



**PROJECTION OF FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF SHASHI DESHPANDE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ROOTS AND SHADOWS AND THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS: AN ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to project Shashi Deshpande as an eminent and scholarly writer in the realm of Indian English fiction, gifted with extraordinary Capability to touch upon the very touching and sensitive aspects of human life and relationships in general and man-woman relationship in particular with a focus on women's problems and issues especially feminine consciousness, trying her level best to shatter patriarchal hegemony with a voice of protest against male-dominance.*

Shashi Deshpande holds a significant place as an eminent and popular writer in the realm of Indian English novel. No doubt, she is a novelist gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss very sensitive aspects of human life tactfully. Believing in frank narration of incidents and complete open-heartedness in dealing with men and matters, she is found narrating each and every aspect of human relationship in general and man-woman relationship in particular. What is found remarkable in her is that she won accolades for her superb narrative technique as well as subject matter. Being wedded to the treatment of predicament of the contemporary middleclass women, she is an adept in projecting her intimate understanding of the psychological and emotional. Being essentially a feminist writer, she, like Nayantara Sahgal, not only concentrates on women's problems but also recognizes on women's problems but also recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women, trying her level best to shatter patriarchal hegemony with a voice of protest against male dominance.

It is an accepted fact that Indian English fiction has been enriched by several talented notable women novelists including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hossain, Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De who all have written about Indian women, their struggle, their sufferings and their awkward position, keeping in view their image and the role which the society has created. Their chief aim lies in exploring the moral strength of women characters and their struggle with challenges in creating their own identity. Fiction by women writers does constitute a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English, providing insights, wealth of understanding and a rich reservoir of meanings with a focus on feminist issues.

Shashi Deshpande, born in Dharwad in Karnataka, as the daughter of one renowned kannada writer and Sanskrit scholar by name. Adya Rangachar popularly known as Sri Ranga, has established herself as the most accomplished women novelist writing in English in respect of her authentic portrayal of the patterns of feminine consciousness in her writings. She has to her credit publication of such famous novels as 1. **The Dark Holds No Terrors** (1980), 2. **If I Die Today** (1982) 3. **Come up and be Dead** (1983) 4. **Roots and shadows** (1988) 5. **That Long silence** (1988) 6. **The Binding Vine** (1992) and 7. **A matter of Time** of which, **The Dark Holds No Terrors** is considered her favourite novel.

In each and every novel of Shashi Deshpande, character occupies a center of prominence. The portrayal of characters in her writings is simple, the narration is in a speedy style and her language is fresh, brisk and easily understandable. Despite innumerable problems and challenges, her women characters have strength of their own and they all remain uncrushed. Many of her characters suffer either sexually or professionally and most of her novels revolve around family relationship especially husband and wife – their difficult positions and emotional conflicts. No doubt, Deshpande has dealt graphically with the problems that confront a middle-class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. In an interview, she herself admitted that hers is not “the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the cause of all troubles” (Literature Alive). Rather her novels deal with the psychic turmoil of women within the limiting and restricting confines of domesticity. Boggled down by existential insecurity and uncertainty, women in her novels are in quest of refuge, which in **Roots and shadows** is portrayed through the image of the house.

**Roots and shadows** explores the inner self of Indu symbolizing the New woman who is educated living in close association with society brushing aside all its narrow conventions. Through the character of Indu, Deshpande has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist herself, to discover her real self through her instinctive potential for creative writing. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service but her husband, Jayant, does not approve of this idea. He is a barrier, Jayant, does not approve of this idea. He is a barrier to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that a person like Indu can do nothing against the whole system by wielding her pen:

What can one person do against the whole system!  
No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile



gestures. We need the money, don't we?  
Don't forget, we have a long way to go (P17).

The temperaments of the husband and the wife are diametrically opposite to each other. One is sympathetic to the ills of the society, the 'system' whereas the other is nonchalant one is a writer in quest of an artistic selfhood while the other is a philistine in pursuit of materialistic happiness. Despite these temperamental differences, Indu is quite submissive. She did not ask him, "To go where?" Instead, she silently went back to her work, though hating it and hating herself for it. Her self-alienation increases, as she becomes aware of the conflicting demands made on her by her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer. Thus, Indu perceives herself as a shadow of the female self, a negative and an object.

Miller observes:

"When one is an object, not a subject, all of one's own psychical and sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently" (P63).

Indu is hedged in, incarcerated, unable to 'go on' through the ordeal of life, "feeling trapped" to and seeing herself "endlessly chained" (P18) in the long dusty road that lay ahead of her. When she receives Akka's summons, she heaves a sigh of relief:

"It had been a welcome reprieve. A chance to get away. To avoid thinking about what was happening to me, ..... to Jayant and me.... and our life together (P18).

A woman's role is not only confined to the centripetal needs of the family in which she lives but also to its centrifugal needs. It is here that a woman has to be more than a submissive housewife. She has to become a 'society lady' as Shobha De has put it. Indu does not pride in her suffering she cannot bear with the suffering she has to face in the family and therefore breaks away from it and marries Jayant. In the family she was an incomplete being without a sense of the wholeness of personality. But with Jayant, she feels a sense of completion and wholeness:

"I had felt in complete, not as a woman but as a person. And in Jayant, I had thought I had found the other part of my whole self" (P114).

But she did not really attain wholeness and integration of personality. She is often haunted by a 'usual feeling of total disorientation' (33). As an outsider, she remains untouched by the milieu:

"For some reason I was an outsider. The waves of sorrow, sympathy and comradeship nipped all around me but left me untouched" (30).

Indu suffers from total disorientation and isolation. There are ample references in the novel to her "loneliness" suggested through the images of 'dust' and 'barrenness' and 'dark room' :

"Then we are out. It is dusty, a totally barren place.  
- - - I am alone and move along people I don't know. I had rejected the family, tried to draw a magic circle around Jayant and myself. I had pulled in my boundaries..... I am alone" (P10).

Fully recognizing her displacement and marginalization as a woman, Indu finds herself merging into others experiencing a loss of boundaries. The authoritative and dominating male has not only suppressed the female voice but also brought silence, dullness and repulsion to the houses women live in:

". . . the house was silent. . . carrying on an interminable argument with kitchen, their voices rising and falling monotonously, were now hustled out by an authoritative male voice" (P6).

Women like Indu can neither express themselves nor choose for themselves. They can neither love nor hate but be content with the gift of silence that marriage had brought them. In silence, Indu pines for love almost frantically.

". . . . I want to be loved,  
I want to be happy .  
The cries are now stilled" (13).



Marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman. The two sexes are different from each other, though one has the necessity of the other. Simone de Beauvoir observes:

“... This necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them, women haven't ever constituted a case making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality” (P446).

A woman like Indu is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. She has to reach out beyond herself towards the social milieu only through her husband. But he is impervious and indifferent to her emotional urges. Instead, it is Indu who has to cater to the needs of his inner urges and drives. In such a situation, Indu feels alienated from Jayant. To Ann Forman, women experience themselves as the fulfillment of other people's needs:

“Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women, there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are essential structures of her oppression” (P102).

Jayant betrays Indu's hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. Nor is he 'a sheltering tree' to her. Instead, she finds that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant's masculinity – by becoming his wife. Willingly she yields to the demands of marriage and moulds herself unto the dictates of her husband. But she never blames him, knowing well that it is men who 'tear' and it is women who 'bear'. O.P. Bhatnagar rightly remarks:

“... the novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with male-dominated society.”

Indu's problematic of “becoming” expresses Deshpande's feminist consciousness against sexual and gender role imposed upon women in a patriarchal malist culture. Indu gradually realizes that she doesn't exist for her but for Jayant the archetypal male, imperialistic and subjugating. She feels in her a sense of insecurity. As a lacerated woman, she rails at her family and the malist world when a girl is “never claimed”. Indu ultimately realizes that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant. Naren, with whom she develops an adulterous relationship is nothing but a mere shadow to her. It is she, she feels, who is to blame for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of a heaven. She being a narcissist, “had locked herself in a cage and thrown away the keys” (P85). Thus, Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine consciousness that frantically longed for self-expression finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with realization and discovery of her authentic female consciousness.

Deshpande's next novel **The Dark Holds No Terrors** is no exception to the presence of feminist consciousness and its assertion by the protagonist. **The Dark Holds No Terrors** has often been referred to and evaluated as “a feminist work” (Sandhu 37). This novel tells the harrowing tale of Sarita, referred to as Saru. Deprived of parental care and affection, she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother but hates her. And when he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own:

“You killed him. Why didn't you die?  
Why are you alive, when he's dead? (P34).

This is the plight of not only Saru but also millions who are born girls. The fault lies with their gender and not with them. Her marriage with Manu is an assertion not with them. Her marriage with Manu is an assertion and affirmation of her feminine consciousness:

“I was hungry for love  
each act of sex was a triumphant assertion  
of our love of my being loved, of my being  
wanted” (P40).

But she sets herself up as a doctor, the situation changes: “He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband” (P42). She is too busy in her profession to look after her children. The working wife stands isolated from familial ties and obligations. Her family gets disturbed. Manu cannot bear people greeting her and ignoring him. She begins to loathe the man-woman relationship which has no love in it:



“Love. . . how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely... turning into the thing they called love. It’s only a word she thought. Take away the word, the idea and the concept will wither away” (P72).

Saru’s feminine consciousness crumbles. Love disappears from her life, cut off from her husband and children, she fails as mother and as wife. Manu’s male ego is hurt by her superiority complex. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon saru. Thus, the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night. Saru becomes a mute sufferer wallowing in self-pity and choked silence:

“I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow, painful death” (P96).

Saru’s feminine psyche becomes the arena of several warring forces. She is torn between her obligation to her profession as a doctor and her duties of her family as a housewife. It is a male-dominated society that Shashi Deshpande portrays in her novel. In the case of Saru’s parents, the father is the “master of the house” (P20) and is never bothered by any of the trivialities of daily routine. Like a traditional Indian woman, Saru’s mother successfully effaces her personality from the room which she shares with her husband. Saru does not accept the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a woman’s existence is to please her husband: “Everything in a girl’s life... was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male” (P163)

In a male-dominated society, woman has many a time to take recourse to putting an end to her life. The novel refers to a woman who drowned herself in a well because of ill-treatment meted out by her in-laws. She had continuously threatened to drown herself in the well but had been stopped many a time on the narrow edge of the well. However, one night when she is truly desperate, she silently throws herself in it. Obviously, the woman was not economically independent. In the course of the novel, there is a reference to the woman’s liberation ideologue. Saru reads Virginia Woolf’s mention of a woman’s right to a “room of her own”. Thus, throughout the novel, Shashi Deshpande probes the feminine consciousness of Saru in order to discover the root of her silent suffering and passive resistance. The feminine consciousness as endowed by Deshpande seems a fusion of the polarities of being: acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality, rebellion and reconciliation. All this is blended in Saru, a typical middle class woman. Saru’s conflict is every woman’s conflict between the desired and the imposed, the willed and the unwilling. The image of the mother as part of the feminine consciousness is remotely romantic and guesomely utopian.

Saru’s arduous journey in **The Dark Holds No Terrors** is an initiation into the mystery of human existence. She realizes that parental home is no refuge. Neither her father nor her mother can provide her shelter. She is her own refuge. The parental home prefaces the protagonist’s comprehension of the intricacies of human life. She broods over the imponderables of human predicament:

“All right, so I’m alone. But So’s everyone else.  
Human beings . . . they are going to fail you. But  
because there is just us, because there’s no one else,  
we have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves,  
we’re sunk” (P220).

thus, Saru’s is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine consciousness:

“And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, tell him to wait.  
I’ll be back as soon as I can” (P221).

This is the surfacing of her feminine consciousness her willingness to confront reality and not to run away from it. The new emancipated women of Saru’s generation are non-conformist who are discontented with the rhetoric of equality between man and woman. They want to liberate themselves from the shackles of tradition and exercise their rights for the manifestation of their individual capabilities and the realization of their feminine consciousness through identity – assertion and self-affirmation Saru is an epitome of this feminine consciousness.



To conclude, it may be said that Shashi Deshpande is not a writer armed with a polemical feminist ideology but is strongly informed by a feminist consciousness. By portraying the simmering discontent among the middle-class women, and creating Protagonists who move from victimization to self-assertion, she provides a pattern for the consciousness of the contemporary Indian women. Through her novels, she does project a positive image of Indian woman, one who refuses to stereotype women into postures of dependence or subordination. She thus articulates a world-view in keeping with the values of female self-hood.

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