



## **A UNIQUE FEMALE IMAGINATION IN THE WORKS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper talks women writers from classic ages to modern ages, observing female imagination to be unique to women's works. Many Indian women poets from classical ages like Mira Bai, Andal, Akka Mahadevi to modern Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, who spoke of their experiences as women were observed to express a female imagination unique to women. Their writings of female imagination were seen in the context of western writers like Dorothy Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood, Mary Shelley, and Toni Morrison whose writings much earlier evoked a female imagination that inspired Patricia Spacks to critique on their writings. These modern women writers wrote about sexual abuse, cruelty and violence and at times even infanticide and serial killing, all these denoting negative female experiences. The commonality of women's experiences and female imagination which pervades their writings, the special female self-awareness, the use of psychoanalytical concept to explore texts – all these were discussed elaborately.

**Key words:** women writers, female, imagination, experiences, self-awareness etc

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The earlier writers of classical ages indicated that female imagination does not indicate only negative dimension of life, rather positive experiences like devotion, love etc. get expressed through positive feelings

and also if the violence of modern age demand that an individual goes through negative experiences, what better way than to release these. Similarly, Patricia Meyer Specks observes how women have exploited the hidden opportunities of a situation which is oppressive and she turns the disadvantages of expected feminine behavior to advantage. Therefore, using passivity as means to power, she takes care of others as a vehicle for control and mastery, her limited existence is a testing ground for emotional growth. Female Imagination 'represents women's power which occupies the writings of western writers like Dorothy Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood, Mary Shelley, and Toni Morrison. Hence modern writers, particularly women writers write about sexual abuse, cruelty and violence and also serial killing or infanticide thus denoting negative female experiences; however, it is indeed interesting to learn how their women characters rise to the crisis or harm themselves through depression or self-destruction.

Indian women writing characterizes a unique female imagination that constitutes their narratives, expressions of woman's feelings, narrating their personal lives, self-perception and yearning for woman's voice to be heard. These writings lend themselves to female imagination also to a special female self-awareness where the struggle is for independence rather than ethics or virtue. So there lies the undercurrent of female social reality. There is a yearning for self-assertion and then protest begins their quest for empowerment. Similar to Spacks, Deshpande's women characterize a female imagination and their problems are existential in nature.

Also, there is a commonality of the experiences of these women and the way the woman views herself and the way she expresses her desires and deep hidden resentments. This deep self-analysis helps these women think about themselves and reach a point of self-recognition. So, storytelling, narration or writing for the woman becomes means for freedom and escape and a letting out from her suppression. In some cases, female imagination is depicted as woman's self-awareness and struggle for independence rather than virtue. These women long for self-expression which emerges from the creative energy and this proves that aesthetic energy is not the sole ownership of men. Selfhood is discovering, manifesting and finding an artistic expression especially for the female narrator philosopher. She derives her inner strength from the successful exploitation of the inner energy and outward passivity.

Then a reading of Shashi Deshpande reveals the following: Woman arrives at solutions and catalyzes the wellbeing of her family; her vision seems inseparable from family and nurturing and she rather prefers to carry forward her culture. Women crave for liberation but the importance of their home as well as their husbands are merged in their feminine sensibility though man-woman relationship is the most committed and difficult one. They assume their quest for identity while their vision is to break silence.

Deshpande's attempt to voice the voiceless by delving deep into the female psyche helps the author to place the woman's predicament issue the conventional trajectory of problem to new visions through self-analysis of questions about existential problems and the language used reveals the feminist vision. These

women refuse to be oppressed or carry out things that are against woman's dignity, it is about woman's worth and value to herself. The women verbalize their inner turmoil, indicating that the weak have their weapons too, though passivity helps them to endure hardships. During withdrawal, they question their inner psyche and try to comprehend their personality, inner strength and secret capability.

Another observation on the research undertaken leads one to observe how the replenishment and fulfillment of a need enables woman to come to terms with her internal unrest, further aiding her to replenish herself by having her personal space. Woman's world is a unique world that they have created for themselves in a womb of liberation, freedom and happiness. Hence their conviction that and no one can take it away from them, they belong only to themselves. So, the search for answer is within not without. Likewise, myths are seen in negative light therefore indicating a resistance discourse. Wherever there is power there will be resistance, and resistance makes survival possible for women; many times, resistance or rather restrained resistance motivates women to reclaim their identity.

One of the researcher's findings is on Shashi Deshpande's deep insight into situations, circumstances and relationships. Motherhood is usually glorified and its deity's qualities remain unopposed even in myths. But Deshpande is one of the few earlier writers who observed and pointed out that women are not born mothers – that they were first babies, then grew up to be girls and motherhood came much later, that many women were not taught or even prepared for motherhood. Deshpande observes that mothers are first human beings with their needs, desires, shortcomings, etc. Therefore, in many short stories and even novels many mothers are not seen to descend from a hallowed place but that they can be cruel, selfish, mean and rude.

The uniqueness of the female imagination is expressed by the female narrator whose discursive voice plays an important role in the short story's narrative management, and tried to understand how the author's narrative management helped to bring out the female imagination in her short fiction. Such a narrator philosopher studies the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and existence, which she becomes aware of in however miniscule a world that she inhabits. Since almost all of Deshpande's short stories have a moral ending it emphasizes the idea of the female protagonist as philosopher; also, the narrator and protagonist in their quest for solution are led to a female vision of life. The narrator points to important questions on domestic issues such as an insider's view.

Within such a narrative management, women are observed to break down the walls of language and create a world that carries meaning and displays experiences that create an awareness of woman's inner self. Further, in such a narrative management, authorial voice and narrative voice merge, with the narrator asking questions and the female narrator conveying ways of female feelings. Deshpande's fictional narrations and their aesthetic appeal arise largely from the sensitive portrayal of women voicing their oppression and their mature reasoning of their experiences where they talk with a spiritual awareness displaying their forbearance. Since the woman narrator interprets her predicament and arrives at philosophies by her own explorations, her

philosophical exploration reveals a deep understanding of human psychology. Another interesting observation made from a study of her short stories is that she creates the sensitized woman who explores the self, and thereby realizes that though she is a product of culture she never had any contribution in its making, since her self-identity had been destroyed because of patriarchy, which never recognized her existence or experiences. Also, woman's awareness of the male gaze helps her to resist gender stereotyping.

Thus, women in Deshpande's fiction not only haunt a biological space but also a philosophical space, with the former derived from their experience of home making and rearing up children or taking care of them and the family, and with the latter derived from their search for an inner space or identity as woman, or a search for a meaning of their existence. Women in Deshpande's short fiction are never rendered any appreciation or acceptance; nor do they mean anything to society despite being tragic protagonists whose failures as well as her successes mean nothing.

Though Deshpande's short stories are nuanced and could be considered as philosophically resistant to imposing the ordinary and the mundane in the name of culture and tradition, the irony in their portrayal is that they gradually tend to accept life through acceptance of life as restoration and finding solace in inner harmony. To understand Deshpande's female imagination, it is a female creative energy that follows a female trajectory through the consciousness of the individual and finally derives from the collective unconscious, thereby making the narrator protagonist a philosopher or a thinking woman in search of a refuge.

The study of Deshpande's short fiction therefore reveals how a feminist tale need not represent mega narratives of woman's suffering but that even a miniscule narration of a motherly feeling coupled with her denial of motherhood is worthy as subject of a feminist tale. Such a choice of miniscule narratives of issues pertaining to women reveals that Shashi Deshpande's female vision is essentially feminist, whether in terms of the women's denial of motherhood (—Death of a child) or her choice of domesticity over liberation or her voicing her personal experiences of marital rape (—The Intrusion) or the woman's liberal attitude to extra marital affair (—A Day Like Any Other).

Deshpande's choice of subject matter is unique to women's personal experiences where the solutions to the woman's problems do not separate themselves from the ground realities of woman's life in India. Hence the female imagination represented in Shashi Deshpande's short fiction resorts to explore and understand woman's life. In the above sense female imagination tends to be therapeutic in the modern age since thinking becomes a cathartic moment that is both emotionally purging as well intellectually enriching, leading them to decisive opinions on any issues, though not leading them to take drastic or revolutionary actions. Shashi Deshpande's representation of the Indian female imagination typifies the Indian women's consciousness whose vision of life, narrates her own suffering within her family and traditional familial relationships that seeks refuge by turning inward like a philosopher.

The Indian female Imagination represented too is different from that of western women writers' works, since western women writers may talk of exploited women who use an oppressive situation for their benefit using passivity as means to power, taking care of others as a vehicle for control and mastery. For the female literary tradition of the British and American women writers, perceived themselves and have imagined reality different from the Indian women writers. It is possible that the female imagination in Indian women writers may be all these and more. They will not revolt or break away from the norms of the society many a times and prefer familial harmony at their expense and at the cost of their happiness. Deshpande's women question and define their identities as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, and as human beings. They are aware that the Western concepts of individual rights, equality and personal choice can destroy and challenge the family structure, which is built upon accommodation and sharing.

The researcher's conclusion is that female imagination is an expression of female feelings. It indicates that it is written by women as it explains the understanding of women's self and its discursive voices within her, with female narrators and a discursive method of creation of women's text or sub texts. It displays how women have perceived themselves, their realities, and their imagined realities. The study on Shashi Deshpande's short fiction gave rise to several additional questions and problems, which need in depth research exploration that is beyond the scope of this study. First of all, it can be comprehended that Deshpande's views on the Hindu marriage, family and women's role, are given due importance in her short fiction. Her female protagonists as philosophers become catalysts to confront or transform various domestic problems by exploring and analyzing them from an insider's point of view. Such confrontations basically explore the female and male relationships and the familial situations, and finally put them on the path of their search for identity. Hence, the whole venture of the female protagonists to view their life situation with 'female ways of feeling' demands a careful examination and study.

Deshpande's positive contribution to Indian short fiction is immense. Her works reflect and represents the realistic attitudes and feelings of contemporary Indian women who belong to the middle class, in their various life situations. Since she is one of the authors who had started writing right from the 70's onwards and continues to do so even today, she rightly deserves the reputation and the respectable position she enjoys among the Indian writers. Few topics that the researcher suggests for future research on Deshpande's short fiction discuss the following woman centered ideas: woman's upbringing in the Indian scenario, the background, culture and tradition she is nurtured in. In other words, the woman centered world of Shashi Deshpande as represented by her works is a subject worth the study.

Another viable issue meant for an in-depth research on Deshpande's short fiction delves on the possibility of an Indian feminist approach to her works. What are the challenges faced by an Indian woman, when she faces the harsh realities of life, marriage and relationships? Though it takes a toll on her, especially since after marriage she is confronted with a different world, she comes out of her world of illusion and faces the harsh realities of life and marriage, problems of adjustments, compromises and sacrifices.

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