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FEMALE VISION OF LIFE IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, one of India's most celebrated contemporary women novelists, presents a nuanced portrayal of female experiences, struggles, and aspirations in her works. Her novels explore the complexities of women's lives within the framework of Indian society, addressing themes such as gender roles, marital conflicts, identity crises, and the search for selfhood. Through her strong and introspective female protagonists, Deshpande challenges traditional patriarchal norms while highlighting the silent resilience and agency of women. This study delves into the female vision of life as depicted in her novels, examining the socio-cultural constraints and psychological depths that shape her characters. By analyzing works like *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows*, this research sheds light on Deshpande's feminist perspective, her critique of societal expectations, and her emphasis on personal liberation. Ultimately, her novels provide an insightful commentary on the evolving roles of women in contemporary India, making her a significant voice in feminist literary discourse.

Key words: Shashi Deshpande, female vision, women's identity, gender roles, patriarchy, feminism, marital conflicts, selfhood, liberation, Indian society, psychological depth etc.

Deshpande portrays women many times as victims of patriarchal dominion to which they meekly submit. Many a times they do not raise their voice and submit in humility to whatever situation they come across. They submit to their fathers, husbands and society and give away their independence and freedom for the benefit of their family. They realize that their act of submission ensures peace and stability to their homes. Willingness or acceptance to submit is one of the characteristic traits of the female worldview of life among Deshpande's women.

The writer's vision on women is expressed effectively through woman's silence. For, an initial reading of her short story reveals that being submissive is never enough for the Indian woman, and she would not voice her concerns openly. Rather she bears her pain and suffering silently and submissively. However, the uniqueness of the writer's vision lies in the fact that she reveals how there is power in her silence. Like in the short story —*The Legacy* the wife's silence is an outrageous one, since she submits to her husband's demand for her to sleep with another man for the sake of their progeny. Hence Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of women as silent and submissive. What Deshpande attempts here is to voice the voiceless. In —*The First Lady* she voices the voiceless woman whose aim is not to disrupt her family's harmony, but try to be content in her monotonous and tedious lifestyle. Even as a young girl with desires to marry a young man of her choice, for the benefit of her family she gave up her desires and aspiration, killing her emotions and settling for a monotonous life. Such a woman is also portrayed in —*A Liberated Woman* where the woman fakes and lies to her friends, family, society and finally to herself, since her objective is to bring peace, harmony and stability in her marriage and family, just like many other protagonists of Shashi Deshpande.

The analysis of the texts discussed above reveals that Deshpande's expression of the female vision is not rebellion in its fierce sense. A phallocentric critic might think that a woman writer's imagination cannot go beyond family and relationships. But on the contrary

Deshpande's imagination is emphasized in her definite choice to image a woman confined to family and tradition. The very choice of Deshpande to image a family woman reveals her emphasis on woman's psyche and what it feels like to be a woman, a homemaker, a mother and so on.

Interestingly, this woman writer's choice to portray domestic realities as seen from a woman's psyche helps to understand her feminist vision of life viz to represent the underrepresented to voice the repressed voices and express the woman's point of view and perspective to her own problem. —The Legacy is Deshpande's expression of feminist vision on women characters who are frustrated. While it portrays women victimized in a male dominated Indian society it also portrays women's quest for self-fulfillment. The woman's instinctive longings for a son, remains unfulfilled, because of the sexual inadequacy of the husband. A young doctor as a surrogate husband is therefore arranged. This loveless sex with the doctor results in her conceiving a child. The doctor describes the experience:

We were the primeval Adam and Eve in paradise. There was no talk of love. No futile promises. The few days we spent together were so complete in themselves they stand out like a splash of color on the grey palette of my life I have never met anyone who laughed so easily as she did. Days of laughter! (*Col V.I5*)

Though the female protagonists are apparently tolerant and submissive, they do not in reality compromise their identity and individuality. For their apparent submission only leads them to intense isolation; they are unable to reconcile themselves to the demands of their independent psyche. Consequently, they view the world as a hostile place and often take a negative stance, which generates psychic states of anger, guilt, fear, bitterness, depression, helplessness and anxiety.

Such psychic experiences lead Shashi Deshpande's women to quest for identity to move beyond suffering. Deshpande deliberately explores these problems through the female

consciousness by making her female characters intensely introspective. Most of the stories shape Deshpande's conviction that woman's true existence emerges from self-affirmation that leads to self-control. There always comes a point in a woman's life when one may revolt against the stored-up indignities. Over the years women face insults, dominion, oppression, disrespect and suppression which results in immense pent up emotions or insults. Deshpande portrays her woman thus as voice of silence that gets transformed to voice of revolt.

So, if Deshpande's women are preservers of family and tradition, and at the same time they suffer the patriarchal oppression, which they are not ready to leave, then what is her female vision? Also, how is this vision akin to or opposed to the feminist vision? The answer lies in the following observations: her short stories delve deep into the female psyche; she outlines the woman's quest for life and the search for her place in the complex reality of life. However, they create a female vision in voicing the voiceless lives, environments and visions of women. Her characters move from trajectory of problems to a new vision through a self-analysis of questioning themselves about the existential problems faced by a woman. Such a vision only divulges the truth that the traditional Indian society provides little scope for the independent growth of a woman. Hence, she must live through restrictions and inhibitions throughout her childhood, youth and old age. Deshpande's vision is revealed in her exploration of moral and psychic dilemmas of her women characters along with their efforts to cope with these challenges.

At times, woman's attempt at quest for identity and self-definition leads to psychological and moral dilemmas generating feelings of guilt, shame, frustration and fear. This can be understood through an exploration of Shashi Deshpande's language, which is another forte of Shashi Deshpande's short fiction, which characterizes a spirited and beautiful language with a touch of the spontaneous, the simple and the free. While English used by Shashi Deshpande is distinctly Indian, it is also free from Indian rustic simplicity or harsh

verbalizations. Though English used is in its simplest form, yet it is heavily loaded with Indianness, as sensed from her sensorial presentation of the place, culture, food, traditions, beliefs, etc. Such a language that also resounds the authenticity of situations, characters and places elaborated, brings home the female creation of Indian culture. In the short story

—Lost Springs¹ we find the narrator narrating in the following manner:

THIS PLACE WAS once a Portuguese fort. There's nothing left of it now, except the crumbling walls and the name, which the hotel has adopted. There's still something fort-like about it though, a tightly secured feel that seems to keep the stray weekend visitors outside the low walls. Even the sea has been kept at bay and is only a distant view which we watch from our deck chairs, as if it is a spectacle placed there by the hotel for our pleasure (*Col V.II* 70).

Another significant dimension of Shashi Deshpande's language is that it reveals a feminist vision which is like any other marginalized discourse that has many a times bid certain alterations leading to structural shifts in the genre of fiction. When we compare how a man writes and a woman does, then we can argue that men interrupt women much more often than the vice-versa; men use interruptions as a discourse strategy to dominate women. However, discourse of women shows active participation through cooperative overlaps or collaborative floor holding, as depicted in Deshpande's short story —Madhu. When the narrator who is a retired army officer visits his friend's house after a long time, he engages in a conversation with his friend's modern daughter Madhu:

I bet you stored up plenty of nasty replies in your mind, though,' Madhu chuckled. That was Madhu...impertinent, casual, impatient, intolerant of her parents, yet shamelessly taking advantage of them...you'll be the same with your kids,' I told her. _Who? Me? She was genuinely indignant. God. I'll never be nosy. I'll leave my kids absolutely free. They can even choose their own names (*Col V.II* 93).

Women's talks are more indirect and men's talks are more direct, evidence of this is seen in the same short story: —I say. ' She whispered, —am I in disgrace?'

Utterly, ' I spoke sternly, What happened to you? (*Col V.II* 95).

When it comes to the importance and significance of Indian women's writings the common point binding them became the common goals, to make their voices heard, to make their presence felt and to voice the voiceless. Deshpande's woman voices her thoughts in a family circumstance. Earning for the family for a living or providing for the family is not an issue that bothers the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande; her heroines are not very poor - in fact they have a proper family and comfortable life, so their problems are different, what they suffer from is inner turmoil and internal pain. The torture and mental agony that they suffer is immense but they will not let that torment disturb or create ripples in their already static family life, their inner realization brings them to a consciousness of their now awakened conscience. This awakening leads the protagonists to carry out some very important decisions bordering on the feminist.

Deshpande's vision characterizes the vision of Indian feminism; women have learnt to assert themselves but are careful enough to avoid a storm that may unsettle the happy family atmosphere. Liberation for her protagonists does not mean doing away with human needs. Nor does it mean walking away or putting aside all the ties of life, the ties of love, etc. It means not to give in to oppression and refuse to be oppressed and to refuse to do things that go against woman's dignity. It is a realization of the woman's worth and value to herself. As Betty Freidan says: —For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self realization, independence, individuality, and self actualization is as important as the sexual need with as serious consequences when it is thwarted (282). The fulfillment of the needs of the self, its autonomy and realization thus completes the woman; her independence comes from realizing her fulfillment of herself. In other words, what she seeks is her self-actualization.

Referring to self-actualization, Calvin considers it as -

... the creative trend of human nature. It is the organic principle by which the organism becomes more fully developed and more complete. The ignorant person who desires knowledge feels an inner emptiness; he or she has a sense of their own incompleteness. By reading and studying, their desire for knowledge is fulfilled and the emptiness disappears. A new person has been created, thereby; one in whom learning has taken the place of ignorance. Their desire has become an actuality. Any need is a deficit. It is like a hole that demands to be filled in. This replenishment or fulfillment of a need is what is meant by self-actualization or self-realization. Calvin S Hall and Gardner Lindzey. *Personality* (249)

Thus, in every person this need for realization of the self is inevitable, much more in women; therefore, its realization and fulfillment, this replenishment and fulfillment of a need enables the woman to come to terms with her internal unrest. It helps her replenish herself, gratify her emptiness against her own internal agony and therefore find freedom at the end of her captivity. She thus realizes that she will stand for her personal space and freedom at the same time not disrupting her flow of family life. Like the protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's short story —A Day Like Any Other,¹ aware of her husband's affair with another woman, replies when she is inquired about her feelings —But who can cheat me out of what I alone can create for myself?² (*Col V. II* 80). These are very powerful words; the husband's affair does not affect her life anymore - she rather has a realization of her freed self, where she is not bound by these petty sorrows, grief's or surprises of mundane life. She has created a world for herself where she is liberated, free and happy and no one can take it away from her.

Such a feminist vision expressed in Shashi Deshpande's works is like western feminists. Many western women writers give voice to their woman's concern and they have defied and rejected the stereotyped image of the angel in the house, through their works that

represent the image of a submissive housewife, mother, daughter, sister, etc. They also criticize explicitly as well as implicitly the patriarchal values. Most of the women writers wrote of women as subject of their works but very few projects the global, economic, cultural, historical, political and other concerns of the society with an exception being writers like Arundhati Roy.

To take the tangent off Indian writers for a while and view western writers, Madame de Stael, the first woman critic of importance according to Rene Welleck in history, views literature and civilization by positively espousing the ‘myth of progress’ from classical Greece and Rome to modern times. She claims to have observed the —slow but continuous progress of the human mind...I believe that by studying history, one becomes convinced that all major events are tending toward the same goal, a universal civilization(2). This statement encapsulates the essence of women’s vision in western literature, minus the empathy, which Madame de Stael adds in *De l’Allemagne*. Lawrence M Porter.

The beginning of the new century saw a change in the style and content of women's writing, as well as an increase in the depiction of feminine images and themes in literature. Male authors such as D. H. Lawrence and W. D. Howells spoke of issues relating to sexuality and the freshly redefined sexual politics between men and women. Women authors such as Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Katherine Mansfield focused on topics relating to women, directing attention to the infinite difficulties they faced redefining their identities in an ever-changing world. These women writers attempt a kind of female perspective of life, a kind of feminization of society. Eve Figes commenting about feminization of society says:

When women did begin to comment on the social system in fiction their outlook was essentially humanist. Leaving aside isolated statements on the position of their own sex, which occurs in the writings of all women therefore they tended to stand aside from an indeed, distrust political systems and solutions and view the problems they described in terms of human relations...and see the solution in terms of the feminizations of society (152).

This attempt at feminization of society that characterizes female writing is brought forward by a female identity, as a subject always in progression; and these writers like negating norms, boundaries and limits set for them. They oppose the culture of silence and question deep structures of politics of sex revealing a different viewpoint of myths that depict women in negative light. Such a female writing is a resistance discourse where women question every aspect of life and society like marriage, control of sexuality, tradition and motherhood. They question and its role in creating a void for women in it. Similar to the western women writers, Indian women writers do express ways of feelings, ways of seeing, ways of showing and most importantly ways of voicing the voiceless, thereby representing thoughts that are liberalized as well as independent.

Shashi Deshpande's novels offer a profound exploration of the female vision of life, portraying the struggles, resilience, and evolving identities of women within the socio-cultural framework of Indian society. Through her nuanced storytelling and deeply introspective characters, she challenges traditional gender norms while highlighting the silent endurance and agency of women. Her works serve as a critique of patriarchy, emphasizing the need for self-discovery and personal liberation. By presenting realistic female experiences, Deshpande contributes significantly to feminist literary discourse, making her an influential voice in contemporary Indian literature. Ultimately, her novels not only reflect the challenges faced by women but also inspire a redefinition of their roles in society.

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