

## Woman at the Crux of Crusade: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Female Protagonists

### Unnat Patel

Assistant Professor,  
U. V. Patel College of Engineering  
Ganpat University,  
Mehsana 384012, Gujarat, India.  
Email: unnat.patel@ganpatuniversity.ac.in

### Abstract

However, woman empowerment across the globe has improved the condition and status of women vis-à-vis the attitude of males towards them on global as well as Indian front, unfortunately this change has remained limited to upper and upper middle classes only. It is unfortunate that this exists even amidst the guarantee of Indian constitution to women of different rights under different articles. Even today the women of middle and lower-middle classes of India are living in the destitute and marginalized conditions. Brutalities and exploitations of women are quite recurrent and frequent. The terrifying news of different injustices and brutalities reach us through mass-media (print and visual) almost everyday. They assume different forms viz. female infanticide, child marriage, deprivation of education, malnutrition, sexual harassment, physical exploitation, dowry, rape and so on. Even when the fortune is in favour and the woman makes advancement, the social and patriarchal factors are always present to obstruct the way. The society expects the woman to maintain mental and social equilibrium even when she is faced by two completely opposite factors: family Vs profession, domestic duties Vs career. Such embarrassing situations bring woman to a crux and every activity of her acquires the form of a crusade. In present paper, an attempt has been made to trace the crux of crusade faced by the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's three popular novels and how do they act to effect new beginnings.

### Key Words

Woman at crux, plight of woman, crusade, equilibrium

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Shashi Deshpande, born in 1938 in Dharwad (Karnataka) and educated in Bombay and Bangalore, is an award-winning Indian woman novelist. Daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Sriranga, she has degrees in Economics and Law. When she was living in Mumbai, she did a course on journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine 'Onlooker'. She published her first collection of short stories titled *The Legacy and Other Stories* in 1978 and *The Intrusion and Other Stories* in 1993. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) was her first novel. Her other novels are: *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1989), *A Matter of Time* (1999), *Small Remedies* (2000), *The Binding Vine* (2002), *Narayanpur Incident* (2003), *Moving On* (2004) and *In the Country of Deceit* (2008). She won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel '*That Long Silence*' in 1990 and the Padma Shri award in 2009. Besides, she penned several perceptive essays presently available in a volume entitled *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. The discord and the disillusionment of middle-class Indian woman are beautifully delineated in almost all works of Shashi Deshpande.

Liberation of woman from the shackles of male oppression has been a thread that runs commonly in the contemporary literature across the globe. The unjust treatment to women and their physical, financial and emotional exploitation has found its apt presentation in literature since decades and Indian literature is no exception to this. One can easily trace the way in which western feminist thought and western feminist movements have influenced the women's movements and literature in countries like India. Although feminism appeared on Indian literary scene in 1970, Indian feminism has surpassed its western counterpart in many different respects. In fact, feminist spirit existed in India long before even the beginning of western feminist movement. Moreover, the large-scale participation of Indian women in India's freedom struggle was nothing but, incarnation of feminist spirit that Indian women lived by. Because of historical and cultural reasons applicable in Indian context, the feminist movement in India had to chart its own tracks, ways and avenues. It is but-obvious that in order to free herself and also in order to advance, woman has to fight many crusades just because the social structures and prevalent traditions stop her from asserting her rights and raising her voice.

The pathetic condition of Indian women in and outside the four walls of her home has been beautifully and artistically delineated in the Indian literature in English in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indian creative women authors of English like Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and a score of others started coming out openly to discuss the problems of women and to question the gender-role expectations through their creative fictional works. The female

protagonists in their writings exhibit sufficient courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion and culture.

The present paper aims at undertaking critical study of three major novels of Shashi Deshpande: *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence* for the purpose of witnessing trauma and torture caused by patriarchal norms prevalent in India and recording the reactions of the women characters. Shashi Deshpande has tried to portray the women characters especially its female protagonists in entirely a subjective way. The condition of woman in a middle-class Indian family finds its touching expression in all her three works under focus. Her writings, rooted in the culture in which she lives, remain sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences. The plights of these women are purely Indian in the sense that they born out of the predicament of Indian women placed between a unique and opposite crux: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature and still it is equally humanistic and optimistic in its outlook. The notion of 'relationship' has received specialized attention and weightage in the creative works of Shashi Deshpande: relationship between mother and daughter, father and daughter and husband and wife occupies centre-stage in Shashi Deshpande's novels. In every relationship, the helpless woman is standing at a crux wherein she is in a state of dilemma as to which avenue to resort to. Paravati Bhatnagar aptly remarks:

"Values need to be redefined, so also human relationship, especially within the family. Such is the dilemma of the middle class. An adherence to the traditional values has become difficult. New values have yet to be evolved. It requires tremendous courage (and thoughtlessness?) to break, away from the tradition" (Bhatnagar 53).

The most distinct feature of all these novels is that everything moves round the female characters. Every feeling, sentiment and emotion passes through the feminine consciousness. It will not be an exaggeration to state that the poignant cries of the female protagonists are beautifully recorded and simultaneously the quest for self-identity is nicely portrayed. If the female protagonists are analyzed in terms of mindset, reactions and attitudes, these women characters comprise three distinct categories.

The women in motherly role comprise the first category. These women are presented as the heroine's mother or mother-in-law. They are the typically Indian traditional women who believe that their place is with their husband and family. They are the one who are submissive and dedicated. Whatever be their troubles, they do not leave their husband but, on the contrary they strive for a long-lasting relationship with him. They represent the traditional religious ethos and confirms to the code that woman should be under the

control of the father in the maidenhood, the husband in her youth and the sons during her old age.

॥ कार्येषु मंत्री, कारने शु दासी, रूपेचा लक्ष्मी, क्षमाया धास्त्री ।  
भोज्येषु माता, शायेतु रम्भा, शत कर्मा युक्ता, कुलधर्मा पत्नी ॥ (आचार्य-३५१)

Despite being the victims of patriarchy, some of these women hold power or control over other women in the family because of their status as mothers or mothers-in-law. Saru's mother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu's mother in *Roots and Shadows* and Jaya's mother in *That Long Silence* belong to this type.

Secondly, the novelist has presented another type of women who are self-confident and self-reliant. These women are neither ready to succumb to any forces nor are they ready to accept anyone's dominance. They possess the courage of calling spade a spade. They are brave and bold and hence they are inclined towards, what we may call, radical feminist ideology. However, such women characters are very rare in Shashi Deshpande's novels. They are mostly the heroine's friends and classmates. Saru's friend Nalu in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* holds a feminist ideology to life for the sake of which she chooses to lead an independent life as spinster.

In the third place, we find such women that take the middle course. They possess nice blending of the qualities possessed by both previous category women. Most of Deshpande's heroines fall in this category. These women are neither traditional nor radical in their ideas and practice. At one instance, they do not hesitate to leave their parent's / husband's abode in the mood of protest and defiance, but on the other front also realize that running away from hardships, problems and suffering does not end them. 'The Dark Holds no Terrors' is a saga of mental and sexual suffering of Saru. During the course of novel, we witness Saru succumbing to the wishes and desires of her mother and husband, of course, unwillingly. To save her existence, she has to make compromise in her life with her husband and her mother. Without compromise, there is nothing possible. As Kailash Baral mentions :

"Deshpande has employed a conscious strategy of embodying and embedding issues that are reflexive upon anti-patriarchal stance in the narrative. Among the various issues that the novel focuses on, concepts of 'bonding' and 'bondage' are considered not only in India but worldwide" (Baral 22).

Saru broods over her agonies even after she escapes her marital home. In '*Roots and Shadows*', Indu leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home, but she is

unable to accept her fate as any ordinary woman might do. According to Dr. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar:

"Sarita Strips herself of self deceptions, guilt complexes and motive illusions, and Shashi Deshpande's language itself flickers like a candle and blobs of remembrance melt and forms icicles of furrowing thought. Sarita cannot forget her children or the sick needing her expert attention and so she decides to face her home again. In this unpredictable world, even total despair can open up a new spring of elemental self-confidence" (Iyengar 758).

These heroines suffer more because they are aware of the escape routes of two other types of women – the traditional and the radical – but hesitate to choose those options. Their initial position is one of remaining at the crossroads. It is towards the end of the novels that Shashi Deshpande's female protagonist realizes herself and learns to live up to the challenge. Saru decides to face her husband and not to run away. Indu and Jaya decide to confront their husbands and talk the matter out in order to arrive at a solution. The female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are not representations of traditional 'Sita' images. They are the 'new women', who could be likened to the flooding rivers that find a pathway into crevices and holes. In the three novels subjected to study here, the heroines are initially fugitives who seek refuge to escape from domestic, professional and sexual traps in which they find themselves. But each refuge, whether it is love, marriage or sex, only turns out to be another trap wherein they further lose their freedom and identity. Before their marriage, even in their parental homes, Deshpande's heroines find it difficult to adjust to the kind of family relationships that exist in the traditional middle class. They then experience uneasiness or even hatred towards their mothers, whom they view as dominating and oppressive individuals. Against their mothers' wishes, they attempt to leave their parental homes in the name of education or marriage. The fathers of the heroines on the other hand, become the source of support or even inspiration for these women. The heroines like Saru and Jaya see marriage as an escape route made in order to liberate them from the suffocation they experience in their parents' home. Their act of marrying outside their community, as in the case of Indu can also be seen as their way of rebelling against patriarchal attitudes towards marriage.

However marriage proves to be no escape. The husbands accept their wives as working women but at the same time do not recognize or encourage the 'feminist self' in them. Through Indu, Deshpande voices her view of marriage:

"It's a trap... that's what marriage is, A trap? Or a cage? May be the comic strip version of marriage... a cage with two trapped animals glaring

hatred at each other... isn't so wrong after all. And it's not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself ?" (Deshpande 60-61)

In all the three novels studied here, the heroines are left without any sense of fulfillment – both physical and mental—because of their husbands' lack of understanding.

Jaya by nature has inherited tenderness, she relents for she cannot see Mohan shattered, yet her entire pent up anger surfaces when Mohan's professional life faces crisis, and the blame is showered on Jaya and children. She now realize that the seventeen long years of her married life had failed to make them one emotional, intellectual, only their physical bodies had occasionally met, not their souls, "We were two persons, A man, A woman" (Deshpande 8). The heroines who have children also sense a kind of uneasiness in their relationship with their siblings. They often wonder whether history repeats itself when it comes to the misunderstanding between the parent and the child. The uncaring husband and the demanding children become obstacles to achieving individuality. As Jays says, "It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and a woman, could talk this way. With this man, I had not been a woman. I had been just myself ----Jaya" (Deshpande 153). Hence, the feeling of being trapped comes back to them after the marriage also. Finding it difficult to cope with the tensions arising out of their professional roles and domestic expectations, these women initially seek relief through abandonment of their professional roles. They quit their professions and try to seek peace by confining themselves to their familial roles as homemakers. They soon find that their attempts to reconcile themselves to homemaking only add to their sufferings. When they find that giving up professional roles does not make them happy in any way, the female protagonists seek to escape from their domestic roles as well. Relinquishing their roles as wives and mothers, they turn back to their parents' homes. The parental homes become sanctuaries for their restless souls wherein they begin their search for knowledge and for a solution for their private woes. For Deshpande's female protagonists, relinquishing of roles as daughters, wives, mothers, homemakers and professionals is a very painful process. When the female protagonists start living in their parental homes, they sense a relief in their new-cum-old shelter. They revert back to their elders' style of living, giving up the routines to which they got used to in their marital homes. Saru to her disappointment finds herself taking over efficiently all the chores that she administered dutifully day in and out at her marital home. Indu feels a curious sense of freedom and homecoming. She also finds herself resuming the role that her aunt played as the family head.

In assuming new roles and new attitudes towards old roles, they break the mental barriers, which they had initially built around themselves. They learn more about their mothers, and gradually overcome their feelings of alienation, hatred and resentment

towards them. In fact, they tend to identify themselves with their elderly counterparts and assume the roles of their mothers or mother figures after they return home. With their contempt towards mothers deciphered, they tend to turn inward. Their stay at ancestral homes gives them the chance to recollect the past and re-evaluate their decisions and actions. Their parental homes do not provide them any permanent relief from their suffering. However, these transitory retreats help them to confront their real 'I' and understand themselves better. It is here that they explore the sexual and other causes that had led to their marital discords.

Dissatisfaction in the women's sex lives is cited as one of the important factors affecting the marital relations of the Deshpande's female protagonists. The three novels represent three types of sexual aberration. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru explains her sexual relations with Manu, her husband, thus: "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (Deshpande 29). Saru finds in him a 'protean monster' at night and a 'dutiful husband' in the day. Their sexual life is reduced to macho sadist acts inflicted on woman by man. She says: "We're on different planes. He chooses his level. And I ... try to choose the one he would like to be on. It humiliates me" (Deshpande 90). Neither the woman nor the man in Deshpande's novels try to do something about their marital / sexual monotony. The women specially tend to ignore the sexual roots of their marital discord. Their assumed roles do not give total sustenance, as their sexual dissatisfaction raises its ugly head at times and disrupts the harmony of their patterned living. Hence they seek sexual gratification by resorting to extramarital relationships. Saru tries to justify her affairs with Boozie (her boss) and Padmakar Rao (her college classmate) as the substitutes she had found for her unfulfilled marriage. Yet, such affairs do not give her total satisfaction. In the case of Indu's affair with Naren (her cousin), we see a woman-in-guilt. Like Indu and Saru, Jaya in *That Long Silence* feels guilty of her aborted affair with Kama, her neighbour.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists might be considered as sexual profligates as they go off the track of tradition. But their extra-marital refuge fails them because their sexual freedom does not pilot them out of their predicaments. Instead of helping them to confront the problem, they only postpone the problem. When their sexual escapades bounce back, they divulge their problems to their friends or relatives. For example, Saru confesses to her father about her marital crisis to save herself from it. Her father advises her not to run away but to face the problem.

The awareness of the self and the ultimate refuge in the self are inveterate experiences in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. The awareness of the self is nothing but the awakening of woman's consciousness. The determination to confront and accept the self

is seen in all the three female protagonists of Deshpande. The act of confrontation gives them the courage to decide things for themselves and increasingly leads them to a positivistic detachment from life. The refuge in the self guides them towards a deeper awareness of their predicament. According to Deshpande, the solution cannot be 'given,' because it is 'self-bound;' in other words, it depends on the individuals concerned – it depends on the fiber of their self. A deeper awareness of the self leads to the understanding of its true nature. Nevertheless, the heroines do not go to that extent. Their self-realization is psychological rather than metaphysical. Towards the end Saru refuses to call her predicament as 'fate' and would rather call it as something she 'had helped to happen.' For blaming only the patriarchy or only certain external causes for her predicament, takes her away from the fact that she had also to be blamed for being weak and allowing her predicament to happen.

Ultimately, the Deshpande's protagonists choose to be within themselves, accepting themselves in whatever forms they are. When the 'way out' fails them, then the 'way in' – their delving deep into the interior resources of their selves - provides the necessary sustenance and strength to face their problems. Their determination to face the situation and their dependence only on the self show them the way to confront the crises in their lives. Although their problems remain unresolved, their attitude towards the problem undergoes complete change with their understanding of the 'self.' In one sense, it can be said that they attain the stage of self-realization and self-actualization. Once they start standing on their own legs, the protagonists accept all that is fractured in their self and try to unify the fractions. As they decide to assert their selves against other forces that seek to enchain them, 'the dark', as Saru realizes, 'no longer holds any terror,' and as Jaya and Indu visualize, they see the hopes of happiness and peace in their family lives. From the study of the three female protagonists, it becomes clear that it is the authentic base of Shashi Deshpande's novels, which makes her 'feminism' typically Indian. Deshpande evolves a feminist understanding of the woman's problem out of a purely Indian climate. The central experience in her fiction is authenticated by autobiographical overtones. Deshpande has tried to portray the shades of woman's position in contemporary Indian society. Her writing displays her intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her interest in women's problems, and not in the sense that she makes an advocacy for women's rights in her fiction. In fact, she does not hold the torch of women's liberation beyond making the woman realize her 'self.' One may be inspired to infer that through her writing she has voiced the fundamental rights that women are entitled to but, in fact she seems to have portrayed her women characters with complete objectivity. She goes one step further and brings out the injustice caused by woman to other woman. It is in this sense that her fiction is distinct. This is entirely a new sort of experimentation in the world of fiction where women are shown jealous of other women's

progress and intellect. The beauty of her language is characterized by lucidity and flawlessness. What is evolved through her intense awareness of the Indian woman's situation is a mode of narration, where the woman is at the center, speculating and working out the problem positively.

Shashi Deshpande's women's voices are neither cynical nor nihilistic. She is quite down to earth in her approach to the woman's problem. For though she is aware of the seriousness of the Indian woman's dilemma and the generation old struggles behind it, she also believes that a positive change in women's social status cannot be materialized without bringing about a change in the woman's mindset first. Each of her woman character is hence standing at the crux of crusade – a crusade to attain real account of self and also a crusade to endow new meaning to life.

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