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## Shashi Deshpande's women: Feminine sensibility in quest of identity

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### Abstract

One of the most well-known names in Indian English writers is Shashi Deshpande. Her articles are primarily concerned with the misery caused by the patriarchal system on the lives of women. Throughout ancient times, India's male-dominated societal system has been unfair to women. They have always been subjected to pain on a physical, mental, and financial level, yet they are unable to get their rights as males. Many obstacles and limitations are emerging, both socially and in their various ways of existence.

Yet as time went on, women began to see the light of knowledge. They have now begun to struggle and fight for their rights as they raise their voices against the oppressive societal structure. Despite their education and ability to support themselves, women are nonetheless controlled in some way by the predominantly male Indian culture. The present paper aims to analyse the theory of feminism by taking the women characters of Shashi Deshpande.

**Keywords:** Domination, education, emancipation, feminine, identity, quest, struggle, suffering

### Introductions

Women have been denied their rights and privileges for generations because they have not been granted an appropriate home of their own. Because of this, they were unable to fully grow as individuals, which in most cultures results in a lack of accountability. Because of gender discrimination based on the patriarchal construction of high and low, superior, and inferior, self, and other, and other concepts, they have been considered as a class of oppressed people whose issues and voices have gone ignored while they remain subjugated and marginalised.

In a patriarchal culture, women's quiet pain typically becomes physical rather than emotional. Women continue to be viewed as a second sex and can only exist as a result of male demands. Women have been oppressed for a long time, which weakens them and prevents them from openly opposing society. In contemporary India, where women are sandwiched between tradition and nature, the situation is more problematic. Notwithstanding the benefits that contemporary society has provided for women, these notions and presumptions are still mostly held by males. They are thus the targets of gender discrimination and social exploitation, which take many different forms, including social, political, economic, sexual, cultural, and psychological oppression.

It is true that under patriarchal structures and gender inequality, Indian women are viewed as a different group of underprivileged and oppressed people. As a result, gender-based society and male-centered views are challenged by women's subversive ideology on a social, political, sexual, and economic level. This develops into a complex problem for us. Every woman in society has obstacles to her existence and way of living because of gender, the social construct that separates men and women into opposing categories with uneven social worth. It is a collection of politically imposed regulations with multiple means for one sex to express itself and impose itself on the other, but it is not necessarily symptomatic of the sexual distinctions between male and female. He is 'self' and she is 'other'. It becomes noticeable when Showalter says:

...gender is not a question of difference, but which assumes that the sexes are separate and equal; but of power since in looking at the history of gender relations we find gender asymmetry, inequality, and male dominance in every known society. (p. 4)

Hence, the entrenched positions of power are threatened by women's demands for just legislation and for women's empowerment. Women must thus fight back against this schematization by men and step up their fight for their fundamental rights to life and self-respect. It could be true that PATIVRATA NARI's (committed to her husband) days are numbered in our nation today. Yet the reality is that males still hold sway, and Indian women find it challenging to adopt more extreme western feminist beliefs. In general, a tremendous deal of respect is shown towards the traditional husband-wife relationship. Yet, women fiercely object to any treatment of them as a subhuman species.

Women in India should be entitled to sexual equality and equal treatment as a matter of birth right. In response to an interview by Geeta Gangadharan, Shashi Deshpande says:

..I have a strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been look upon as 'breeding animals'. They had no other roles in life; I have a strong objection to treating any human being in the name... (Indian Communicator, 20 November 1994 p.11)

History demonstrates that women had been oppressed for a substantial amount of time. Social and cultural norms were created with the express purpose of stifling women. In many regions of India, such as Rajasthan, Sati was not outlawed until the early 19th century. Women were unable to express their dreams and objectives or celebrate their accomplishments. The first step in establishing women's role in society was only taken by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the Indian who was responsible for the revolutionary reform for women. In the guise of religion, Roy, who drives out "Sati," subsequently taught austere widowhood for women. Then Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar appeared, starting a campaign for female literacy and the remarriage of widows. In addition to opposing the dogmatic conservative arguments in support of child marriage, polygamy, and purdah, he also disputes Roy's earlier claim that widows should lead a life of piety and renunciation. The remarriage legislation, which was approved in the middle of the 1950s, had little impact. Education was still not even a dream for women. The few schools for girls received a trickle of students, largely from the upper strata of society. The female body has not yet broken free from centuries of confinement. Declare her own desire, reject the oppressive man, and take control of her own life.

The reform movement led by Roy and Vidyasagar hadn't yet reached the masses. Moreover, they had yet to have an impact on the intelligentsia and encourage it to view women as human beings. To give her a voice, it required a visionary, to dispel the long-held notion that was created to benefit father, spouse, son, and other family members. Furthermore, it depicts a future scenario in which she may fall in love and, once more, disregard all established rules and morality. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was a trailblazing dramatist, poet, and the first Indian woman. In line with his "campaign of the underdog," he took it upon himself to defend the most downtrodden and backward segment of society, and he did so. Dedicated to Vidyasagar, the famous campaign for female literacy and widow remarriage, Dutt's "Berangana Kabya" (1860) was written. One of the earliest books to appreciate women was this one. The term alone signalled the development of the female voice—women who dared to challenge their husbands and defy convention. Heroism in the conventional sense does not involve daring defiance of social norms and restrictions. It was one thing to

advocate for women's freedom; the intelligentsia was in charge of this movement. To imagine her as a real, living person, though, was something another. One who wasn't daily beaten to the point of losing all self-awareness may express her own scepticism. Seeta from "Seeta Banarbas" wasn't quite a Renaissance woman. The women continue to revere their spouse without reservation. These accusations are unrelated to the normal variations in domesticity. Instead, these women stage a confrontation in front of spectators. They openly share their innermost thoughts and experiences. They expressed their requests for their rights as well as their dissatisfaction.

Following in their footsteps, many feminists Indian women spoke out about the difficulties they faced. It is appropriate to include authors like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Athia Hossain, Shashi Deshpande, and Shantha Rama Rau, among others, whose writing and thinking represent the struggles and issues faced by Indian women. This prompted R.S. Pathak to say:

Their chief contribution consists of their exploring the methods and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of their women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and achieve a new harmony of relationships with themselves and their surroundings. (p.11)

In order to be explicit, Shashi Deshpande addresses modern Indian writers with an open mind while showing the life of middle-class Indian women who are educated and have a keen sense of reality. The light of knowledge most likely inspired her female characters to fight for freedom.

India's Karnataka state is where Shashi Deshpande was born. Adya Rangachar, also known as Sriranga, was a well-known author and Sanskrit scholar in whose house Deshpande was born as a girl child. He was a writer who produced a lot of thought plays. Shashi Deshpande is a smart individual who has earned degrees in journalism, economics, law, and English. She inherited her father's intelligence and scholarly mind since he enjoys reading, writing, and producing plays and poems. She also received support from her spouse, a Commonwealth researcher.

Despite not being a part of any section or group of writers, Deshpande's works attracted the attention and praise of the reading public, making her a well-read individual. She read a lot of novels, but she was particularly drawn to the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Somerset Maugham. The Brontë Sisters, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, and Erica Jong also had an impact on her writing. Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer served as her literary inspiration and influence. Shashi Deshpande might be considered a writer in her own right, even though she drew heavily on Victorian and Modern literature. For the first time, she obtained permission from her father to have her writings published in the "Deccan Herald".

After that, she began releasing her writings, including her short story collection *The Legacy and Other Works*. She also published *It Was Dark*, *The Miracle*, *It Was the Nightingale*, and *The Intruder and Other Tales* as a collection of short stories. She began to explore women's lives, including their issues and their hopes, in these little pieces. She portrays, the struggle of modern Indian middle-class women to maintain their identities as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and, ultimately, as human beings.

Then, she started reading novels, including *Roots and Shadows* (1983) <sup>[2]</sup>, *Come Up and Be Dead* (1982), *If I Die Today* (1982), *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), *That Long*

Silence (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992), and *A matter of Time* (1996). Shashi Deshpande also authored several additional children's books, and she continues to write and publish books today, making a significant contribution to both social change and the world's readers. For her work *Roots and Shadows*, she received the Thirumathi Rangammal Best Indian Novel Award for the years 1982 to 1983. In 1991, she begs for the Sahitya Academy Prize for her story *That Long Silence*.

As compared to other female characters written about women, Shashi Deshpande's flesh-and-blood female characters are not as severe. Her female characters are strong individuals who stand up to patriarchal culture and society's hostility. They possess strong personalities that the domineering patriarchy cannot stifle or destroy. With her books, Shashi Deshpande provides a vivid perspective of women's struggle and accomplishment. Her works offer a clear vision for how to unleash women's struggle for equality and emancipation in opposition to conventional voices and various presumptions about women. Her writings are primarily concerned with the representations of oppressed women found in patriarchal Indian culture and, on the other side, the emergence of new, liberated women who are cognizant and capable of choosing their own fate and exercising self-determination. Shashi Deshpande is interested in women as individuals based on their potential. Women therefore must fight to expose their identity and significance in this patriarchal environment by challenging the socially prescribed gender norms.

With Saru as the primary heroine against the patriarchal structure, she addresses the societal taboo of women, their idea of having a lesser position, and women's economic freedom in *The Dark Holds No Terror*. By going against the wishes of her traditional parents, Saru deconstructs the conventional educational system and pursues a career in medicine. She battles against her early obsession with her sibling. By being married to a member of a lower caste, Manu (Manohar), she even encourages inter-caste unions.

Once more, the novelist highlights the difficulties women have when they enter the matrimonial home, which is run by the husband's rigid patriarchal control. As a result, Saru (Sarita), a successful doctor outside of the home, suffers at the hands of her husband inside. As a result, the author prefers to be regarded as a person rather than a lady with a strong social identity. Hence, the novel effectively challenges societal norms and patriarchal ideology that place males above women in the family, the church, politics, the economy, society, the law, and the arts, which hinders the socialisation of women.

*If I Die Today* reflects how women are faring in their home lives and in their marriages. There is evidence of the breakdown of marriage relationships caused by factors including motherhood, economic independence, and education. There is the image of the typical Hindu man who yearns for a son, the lone heir to the family and to the home. Even the well-educated Dr. Kulkarni tortures his wife in silence while trying to have a son, completely reliant on him in the process. It is true that *Come Up and Be Dead* depicts women's activities along with the challenges and dangers that come with being a member of the feminine sex in society. The use of murder as a tool of oppression against women by men has been exposed as violence against women. In addition, the book depicts women suffering at the hands of parents who value tradition. Deshpande fights

for women's liberation from the bastion of female dominance through *Kshama*, achieving economic independence, breaking away from the marital system, and paving the road for women's complete subjugation to males. In *Roots and Shadows*, "Indu" is seen opposing the dominating positions that are allocated to women in order to further the interests of males. She is on a mission to dismantle sexual and gender boundaries in order to challenge the conventional male autonomy upheld by the macho culture. Her battles and protests are directed against the unfair treatment of women under biologism and essentialism. Deshpande's character Indu is the only one who has the strength and support to stand up against patriarchy without fear.

In *That Long Silence*, the author uses the character of Jaya to criticise how women are treated in our society. Hers is a fruitless attempt to discover who she truly is inside the confines and expectations of respectable middle-class society. She is compassionate, self-aware, and artistic. She is on a psychological introspective quest for self-actualization. She becomes psychologically unwell, anxious, and psychotic as a result of the terrible repercussions and protracted repression of her personality. So, the concerns about gender issues and the status of Indian women are a kind of protest. In addition, the character is trying to present a different account of history from the perspective of women.

Similarly, the author of *The Binding Vine* depicts women who are denied love and pleasure in a world where males predominate. The book presents a first-hand description of rape both within and outside of marriage, with Kalpana being raped by her uncle for refusing to marry him and Mira suffering from marital rape. The major tools employed in the story to stop women's natural development are economic hardship and rape. Here, Shashi Deshpande introduces the main character Urmila (Urmi), who recreates the events of her late mother-in-law Mira in order to struggle against such oppressions. A career-conscious, educated woman searches for new roles in this unusual society as a result of shifting events in the narrative. In order to combat female oppression, the author fights for equality, freedom, and equal rights.

Once again in the book *A Matter of Time*, rape, death, and decay are three topics that Shashi Deshpande emphasises. Here, three generations are used to contrast the initial holiness and suitability of marriage with the bitterness of marriage and married life. Aru is the main character in this story, and she battles against the disparities that exist in male-female interactions. Deshpande's use of her serves to mirror the current period, which serves as the nexus of tradition and modernity. The link connecting the ancient and the modern is Aru herself. Shashi Deshpande is tearing down this oppressive tradition in this way, uniting the voices of the women to resist. In addition to leveraging her rage and resentment for good, she is deromanticizing the picture that men build of women.

Although Shashi Deshpande works in the direction of feminism theory, she differs from staunch feminists like Simone de Beauvoir or Kate Millette in how he addresses women's issues in the context of India. Feminist heroine is said to have originated with Jane Austen and progressed via Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millette, and Elaine Showalter. Yet, because feminism varies depending on culture and civilization, it is difficult to define precisely.



That is a settled subject in western nations, yet there remains debate and contention in third-world nations. This led Chaman Nahal to state that feminism is a way of life in which women are liberated from the father-husband dependency syndrome as well as from social, religious, and political communities. Everyone will be equal once individuals are free from the reliance syndrome. In addition, feminism promotes sexism, sexual liberty, and equal chances for men and women. The fight to end sexual repression is political. Women suffer as a result of patriarchy, which links them to the group of aware parents. Feminism is now a literary philosophy as a result.

In this way, Shashi Deshpande, a novelist, exposes the lives of women who suffer because of the strict patriarchal laws, particularly Indian women in general. In order to give women's repressive lives a voice in her stories, the author developed female protagonists who rebuild women's experiences. She is working hard to break free from her limitations and release the ladies from the prison of the feminine mentality. Hers is an image of feminine dominance and a rejection of patriarchal ideals.

The feminism of Shashi Deshpande is characterised by the projection of the struggles and identity-related issues of middle-class women. She might encourage her main characters, like Urmi, to stand up and aid Kalpana in the conclusion by incorporating the idea of womanhood through love and women's freedom. It was created in a way that demonstrates the desire of the new woman to proclaim her individuality and the fulfilment of her sexual needs.

With the characters in Shashi Deshpande's works, there is a change from the previous observation of sex to maintain the man-woman connection to the modern empowerment of women via sex. Moreover, every one of her works is about a woman. The transformation is an examination of borders in the history of women and an explanation of the many differences and wants of women. Shashi Deshpande's fight for women's suffrage, freedom in all spheres of politics, society, education, and economy has succeeded in making this reality in contemporary India.

Shashi Deshpande gets the intended impact by contrasting her intelligent, independent, inquisitive, and career-focused heroes with a large cast of self-deprecating, "feminine" characters. We watch the development of the feminine psyche through the stages of restriction, protest, and self-discovery as a result of the main characters' personal experience with the acquired information that leads to self-analysis.

Shashi Deshpande highlights contemporary Indian women who are neither strong-willed superheroines nor demi-goddesses. With durable and compelling characters, she painted a picture of an evil world filled with murder, mystery, and mischief. They are educated middle-class women, but because of an unbreakable relationship with tradition, they are also susceptible. They carry on with their lives and re-join society after achieving personhood, self-realization, and having their own voice. Out of the confusion in the environment, there is a tremendous motivation and desire to establish an orderly society.

Her works are evidence of her thorough comprehension of Indian women's realities and struggle at the grassroots level. She also raises concerns related to gender and women's status within the framework of respectability for the middle class. Her main characters live a middle-path lifestyle, allowing others to live and letting themselves live on their

own. She does not oppose women who want to be independent and speak out for themselves. Despite the endless suffering, agony, and grief, she enables the ladies to rise beyond any misconceptions, as well as their own sense of loss and despair.

Without hesitation, Deshpande ignites a significant change in the history of women by contrasting the modern educated young lady in her books with centuries of enslavement, pain, and repression. This new, transformed lady is now aware of where they are going. She achieved her goal of freeing herself from the oppressive taboos and traditions that male authority had imposed on her. She has been able to let go of the long-standing anxiety that had been stalking her for years—the fear of being unloved, misunderstood, misjudged, and failing. So, Shashi Deshpande successfully informs the woman of her own rights and obligations, distress, and destination.

Moreover, Shashi Deshpande's female subjects refused to submit to violent male dominance that threatened to crush and destroy them. Her women revolt against the sexism and challenge the man's dual morals and double standards. She is fighting sexist ideals of male power in order to win liberation from them not only in the social and economic realms but also in their emotions, body, and mind. All her books emphasise how patriarchy strengthens male use of physical force and female sexual servitude. She investigates rape, which has been used to deplete women physically, emotionally, and mentally from the dawn of time, and deconstructs it. In her writings, she makes it clear that rape in marriage is illegal and outlines ways to stop women from developing uncontrollably.

As a result, Shashi Deshpande is reevaluating women's roles in society and searching for her identity. A sensitive soul is engaged in an existential fight with the male-chauvinistic society's repressive dual standards. Her ladies openly declare their regard for themselves, objecting to treatment that involves intimidating and demeaning them. Her female characters stood up for themselves and refused to submit to masculine power. Deshpande's feminine sensitivity and reflection are such that they provide women throughout the world a human touch and psychological depth.

Her women are individuals who work to express themselves and find fulfilment in their own lives while adhering to the rules of their own communities. Although while she cannot be compared to the hard-core western feminist, her thorough analysis of the existential battle of these overly sensitive and very independent women clearly indicates her feminist idea and as a feminist writer.

Indeed, her works show how the ladies are going through a change in their lives. Her facial expression in the book *Roots and Shadows* conveys a message to modern women that says, "Assert yourself. Don't suppress it. Let it go and flourish never mind how many things it destroys in the bargain." (115). She goes on to suggest that love, respect, understanding, and the eradication of inflated egos are more effective ways to achieve equality and liberty in man-woman relationships than the constitution and the law alone. Deshpande continued by pointing out how amazing it is because gender is merely an idea of power. Man and woman are separated into two groups by a societal construct that views man as superior and woman as the "other" as well as man as the subject and woman as the object. The author of this story affirms and demonstrates that the split is artificial because the difference is solely biological. The ladies have

typically transformed mentally and emotionally because of the newly recognised regulations and forms. She gave her characters a space to become cognizant and understand themselves, forcing them out of their state of disillusionment. As a result, this transforms their home and everything else related to their way of life. As a result, it is largely men who need to adapt, leaving women to handle the other issues.

The gender roles of today have been significantly inverted. It is reversing and justifying sexist stereotypes of masculine anger and destruction as expressions of our social behaviour rather than fighting and dispelling them. Generational shifts lead to abrupt and significant social, political, economic, and psychological upheavals. It serves as a symbol of opposition to centuries-old oppressions of men. In addition to establishing a just man-woman relationship, it also aims to free women.

Shashi Deshpande is a prominent Indian woman author who portrays Indian life, culture, and tradition. She works to emancipate women via her writing. Her writings offer a realistic perspective on the inter-personal connections, perception, and personality development of women. She is examining the lives of Indian women who are juggling the demands of tradition and modernization, the weight of the past, and the hopes for the future. She portrays females as having their own sensitivities and unbridled faith in the capacity of human intelligence to bring about equality and order in the conundrum-ridden environment of the orthodox Indian heritage. Shashi Deshpande was able to successfully facilitate the woman's catharsis process, allowing her to emerge with a subtly growing sense of confidence and self-assertion.

Compared to a generation before, more women work now, more girls attend school, and more of them are seen demonstrating in public places like streets and squares as well as at home. While their appearance has not altered, their behaviour has. They now have names, both individually and collectively. Their new power was not thrust upon them; rather, it was already there, contained by barriers.

Now that their distinctive personalities have gained fresh vigour, power has been brought into the open. They leave a restricted world and enter a vaster, more varied, and mobile one. Women are no longer the weak, reserved, subdued, or delicate-toned threads that crossed and re-crossed to form the backdrop tapestry of her life. Instead, they are bold, assertive hues. So, the myriad subtle kinds of violence against women and their responses to it are shown in her writings by the violent and aggressive language. Her books portray the treasured values of women's mental freedom and incorruptibility.

Although while it is difficult to overcome the societal and cultural conditioning that needs women to be passive victims and men to be victimizers, it can be done, and their silence can be broken. She is mobilising the general public to act against violence.

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