their voices, she also highlights the futility of separating the past from the present.

In the Country of Deceit: Illicit Desire, Moral Ambiguity, and Feminine Subjectivity

In the Country of Deceit, published in 2008, Deshpande has used the technique of revisionist mythmaking to explore the man-woman relationship from a fresh perspective—an illicit love affair between a married man and an unmarried woman. Revisionist mythmaking is a technique of rewriting a myth, often from a feminist perspective, radically subverting the old story in such a way as to render the woman's experience, which has been ignored in the original, patriarchal version. The revisionist rewriting of myths aims to correct the incorrect gender imagery inherent

in them. It narrates the doomed love affair between an unmarried woman, Devayani and a married police officer, Ashok Chinappa.

Deshpande explores the concept of deception and discusses adult love, trickery, and guilt throughout the novel. Through the illicit affair of Devyani and Ashok Chinappa, Deshpande highlights the betrayals of loved ones. Devyani deceives her loved ones—Keshav, Shree, Sindhu, and Savi by concealing her affair. She challenges the moral boundaries by having a relationship with a married man. Deshpande takes this narrative in a deconstructive manner and modernises the *Yayati-Devayani-Sharmishtha* tale by shifting the focus to the bold woman. Additionally, by quietly referencing the *Devayani-Yayati* tale, Deshpande reclaims and reinterprets traditional myths from a feminist perspective, allowing for female sovereignty even in unconventional choices. The novel ultimately illustrates that women's self-discovery often emerges not from conformity or rebellion, but from introspection and the courage to accept emotional ambiguity. The examination of Devayani's unconventional behaviour presents ambiguous possibilities for women's liberation by revising the Mahabharata's theme of forbidden love.

Shadow Play: Fragmented Identities and the Emotional Architecture of Womanhood

Shashi Deshpande's novel, *Shadow Play*, begins with the wedding of Aru, short for Arundati, to Rohit. Aru (Arundhati), the eldest daughter of a shattered family, is at the centre, navigating the weight of responsibility while contending with the unresolved anguish of her mother Sumi's accidental death and her father Gopal's prior abandonment. The novel employs a polyphonic framework, interlacing the lives of Aru, her sisters, their aunts, and other ancillary women to emphasise the shared legacy of silence, pain, and perseverance transmitted between generations. However, tragedy strikes the family again through a devastating act of terrorism, forcing Aru to confront some of her life's most challenging moments. *Shadow Play* is a masterful meditation on kinship, marriage, ambition and the evolving dynamics of urban India. Filled with a memorable cast of characters, it also tells the story of Kasturi, who seeks understanding and peace after enduring extreme cruelty and heartbreak; Kalyani, who atones for the wrongs society inflicts its women through an act of generosity in her death; and Gracy, Tressa and Ramu, a family shattered by a senseless act of violence. The novel's non-linear narrative and introspective tone highlight the interiority of women's lives, illustrating the convergence of personal and political history in the formation of feminine consciousness.

Through Aru's subtle yet relentless introspection, Deshpande creates a contemplative environment for examining the complexities of identity, love, duty, and psychological resilience, rendering *Shadow Play* an essential feminist work that enriches the discussion on the emotional framework of Indian women.

Ships That Pass: Marital Disillusionment and the Mystery of the Female Psyche

Shashi Deshpande's novel, *Ships That Pass*, published in 2012, discusses the psychic disturbance of a married woman caused due to the infidelity of her husband. Shashi Deshpande is a virtuoso in exploring the great mystery of the human psyche. *Ships That Pass* is a suspense thriller which revolves around a marriage where a couple hides itself in silence. Usha KR rightly opines, "Shashi Deshpande uses the tool kit of the crime novel to take us into literary heartland-the complexity, the impossibility even, of human communication."

The novel opens with the protagonist, Radhika, announcing her choice of what she wants to pursue following graduation. She simply wants to get married; no more education, no legislation, no post-graduation. She is not in love with anyone; rather, she prefers an arranged marriage. Her elder brother, who is also her good friend, advises her to give her choice a second thought. She will, he believes, reverse her choice just at the last minute. Radhika assures him that she has decided to marry and has no idea of changing her mind in the eleventh hour. Her family finds her a groom named Ghanashyam. She gets a call from her brother-in-law Shaan, at this moment. She should come right now, he advises her, as her sister Tara is sick. She goes straight to her sister's house. There, she finds Tara not just sick but also sad. She learns that Shaan is involved in an extramarital affair with his neighbour Rohini. She also runs into an affair with Ram Mohan, a widower doctor who is senior to her by seventeen years. Tara dies under unknown circumstances. Shaan is taken into custody for murder. In these challenging circumstances, Ram Mohan and Radhika come close. Radhika marries Ram Mohan and calls off her involvement with Ghanashyam. Though not a murder mystery, the narrative presents the suspicious death of Tara very discreetly. Not knowing if Tara was slain or whether she committed suicide, Deshpande keeps her readers in suspense till the end of the novel. Towards the end, Shashi Deshpande depicts the different aspects of the allusion to women's psyche. The characters are suppressed by their thought process rather than by society. *Ships That Pass* is the mystery of the human mind in the context of a modern isolated society.

Strangers to Ourselves: Love, Trauma, and the Quest for Feminine Wholeness

Shashi Deshpande's *Strangers to Ourselves* (2022) presents an intricate exploration of the divided feminine psyche through the character of Aparna, a successful oncologist grappling with solitude, emotional alienation, and the lasting effects of a chaotic parental background. The novel examines themes of marriage, sexuality, and love.

Deshpande thoroughly investigates the effects of childhood trauma. Aparna is traumatised by her parents, Gavi and Sulu's failed marriage; after all, she viewed them as the perfect happily-ever-after couple. Once her parents ended their relationship, they no longer even wished to be a part of each other's lives, not even on the fringes. Aparna is captivated by the magic of Hari's music and, within a short time, becomes very close to him. Despite being immersed in her love for Shree Hari, she trembles at the thought of getting married to him and having to succumb to the gender roles expected of her. The novel also depicts Aparna's actual and profound bond with Jyothi, her cancer patient. Aparna's relationship with Jyothi, a terminally ill patient, reinforces the novel's feminist themes by illustrating how solidarity and empathy can heal those who have been hurt by tragedy and the contemporary world. *Strangers to Ourselves* is not merely a narrative of love ambivalence; it is a profound exploration of how women reconcile their internal landscapes—frequently strange and often muted—while progressively seeking emotional integrity and existential completeness. Aparna helps Jyothi in finding a translation project into English of a mystery novella penned in Marathi from among her father's collection of journals. This opportunity gives a new meaning to Jyothi, and she envisions her presence even after her death. Deshpande highlights the strife that hardworking artists from a middle-class, humble background face in Mumbai through the characters of Hari and Gavi, Aparna's father and an illustrious theatre artist.

The novel thoroughly explores the concepts of female subjectivity, emotional repression, and the fear of conforming to prescribed gender norms, all of which are key themes in feminist psychoanalysis. Deshpande's narrative, characterised by lyrical restraint, aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical feminism, particularly the idea that women must move beyond being "the other" to discover their true selves.

Conclusion

Deshpande's novels depict women and feminine consciousness, offering insights into the depths and various shades of conflicts faced by her protagonists within the socio-cultural context of

contemporary India. Shashi Deshpande uses this perspective to show how challenging life can be for women. She allows her female characters to feel the confusing and unsettling silence within them, recognise their true selves, and prepare to face what lies ahead while trying to understand their existence. They gradually become aware of their power and identity within the private spaces of home, family, and memory. Her stories authentically portray women's realities, focusing on the harsh truths they confront. The psychological themes of silence, memory, guilt, trauma, and desire in her work reveal influences of psychoanalysis and existential feminism. Her critique of social systems aligns with liberal feminist thought.

Deshpande illustrates how different generations live and shares stories filled with emotion to challenge the opposites of tradition and modernity, responsibility and desire, obedience and rebellion. The peak of her literary vision lies in recognising subjectivity, where women not only respond to patriarchal limits but gradually regain voice, value, and importance in their lives. Ultimately, Deshpande's fiction reclaims the inner world of women as a valid and powerful space for feminist dialogue, offering a distinctly Indian yet globally relevant exploration of the feminine ego. What emerges from her stories is not a fixed way to achieve freedom but a complex process of introspection, resistance, and personal transformation.

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