



## Quest for Female Identity: A Feminist Study of Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

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### Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with traditional and patriarchal Indian set up as well as the difficulties faced by women handling multiple roles in Indian society. Deshpande's protagonists belong to typical middle-class family and are caught in the web of traditional patriarchy, set by ideology in one hand and with the desire of independent identity on the other way. All the women characters of Deshpande's fiction try to assert themselves both within and without the familiar zones by overcoming the challenges and hindrances and have proved their individuality and unique identity as human beings by taking decisions on their own through suffering and enlightenment. Moreover, the present research is qualitative in its approach that is conducted under the feminist theoretical perspectives.

**Keywords:** Deshpande's protagonists, Indian society, independent female identity, patriarchal society

### Introduction

Undertaken research aims to locate female identity in Indian society in the selected works of Indian writer Shashi Deshpande. Undertaken research includes novels *That Long Silence* (1988), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) and *A Matter of Time* (2000). This research refutes the socially acceptable claim that within the family the man is the master and the woman is the inferior and the subordinate partner. Deshpande's work has a status with critical attention of her minute, thoughtful and life like portrayals of urban middle class woman caught in the web of patriarchy on one hand and the urge to make themselves socio-economically independent on the other. Her novels wonderfully delineate the inner conflict and anguish, disappointment and dilemma in a woman's mind, both in the external and internal spheres of life. Deshpande's writings explore the numerous experiences of Indian women in domestic and social zones, experiences that are ingrained in "the presumption that (a woman) is an inferior being, of carrying the burden of being an unwanted female child, of having to battle an ingrained, deeply entrenched patriarchal system all of which give rise to problems specific to their sex" (Sarkar, 2022, p. 10). To combat such discriminating tendency of our typical patriarchal social structure what is essentially needed is the establishment of an identity, an identity that is specific and unique to an individual, an identity that gives a woman her reason of existence, the motivation to survive strongly without being dependent on anybody. Sarkar (2022) observes about Shashi Deshpande that she has, "the urge to find

oneself, to create space to grow on one's own that seems to be Deshpande's major occupation. Personally I think that's every woman's problem as well. That's where Deshpande has touched a chord" (Sarkar, 2022, p.16).

### **Research Questions**

1. How are the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's selected works exploited by patriarchal Indian society?
2. How do female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande struggle in Indian society to locate their identity?

### **Methodology**

Undertaken research is qualitative in its nature where descriptive analysis of the text reflects the issue of identity. The textual analysis of the novel reveals how Deshpande considers Indian patriarchal society with special reference to the feminist perspective. In the light of feminist approach the selected texts have been analyzed with the help of close reading technique.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Undertaken research is in the light of feminism theory that focuses on equality of women on socio economic and political fields of life. The theory claims that women are not mere the commodities rather they are beings, and they should be treated as such. It focuses on equality of sexes and often taken against the patriarchal mindset where the breadwinner men are thought to be the center of attention in society and women as well as their part in society is often ignored. In political, philosophical, and fictional discourse feminism has its unique importance as it deals with the marginalized strata of society. Theory aims to understand the nature of gender inequality being practiced in society. In the light of this theory the roles of men and women are defined, and every individual is supposed to play his or her role without considering one inferior or superior. The men on patriarchal societies take the women as stereotype. All these things are being conducted with special reference to the Indian society.

### **Literature Review**

Identity plays a vital role to shape a person's life in society, in recognizing a person's power and position too. Identity enables a human being to have a strong hold on himself/herself without being a dependent crippled creature, often considered as a burden to others. Not only this, a person's identity is the key to his/her survival as an independent entity. Without a specific identity a person cannot earn self-respect and cannot even hold the courage to express opinions as an individual. Having a definite identity bolster one with a positive aura, self-esteem, clarity of thought, resolute approach, and a determined frame of mind.

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Giri (2018) asserts that in the traditional patriarchal Indian society women consistently play the triple roles of an obedient daughter, a dutiful wife, and a doting self-sacrificing mother. The identity of a woman is entangled in these socially defined roles. Scarcely have they found time to think of themselves as an individual human being with a freedom of their own and very often they are brought up in a way to be dependent on men. But with the changing scenario women realized the necessity to create a space of one's own, an identity of one's own, independent of the socially ordained roles of a mother, daughter, or wife. Shashi Deshpande's fiction explores in a magnificent manner a woman's quest for identity to establish herself, to fulfil her dreams as a human being, to survive as a self-esteeming individual, not as a victim or subordinate one. Giri (2018) further argues that in Deshpande's novels there is always a quest for identity. There is always a female narrator in her novels who strive for the identity. They want to assert themselves. Almost all the female characters of the Deshpande are in quest of their self-identity.

Virginia Woolf (1953), asserts that a woman needs to be liberated, emancipated, to have a space of own to think only about herself as an individual. In fact, Woolf vehemently proposes the idea of cultivating one's mind through writing to make women at par with men in terms of intellectual capability. Literary writing by women, Woolf observes, cannot only give them financial independence but also to boost up their moral strength and establish their entity as individual human being.

As Carter (1998) illustrates his views about the female identity in Indian society. He argues that freedom in this society is hard to achieve. With special respect to Shashi Deshpande, he argues that her female characters are in their quest for identity. There is always a passivity in their character to accept socially ordained roles. Moreover, it is reflected in her writings a voice of assertion. Deshpande reflects an idea that women should be true to themselves. There is nobility in their being that should be declared through their beings in the patriarchal Indian society. On the other hand, the women should take their arms against their negation and suppression in society. Women should discover themselves and their potentials before it is too late. There is always an inner space that should be expressed through their existence.

Rightly does O. P. Bhatnagar (2007) comments that their feminism is actually a realization of women's own identity and being. It is, moreover, a realization of courage and identity and being true to oneself. The women should do whatever they think better for themselves. Women feel that they are suppressed and oppressed as well as tormented in patriarchal society and they do not have control over their own lives that should be given to them. With reference to the undertaken study, it is reflected that how the women are exploited

and manipulated in Indian society and how do they fall a victim to their psychotic diseases due to the patriarchal control. They are merely used as tools of enjoyment and do not enjoy their freedom of choice.

Commenting on the character of Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Santwana Halder (2005) argues that the novel has a feminist tone in it and protagonist of the novel is feminist in her approach. She devotes herself in quest of her identity and in the end she becomes victorious. She realizes her self-identity and undergoes herself through the process of self-realization. She justifies her stance before her husband who does not acknowledge her. It is revealed to her that actual happiness lies in living life on her own terms and principals rather than to live on the conditions imposed by others.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

#### **Quest for Female Identity in *That Long Silence***

In Deshpande's award-winning novel *That Long Silence* (1988) the protagonist Jaya embarks on a journey in her quest for an authentic identity as a woman, specifically as a writer on serious social issues regarding women. She feels extremely claustrophobic to portray the character of an ideal wife and a perfect mother so far in her married life. The way she describes her apparently successful marital life with Mohan clearly pinpoints her apathy and repugnance towards life. The text illustrates this fact as, "Two bullocks yoked together it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?" (Deshpande, 1988, p.8)

In the text of the novel the women identity has been represented as a victim of patriarchal mindset. This fact is reflected in the quest of Jaya who is never satisfied merely with the identity of being wife of Mohan. Her identity as a wife of Mohan or the mother of Rati and Rahul does not suit her rather, she wants more as a female. Since Mohan is mouthpiece of patriarchal set up of Indian society so he objects on every action of Jaya. He even objects and criticizes the creative bent of mind of his wife. But Jaya as a female thinks that it is the suitable time to assert her identity and prefers not to live merely as a typical wife at Mohan's home for the rest of her life. She remains in quest of her identity and is eager to establish it. She observes, "To achieve anything, to become anything, you have got to be hard and ruthless. Yes, even if you want to be a saint to love the whole world, you've got to stop loving individual human beings first" (Deshpande, 1988, p. 78).

So far as the identity of a female is represented in the novels of Shashi Deshpande is concerned, she represents those women have nothing to say in society and it is better for them to stay silent. The women have not been possessed with a tongue. Psychologically, the women

are supposed to be silent, hysterical, and neurotic in their nature. The Indian patriarchal set up lemmatizes the women merely to the level of pigmy. They are nothing but a sex tool in society. When they are used as a social commodity, they must be a victim of neurosis. They become frustrated and this is what represented in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. In that long silence this factor has been represented in the following words. This is the factor that is illustrated in the text of the novel as follows, “A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated” (Deshpande, 1988, p. 147).

The female characters of Shashi Deshpande revolt against the normal patriarchal set up of Indian society. The women are eager to have change in social set up and to undermine the patriarchal mindset. They want equality on human grounds and raise their voice against the cruelty that is put on them by men. The view of female characters of Deshpande is that life is itself very easy, but it is made oppressive by social set up of society. From the birth of females, they are made to realize that they are meant to serve and submit that enhances the cruelty of males towards females. In the text of the novel this assumption has been presented in the following way, “It's not just that life is cruel, but that in the very process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty” (Deshpande, 1988, p. 102).

#### **Quest for Female Identity in *Roots and Shadows***

Deshpande's another novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is all about a woman's effort to proclaim her individuality, to materialize her dreams and how her attempts make her confront with her family and society at large. A modern educated Indian woman Indu is a journalist, financially self-determining, married with a person of her choice. But she undergoes a huge crisis both in personal and professional lives as she lacks the spirit to assert her feelings emphatically. Economic independence does not provide her the power to live life the way she wants because she is dominated at every step by Jayant, her husband. To overcome the stifling and strict ambience of her marital life she leaves home to go back to her roots, i.e. her parental home. She once breaks the chains of tradition bound life in search of an autonomous independent life with Jayant but in vain. To her utter dismay she now finds that she has lost the capability to live alone. Marrying Jayant does not give her access to an independent life; rather she loses her individuality in Jayant completely, as she pathetically ponders:

Now I dress the way I want. As I please. As I please? No, that's not true. When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress, I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him? And I can't blame him ... it's the way I want it to be. (Deshpande, 1983, p. 49)

The realization that she has become 'fluid with no shape, no form of my own' once again arouses the latent rebellious attitude in her. She denies surrendering her independence to Jayant's dominating personality. Indu's homecoming after a long break serves as a remedy to her problems, from which she is deliberately escaping. She realizes that she should listen to her conscience, do what she thinks morally right and never compromise with her individuality.

Indu is a middle-class young girl who belongs to Brahman family headed by Akka. She becomes aware later in her life that what her roots are and as a writer she observes herself what her shadows are whether she is better as a commercial writer, mother, or a daughter. She rebels against Akka and marries Jayant against the rigid rules and values. The action of her marriage is to achieve freedom from traditional patriarchal norms and to assert her feminist mentality. In the form of achieving her role as an independent wife she defines herself as a fitting woman. Her expression of being a female is expressed in the following lines, "This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not known it I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone" (Deshpande, 1983, p. 34).

#### **Quest for Female Identity in *The Dark Holds No Terror***

In this novel Sarita is the protagonist who presents the female struggle to achieve identity. Sarita's life in Deshpande's fiction *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Despite achieving professional success as doctor, Sarita's disintegrated life at home, marital discord with Manohar and embittered relationship with her parents compel her to review her identity as an individual. In her childhood Sarita has been a victim of gender discrimination and she gradually started hating herself for being a girl, as she blurts out in anger: "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (Deshpande, 1980, p. 63). She has faced how her own mother wanted to seal her destiny by marrying off instead of supporting her desire to pursue higher studies in medicine. The astounding words, uttered in utmost disappointment "Is that all I am, a responsibility" (Deshpande, 1980, p. 144). clearly echo the grim picture of society whereby women are denied access in decision making process of their own lives. In order to prove herself a strong determined woman Sarita successfully makes a career in medicine but her disastrous marriage with Manohar once again thwarts her personality, crumbles her spirit and she is left with a traumatized mind. The brutal way with which Manohar assaults Sarita every night totally devastates her, and she feels like a trapped animal with nowhere to escape: "I was pinioned to a position of an abject surrender of myself" (Deshpande, 1980, p. 10). Her identity as a doctor seems to have failed in boosting up her crushed spirit. But the moment she revisits her parental home to revive her lost relationship, she feels rejuvenated and with her father's assurance she decides to confront her problems to regain her identity. So far as female identity

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is concerned it is more vividly represented in the following lines of novel, “My life is my own somehow, If I have been puppet, it is because I made myself one. I have been clinging unto the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of providing my mother right” (Deshpande, 1980, p.220).

It is represented in the novel that women are taken as responsibility. The women are thought to be wives and their role is limited to this identity. Even in the parental homes they are taken as other’s property and most often there is no proper attention paid to them as compared to male children. Deshpande attracts the attention of reader towards a social taboo that if a female refuses to marry she is threatened and questioned. She is made to realize that she is not meant for parental home rather she is meant to be married. Since the males are different from females so they are justified if they marry or take time to marry. This is what the text of *Dark Holds No Terror* represents where Saru refuses to marry and her mother threatens her by saying, “Will you live with us all your life? Why not? You can’t. And Dhruva? He’s different. He’s a boy hundred and ninety-nine rupees. That’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage” (Deshpande, 1980, p137).

### **Quest for Female Identity in *A Matter of Time***

What Deshpande desires to convey through the character portrayal of Sumi is that women must curve their own identity to assert their individuality in lieu of accepting the submissive role of a suffering wife or a self-sacrificing mother. Like Deshpande’s other protagonists Sumi is “a new woman, both enduring and assertive, seeking liberation through education and struggle” (Singh, 2013, p. 221). Sumi’s individuality and sense of self-esteem make her strong enough to accept with dignity Gopal’s sudden withdrawal from the role of a family man. Neither Sumi crawls before Gopal for financial help nor does she expect a forceful patch up:

We can never be together again. All these days I have been thinking of him as if he has been suspended in space, in nothingness, since he left us. But he has gone on living, his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged, they now move separately, two different streams (Deshpande, 2000, p.85).

Sumi’s earnest search for a job and a house of her own gives her a sense of liberation and pride for herself. She has moved on from the stereotyped role of a docile wife. Instead of wailing over her status of a deserted wife and disregarding society’s frowning over her estranged condition, she calmly accepts, “It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have got used to being alone” (Deshpande, 2000, p.23). Sumi’s

confidence in starting a new phase of life reflects her sense of freedom as an individual as well as her faith in her potential.

### **Conclusion**

Deshpande's protagonists Jaya, Indu, Sarita and Sumi are undoubtedly authentic portrayals with individual characteristics, problems and plights, failures and disappointments of their own. But there is a common thread that binds all, the factor being their quest for identity, yearning for liberty, aspiration for individuality as human being. Through her portrayals of such strong women characters Deshpande desires to express how women desperately try to assert their individual entity as human being amidst predominant patriarchal social order. The desire to overcome the problems of life springs from resoluteness and unfailing bent of mind that characterize most of Deshpande's heroines. Despite various hindrances and pressures from all corners, the protagonists never give up and emerge victorious in their journey from a dependent and subordinated creature to a self-dependent, confident, and motivated human being with an individuality of one's own. Hence it is essential for a woman to carve an identity of her own, to develop her qualities, to hone her potentials, to take her decisions and foremost to live her life on her own terms.



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