

## Victimized Indian Women: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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### Abstract:

*Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent names among Indian women novelists. She has sensitively treated typical Indian themes and has portrayed the problems and plights of contemporary middle-class women with rare competence. Women, as it is commonly held, have been deprived of their rights and robbed of the opportunities that their male partners have been enjoying freely. They have always been the victims of male domination and conquest. Her mainstream novels undertaken for this study deal with the sordid realities of modern Indian women's life in different contexts and situations.*

**Keywords:** *Desertion, dowry, sexual predicament, domineering husbands.*

A host of women novelists are piloting the trend of making women as well as society conscious regarding the innumerable man-made cancers by which women are being thrust into the drab and drudgery of exploitation. Shashi Deshpande, one of the prominent figures among them has established herself as a writer having been akin to the fact of her being a woman writer and her themes and characters “differ from a man's” (144). She reveals:

My writing originated in the fact of my being a woman in the society I live in, it is shaped by that fact. The way I see the world is coloured by this fact of my being a woman, by the historical and social circumstances of women's lives (144).

Shashi Deshpande has cemented her eminence in the field of literature by having more than ten novels to her credit. This study is an attempt to peep at her six mainstream novels to find out how her female characters are victimized along with their reactions, responses and sensitivities under various situations. The novels are *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996) and *Small Remedies* (2000). Shashi Deshpande's female characters face different kinds of victimization like rape, dowry, desertion, sexual predicament, domineering husbands and gender discrimination.

Shashi Deshpande's novels, overtly and covertly, exhibit her consciousness regarding women of being victims in their family and society. She has chosen Indian middle-class families and all her major characters are women of these families. Mukta Atrey and Vinay Kirpal observe:

Shashi Deshpande depicts the anxiety of the educated, independent, middle-class Indian woman searching for a balance between her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother in a predominantly patriarchal society, and her newfound sense of self and longing for freedom and private space (13).

Sex is undoubtedly a consensual act between two partners—a male and a female. Sex is used as a device to subjugate the woman into passivity within the marriage. It may be called marital rape. The fact is that the act of sex is not a compulsion for woman. She needs it as much as the man does. But she does not need it if it happens to be an imposition. She wants to be titillated for this act in a very conducive atmosphere. She does not want to fall a prey to the unceasing sexual desire of her husband which is not less than the “horror of rape” (DHNT 11). Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Akka in *Roots and Shadows* and Mira in *The Binding Vine* are the victims of marital rape. Kalpana in *The Binding Vine* is an ambitious girl having her aim to be self-dependent and to marry a man of her own choice. She is raped inhumanly and put into a state of “Neither dead nor alive” (BV 86).

Women in Shashi Deshpande's novels are not allowed to participate in the act of sex with their own moods and sensuality. Though sex plays the possessive part in man-woman relationship, they are overpowered by their male partners. The discussion about the sex and the related problems is a taboo in Indian tradition. The women find themselves unable to reveal their sexuality and sexual problems either to their husbands or to their friends and family members. It may be due to their "painful middle-class inhibitions" (DHNT 40), or "anachronism" (RS 83), or "irrelevant, middle-class, bourgeoisie" mentality (TLS 147), or feeling of "sex is only a temporary answer" (BV 139). However they are trapped in an unresolved sexual predicament.

Dowry is an evil in Indian tradition. The bride's parents and family are bound to satiate the monetary and other material demands of the groom's family. It never works vice versa. It is seen in the cases of Saru, Mini and Jaya how dowry plays an important role in a marriage in spite of girl's good education and smartness. Most importantly, these women do not belong to the old generation of *Kakis* and *Atyas* but to the present generation when everyone talks about women's liberation and empowerment.

In case of desertion, man seems to be the privileged gender. Like Saru's grandfather and Gopal, man deserts his wife and children at any point of time without proper intimation and alternative arrangement. He does this for being guided by caprices, not by sense and judgement. The causes and excuses of his deed are not the solace or the solution to the emotional and physical wounds created in his family.

Patriarchal system is so indelibly fixed in Indian tradition that husbands feel the necessity of their being dominating and arrogant towards their wives. So are the husbands of Shashi Deshpande's women characters—"The Indian way. The husband. A definite article. Permanent" (RS 126-127). The grandmothers, mothers, aunts have definitely domineering husbands. It is not much worrying to the extent that they belong to old generation. But it is annoying when the process continues as "a kind of suppressed savagery" (MT 168) in the present generation. Barring a few husbands like Hari and Joe, all the husbands depicted in the novels impose their domination and "sins of patriarchy" (MT 168) on their wives. They, despite their higher education and awareness of modernism, are not ready to accept their wives' socially superior or equal in position to them—"happy marriage" should be "unequal in favour of your husband" (DHNT 137). They have "taken it for granted" (TLS 95) that their wives have to "submit" and "surrender" (RS 158-159). Husbands like Manu and Som cross all canons of patriarchy by inflicting sexual sadism on their wives.

The discrimination of woman on the ground of gender thrusts her into a state of subordination and oppression. The women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande are gradually "engulfed" by "a kind of shame" (DHNT 62) for being in the class of women. The impact of "gender discrimination" (SR 224) is so penetrating to them that they get "sick of it" and develop "a kind of narcissism"—"as if we had locked ourselves in a cage and thrown away the key" (RS 78). Obviously, nature does not allow any discrimination—"Nature is blind. It distributes qualities uncaring of social class, caste, gender" (SR 221). But mothers are "praying...for a son" (SR 311), houses are built for "sons and son's sons" (MT 3), women are to "give birth to children" (BV 127). The women are variously discriminated on the ground of gender.

Hence, the problem of women is the problem of humanity. The issues highlighted by Shashi Deshpande are so deep-rooted that they cannot be eradicated with the help of a miracle. It is hoped that these problems will be sorted out with the help of proper deliberations and appropriate actions. Still and all, Shashi Deshpande deserves all praise for having brought out the saga of suffering of women in India in a convincing manner.

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