



Empowerment of Women Through Autobiography A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Selected Memory

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is known for creating women characters who are contemporary. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. The objective of this study is to find out if Shashi Deshpande's women characters are really empowered women or if they are just wearing a mask of tranquility. The study aims to find out if Shashi Deshpande's women really assert themselves or somewhere in their assertion process conform to endurance. The study wishes to find out if compromise is the key word in Shashi Deshpande's heroines' vocabulary. Shashi Deshpande believes that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually women have reserves we are often unaware of. Women are better at dealing with emotional traumas. This is because women, unlike men, have never had to suppress their emotional selves, they are more open about these problems - both in articulating them and understanding them. Shashi Deshpande has dealt very minutely and delicately with the problems of middle-class educated women. Shashi Deshpande is only making her voice more distinctive with every new publication. Writing from the margin is also written with felicity to evoke emotions. However much she may deny the influence of feminism in her novels, it is the core of her novels.

KEYWORDS

Life and Work of Shashi Deshpande, Style and Technique in Her Work, Women Characters in Her Short Story)

Shashi Deshpande is known for creating women characters who are contemporary. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives.

Life and Work of Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Dharwad, India. She is the second daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shiranga. At the age of fifteen, she went to Mumbai where she graduated in Economics. She then moved to Bangalore, where she gained a degree in Law. The early years of her marriage were largely given over to the care of her two young sons, but she took a course in journalism and for a time worked on a magazine. Her writing career only began in earnest in 1970. Deshpande began her writing with short stories which later developed into writing novels. Her first collection of short stories *The Legacy* published in 1972 had been prescribed for graduate students in Columbia University.

Shashi Deshpande now lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband and has completed her M.A. in English Literature. She is regarded as one of the most accomplished contemporary Indian women writers in English. Her output is by no means inconsiderable — Eight novels viz., *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980); *If I Die Today*; *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983); *Roots and Shadows* (1986); *That Long Silence* (1987); *The Binding Vine* (1993); *A Matter of Time* (1996) and *Small Remedies* (2000). Shashi Deshpande has written four volumes of short stories, viz., *The Legacy* (1978); *The Miracle* (1986); *It was Dark* (1986), and *It was the Nightingale* (1986), and books for children too.

They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained to them by society. Her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels and stories.

What really sets Shashi Deshpande apart is that her writings hold a universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India. She has steadfastly refused to compromise in order to suit the global market, never exoticising India, never 'presenting' it — as she puts it -, and certainly by not playing to the gallery. She is often compared to regional language writers — firmly entrenched in our social realities and grappling with our issues.

One agrees with R.K. Dhawan's remarks that in this era of verbal acrobatics and pretty packaging, her clear lucid prose is starkly real and refreshing. Everything is said as it should be, not a superfluous word to be found anywhere. The aesthetics of her writing is informed by the depth of her content, articulating her thoughts and ideas, transforming the very act of reading into a sharing experience. Readers encounter an intimacy, a kind of secret bonding with her, as if she were speaking to them alone.

Each of Shashi Deshpande's novels is special and offers food for thought on human relationships and emotions. Deshpande is a master writer in the way she articulates human emotions, the fears and feelings experienced by humans, by women. Reading her books is like peeping into the hidden corners of one's own mind. Recognizing oneself in her characters, one does not feel lonely in the world anymore. Reading her novels and stories is thus an immensely satisfying experience, as reading becomes a healing process.

Shashi Deshpande says that all her novels always begin in a moment of crisis. Most of them go on unquestioningly until they are shaken out of the rut by something catastrophic or disastrous. Suddenly all that you have taken for granted becomes doubtful, everything falls apart. You begin then to question everything. And it is through this questioning, through this thinking that you move on, pick up your life once again. But you are never the same after this. This is true of all human beings, not just women. Her protagonists being women, one of the things they question is the fact of their being females, what it has done to them. But they are also probing the human condition, the human predicament. In this thinking process, humans do discover their own potential.

Shashi Deshpande believes that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually women have reserves we are often unaware of. But for the woman the situation is made more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength, because a woman's strength seems to weaken a man. She says that women are the main support of the family, though the male is the titular head.

Women are better at dealing with emotional traumas. This is because women, unlike men, have never had to suppress their emotional selves, they are more open about these problems - both in articulating them and understanding them. Shashi Deshpande has dealt very minutely and delicately with the problems of middle-class educated women. She always had in her mind people from the real India to write about, but as she proceeded, spontaneously and involuntarily, woman became the focus of her writings.

When interviewed by Vanamala Vishwanatha, Shashi Deshpande makes it clear by saying: "It all starts with people. For example, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* came to me when I saw a couple. She is uniquely Indian and her use of Marathi words very evidently presents the customs and traditions of the people belonging to Maharashtra and Karnataka. For example, words such as Kaka, Kaki, Atya, Dada, and so on, are essentially Marathi words and might be a bit difficult to grasp by the readers who do not know the language.

Shashi Deshpande cares more for literary qualities of her creative works. Her language is transparent. It does not draw attention to itself, nor does it come in the way. 11 She is basically Indian and writes for the Indians. She states that if you try to make everything easy for everyone, then, you end up belonging nowhere. So, I've left it at that- characters in their novels, without providing glosses for the western readers... Also literature can be appreciated even without understanding every word of it — one can still respond to the core of it.

Without probing deeply into the novelist's conviction of what would serve as the ideal panacea for the different kinds of challenges, the study considers the problems of her characters which have had to contend with the given situations. *Come up and Be Dead* and *If I Die Today*, two detective serials of Shashi Deshpande which have been expanded and published as novels are not included for study as the very nature of their themes seems at variance with the topic chosen for this thesis. Shashi Deshpande's stories are about a woman: her travails and privations, tensions and irritations, pains and anguishes. Her stories suggest that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run of the middle-class women in India. Unable to defy social conventions or traditional morality, the middle-class women themselves are enmeshed by desires and despairs, fears and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, marital discord and male chauvinism.

Indeed, Shashi Deshpande's chief thematic concern is with a woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as a human being. And accordingly in her novels the operative sensibility is distinctly female and modern.

Shashi Deshpande feels embarrassed to be called a woman writer and she is not very enthusiastic about the label feminist. She considers herself as a feminist in personal life but not a feminist writer.

"I write as a writer but am identified as a woman writer. I am nothing more than a novelist and a short-story writer but people seek more glorified titles to elevate you to stardom."

"If critics and reviewers insist on calling me a woman writer, then 'man' should be prefixed to male writers as well"

"Women writers are expected to write for women's magazines and be read by women readers only. Males generally do not want to read women writers."

Such statements flowed in abundance, perhaps personifying her womanhood. It made a lot of sense particularly in the run-up to the International Women's Day celebrations. With much ease Shashi Deshpande debunked myths that overwhelm the Indian intelligentsia. The prickly issues of language and writing, the widening divide between the non-resident Indian authors writing in English and the writers writing in English in India, the importance of readers and a writer's obligation to self-censorship, globalization of literature and the impact of feminism on marginalized women - the rich repertoire of debatable points that have always troubled her and continue to do so. She laments the divide between writers as a group on the basis of caste, gender and language and this, she says, prevents writers from playing a meaningful role in society and their inability to take on and write on public issues. But the free-spirited Shashi Deshpande is only making her voice more distinctive with every new publication. Writing from the margin is also written with felicity to evoke emotions. However much she may deny the influence of feminism in her novels, it is the core of her novels.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande's protagonist finds herself enmeshed by desires and despairs, fears and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, and marital discord and male chauvinism.

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