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**REDEFINING WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S  
MOVING ON AND SHOBHA DE'S STARRY NIGHTS****Vijay. D. Songire**Assistant Professor,  
SIES Graduate School of Technology,  
Nerul, Navi Mumbai**Abstract:**

*Shashi Deshpande, the winner of the Sahitya Akadami and Padma Shri award, is one of the dominant female writers in Indian writing in English. She writes about the different aspects in the life of women in general and Indian women in particular. Shobha De, a renowned woman novelist in the field of Indian writing in English documents the status of Indian women in the society. She discusses the different phases in the life of women, their roles as a housewife, a friend, a lover and even their fast changing images in the urban Indian society. The paper discusses Deshpande's **Moving On** and De's **Starry Nights** and shows how both of the writers have done a similar attempt to strengthen the female voice. They have defined women in new terms where they believe in women's autonomous identity.*

**Key Words:** Gender, feminism, female sexuality, identity, etc.

Shashi Deshpande depicts female sufferings in patriarchal society of India in her fictional world. She is a writer who significantly portrayed the changing images of women in India. Women in her novels suffer throughout on the account of gender. However, they try to seek their identity in male dominated society. Her women are courageous who strive hard to find meaning in their life. She is an advocate of female rights. Her novel *Moving On* is a family story of where the life journey of the female character is revealed. The female protagonist, Manjari resists the patriarchal ideology and tries to live life in her own way. Manjari, an educated one, a prematurely widowed, is ready to break all the narrow conventions of the traditional society. She is the daughter of an anatomist father, Badhri Narayan and a writer mother, Mai. Her decision of marrying Shyam, a person much below the social status of Narayan family instead of pursuing Medical degree shows her as a 'new woman of India'. She does not believe in the narrow confines of the society. In the words of Binod Mishra, "Manjari-Shyam relationship is based on the foundations of the body... Their union was the union of two hungry bodies and it had too little scope of any discussion, say even of wooing". (63) Manjari is shown as a woman who desires for a man. She does not feel shy to stamp a kiss on Shyam's forehead announcing her declaration of love. Manjari's situation becomes more vulnerable when she gives birth to her son, Anand. Her husband fails on the ground of family responsibility. He does not care about the family and the day comes when he leaves Manjari and his son to suffer alone. This incident disturbs Manjari a lot. It shows the careless attitude of males towards women who look at them just as a means of wish fulfillment. In the words of Manjari, "Closeted in one small room though we were, we seemed to be living on two different continents. In bed, we lay close, but without touching. It was like the game of pebbles. I'd played as a girl. A game in which, if two pebbles touched, you were out". (Deshpande 290) She did not live a happy married life. Again she got a severe jolt to know about her husband's suicide.



After Shyam's death, Manjari determines to discard all her bodily movements and rhythm as she would like to be faithful to Shyam's soul. This has been maintained by her for many years until she comes to touch the hand of Raman, a tenant living on the top floor in her house. It really makes us wonder that where Manjari's true love and faithfulness for Shyam have gone. For years, her sexual desires have been suppressed in her. The rigid restrictions of the society cannot stop the desires of the body as well as mind. One day, when she gets a chance, she fulfils her bodily hunger with a person of dubious identity. After that she is totally confused and she herself feels that how her body which is alien to her all these years is suddenly ignited. "It is not his action that has disturbed as much as my own response, the way my body gave a startled leap in response to his touch, it's my body that frightens me, it's my body that is suddenly my enemy. I feel as if I have been invaded by a stranger, a stranger I'd kept out successfully for so long". (Deshpande .226-227) Deshpande has portrayed a woman in Manjari who does not want to follow the set norms and attempts to come out of the cycle of oppression. Her relationship outside marriage makes her a new woman who thinks for her own individual freedom. As Megha Mishra rightly remarks, "The novel projects Manjari as a complex character trying to reach her real self through the conflicting demands and roles of her life. Manjari is of course the new woman, who redefines freedom and also relationships." (69)

Similarly, Shobha de's women too are completely different from the women who follow the codes and conducts of society. They even don't believe in the narrow confines of marriage and motherhood. They feel suffocating under the pressure of marriage where their freedom is at stake. Therefore they seek freedom in the form of sexual involvement outside marriage. Extra-marital relationship for Shobha De's woman is not immoral. In her novels she has portrayed women who want sexual freedom. They break the social taboo which believes that a married woman has to perform sex inside marriage. The hypocrisy of Indian society which allows men to enjoy sexual pleasure at both sides inside and outside marriage. As Deepanjali Mishra rightly asserts: "Shobha De as a writer tries to mirror or portray her feminist mindset while portraying women in her novels. A broader evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the good old image of women who can't live the way she wants to and do things the way she wants to. Women in her novels are represented as sexually liberated and free thinkers who have been termed as 'New Woman'" (15) A woman in Indian society is considered as a commodity to her husband after her marriage. This notion of sexual freedom for women is very well reflected in her controversial novel *Starry Nights*. Shobha De shatters the patriarchal hegemony where man is at the central position at home as well as in the society. He is a decision maker and a woman is there to follow his all commands without asking any question. Being independent man enjoys all the comforts in marital life. Even his extra marital affairs are silently accepted by a patriarchal society. In such a situation no one thinks about the woman who is lonely in her home waiting for her husband. A woman without a man is always considered as an incomplete being. The patriarchal pressure does not allow her to step out from home and see life in her own perspectives. She is compelled to see and experience life as per the requirements of the family, particularly husband. Shobha De rigorously has attacked on this evil patriarchal system of Indian society that kills woman's existence. She directly emphasizes the idea of sexual freedom which is very natural. Marriage as a social institute has brought limitations upon women. She has to perform the role of an obedient wife and a careful mother within the confines of marriage. However, women in Shobha De's novels seek freedom from the bondage of marriage and motherhood. Her novel *Starry Nights* hits patriarchy and its superficial norms which kill women's existence. In marital relationship woman has to fulfill the sexual need of her husband at the same time it is taught that she needs not to show her sexual appetite. It is secondary whether she is sexually gratified in marital relationship of her husband. It is considered that she has to adjust with the

situation whatever it may be. However, Shobha De has exposed this narrow mindedness of Indian society. She has tried to portray another side of Indian woman who is dissatisfied in her marital relationship. She simply wants to highlight that if man can seek sexual pleasure outside marriage then why women can't. According to Shobha De women too like men want sexual pleasure. If they don't get it in marital relationship they have right to seek it outside and there is nothing wrong in that.

If a woman seeks sexual pleasure outside marriage then it is considered to be against the social taboos. However Shobha De rebels against this gender politics where man is given freedom to seek sexual pleasure but women are denied to enjoy the same. Shobha De has given a very frank treatment to sex in her *Starry Nights*. She has spoken about sex in the following way in *Snapshots* (1995): "Sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three letter word in India, is enough to celebrate." (3) Narender Kumar Neb in her article, "Shobha De: To Read or Not to Read" says, "De treatment of female sexuality gives the impression that she propagates free sex and macho female behavior as a means of women's emancipation. But the reality is different and De's real concerns are rather otherwise. Her prime concern is to expose the futility and meaningless of such kind of pseudo feminist behavior. (163)

De has shown the possibility for women to get away from the continuous humiliation at home. Her women indulge in outside sex manipulate males. However the attempt is not successful because they are not able to win over the situation. As Pooja Rani Jain rightly observes, "Shobha De successfully depicts the tension arising out of the failure of the Indian women in dealing with the situations emerging from a clash between conservatism and liberalism. She also highlights in her novels certain issues such as the non-acceptance of the liberated woman by the Indian society, women's freedom in the contemporary India and an individual dilemma." (02) In the context of *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani is dissatisfied with her husband, Akshay Kumar because he exploits her. He is the only man whom she loves. But he did not treat her better than a kept since he is married. Thus she challenges, "All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all-beat you at your own game!" (8) Aasha Rani's relations with women, be it Thai girls or the Showbiz reporter Linda is challenging to the patriarchal society. She feels ecstasy in the company of her female friends. As the narrator writes, "that it was weeks before she could forget the feel of two, smooth, soft, oiled, practically breast less bodies on either side of her, touching, licking, stroking every naked inch, making her skin tingle and come alive in a way she couldn't have imagined possible (66) She experiences "the greatest orgasm of her life" (66) Her lesbian affair with Linda is an unforgettable experience for her. As she says, "It could never be with a man" (82) She had several sexual experiences with men but all the time she hated those males. Aasha Rani never enjoyed those experiences. She did not feel it guilty. Her complete satisfaction with a female companion is the emergence of 'new woman' who is able to have pleasure without a man. A woman who does not need man any further. As Richa comments in her article, "In *Starry Nights*, the lesbian relationship between Linda and Aasha Rani is a revolt against the patriarchal traditional set up of our society, which allows the sexual relationship of only the heterosexual kind. In man-woman relationship, it is usually the man who has an upper hand. Most women have no guts to voice or reacts to their partner's feeling of fulfillment in sexual pleasure. But through lesbianism woman gives a vibrant jolt and denounces man as unimportant even on the sexual front." (06)

Thus, both Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De are the true advocates of women's rights and redefine the gender roles in their respective novels. They strengthen the female voice and instead of showing them as sufferers under the burden of patriarchy they show women as decision makers of their own lives.



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