

## **Search for a Room of One's Own: Presentation of Women Characters in Shashi Deshpande's *Ships that Pass***

**Avijit Pramanik**

**Junior Research Fellow**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**NIT Durgapur**

**West Bengal, India**

### **Abstract**

Shashi Deshpande is quite unique in her treatment of women characters in her novels. She constantly focuses on the emotional aspects of Indian woman's life. Her women characters are perennially trapped between the beckoning of modernity and the burden of tradition. They are perpetually denied the space of their own. Her *Ships that Pass* brings into foreground the quest of Radhika, the protagonist and Tara, her elder sister, for their own 'room' in life, to be particular, in conjugal life. 'Room' here indicates a particular space in marriage. A space, which would enable a woman to nourish her own aspirations, is of paramount importance in any successful connubial life. In Indian context, marriage tends to stifle a woman's own dreams and desires. She gradually succumbs to the insidious patriarchal domination. In *Ships that Pass*, Radhika and Tara resist such passive resignation. They realize the importance of having a 'room' of their own and persistently hanker after such a 'room'. While Tara fails miserably, Radhika comes out triumphant.

The Sahitya Akademi award-winner Shashi Deshpande is one of the most influential contemporary novelists of Indian English literature. Shashi Deshpande has dexterously and vividly depicted the condition of Indian women, caught between modernity and tradition, in her novel after novel. Her utmost concern is to sympathetically treat the feelings of Indian women. A. N. Dwivedi has sought to explore the major thematic concerns of Shashi Deshpande:

More often than not, Deshpande dwells on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss of face, loneliness and alienation of a sensitive woman pitted against an ill-mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her. (176)

Herself rooted in Indian ethos, Deshpande's summum bonum is to make her readers aware of the unique problems and anxieties of Indian women:

Shashi Deshpande's creative writing gives a comprehensive understanding of the Indian women, their suffering and the eagerness to express their feelings.

(Geetha mala 81)

In her life span, a woman has to perform the roles of a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Each phase has its own distinct difficulties. Shashi Deshpande has successfully revealed those difficulties to win the empathy of her readers. Rightly does Binod Kumar Roy point out:

Shashi Deshpande is a prominent literary voice which tries to furnish the reader with quintessential woman by closely analyzing the woman's psychological, emotional and intellectual needs and aspirations, cravings and desires, and the conflicts and catastrophes that they inevitably bring in their wake. (150)

Though a feminist in her personal life, she is conscious enough not to reveal any feminist doctrine in her works. M. K. Naik has succinctly summed up the fictional world of Deshpande:

Her work is woman-oriented, but it would not be correct to term her a feminist, because there is nothing doctrinaire about her fiction; she simply portrays, in depth, the meaning of being a woman in modern India. (88)

Shashi Deshpande is not only interested in man-woman relationship but also has a fascination for the portrayal of woman-woman relationship. She is quite adept in her presentation of mother-daughter relationship. Her female characters are not always rebels but sometimes conform to the societal norms even after registering a strong individuality. Atrey Mukta remarks:

She has steadfastly resisted the temptation of creating strong glorified female heroes, and has presented the Indian woman as facing the very real dilemma of having to choose between modernity and convention. (14)

By this Deshpande covertly presents the ubiquitous presence of patriarchal norms in society. A strong collective resistance is required to come out of the shackles of male domination in society. In fact, Deshpande never wants her female characters to dominate men but to dominate their own lives. Indian women tend to become puppets in the hands of their family members. Deshpande is unremittingly against this passive resignation of women. She wants them to cultivate their own self, to establish their own identity, and to demand a space of their own.

Published in 2012, Deshpande's *Ships that Pass*, "a complete story of love and mystery" (Deshpande vii), dives deep down the foundation of marriage. The novel succinctly

exposes the hypocrisy associated with the sacred social institution called marriage. Under the guise of a thriller novel, Deshpande unhesitatingly brings out the hollowness lurking at the core of marriage. Though marriage is a public phenomenon, the relationship between husband and wife is extremely private and is much like a “closed room” (*Ships that Pass*61). Though a marriage requires the societal approval, any third person is hardly allowed the access to the husband-wife relationship. However, Radhika incidentally peeps into her elder sister Tara’s life and is shocked to discover the horrors of her sister’s marital life with Shaan. To their parents and neighbours, Shaan and Tara are a perfect match and made for each other. At the surface level, they appear to lead a very comfortable and successful conjugal life. But Radhika penetrates the camouflage and discerns the loopholes. The very ‘devoted’ husband Shaan leads an illicit affair with his colleague. In spite of knowing the affair, Tara remains with her husband denying him any access to her body and mind. Both are incessantly preparing faces to face each other. Their common friend Ram Mohan very poignantly remarks:

Marriage is a very strange thing. It’s a very public institution, it’s meant to tell the world that two people are going to live together, to declare that their children will be legal. . . . At the same time, marriage is an intensely private affair. No outsider will know the state of someone else’s marriage. It’s a closed room, a locked room. . . . (*Ships* 60-61)

This paper intends to show that the women characters in the novel—particularly Radhika, the protagonist and her elder sister Tara—seek for a space of their own. This space is quite feminine. Here any male member is denied access. Sometimes, female members are barred, too. The concept of space, in this context, subsumes spatial as well as temporal aspects. The women clamour for time of their own to think of their dreams and desires. At the same time, they demand space to remain alone to mull over their own problems and difficulties. At the beginning of the novel, Radhika swings between her career options. She is at a loss to choose her future course of work after the publication of B. A. results. While her elder brother Dinkar wants her to sit for IAS, her mother encourages her to go for higher studies. Suddenly a revelation dawns in her and she decides to marry as she thought: “One of the certainties of life was marriage” (9). She does not consider marriage from a romantic point of view, rather in a practical way she takes it as a necessity, as a solution to her confused inertia. When her brother broaches the news that Radhika has been chosen by Ghanashyam, she sarcastically comments: “Dada, I thought disgustedly, looked like a successful pimp” (16). Even when she is out on a dinner with her future husband and he talks of his family, Radhika remarks: “I felt

strangely outraged, as if a stranger had begun undressing in my presence” (18). Radhika gradually realizes that marriage can never be the ultimate solution to a woman’s life:

I thought of my own idea of marriage—it seemed so puerile now. . . . How far I’d travelled from that silly girl who thought marriage was the solution to problems. On the contrary, it was the beginning of problems, some so bad that they could never be resolved. (68)

Radhika moves away from Ghanashyam. She fears that she will lose her identity if she marries him. We find her to be inclined towards Ram Mohan who is seventeen years older than her. Radhika can depend on Ram Mohan as he never forces her to forfeit her own identity. With Ghanashyam, she is phoney and merely acts the role of a would-be wife. With Ram Mohan, she is natural, spontaneous, and can lay bare her heart and mind. Ram Mohan provides her the space to flourish as she wishes. One day when Radhika was chatting with Tara, suddenly she discovered a truth:

Noon hours, as I had seen them at home with Aai and our neighbours, were women’s hours. The time when they were on their own, husbands and children gone. And their morning chores over, they sat and talked about all kinds of things. I had always been scornful of these ‘gossip sessions’, as I called them, but I now realized that perhaps, women needed to be on their own for a while, to be their own selves and do their own thing. (88)

She knows very well that Ram Mohan is the man who will give her the necessary space to be on her ‘own for a while’ and to do her ‘own thing’.

Just like Radhika, Tara also realizes the necessity to have a space of her own. She got married at the age of nineteen. She left her education and devoted herself to domestic chores. At the age of thirty three she finds herself surrounded by vacuum. Her husband and son are busy in their own ways. She has been left alone. She very poignantly reveals her pathetic condition with which majority of Indian housewives will find an affiliation:

Things were different in Aai’s days. They didn’t want anything of their own. To be married was the final goal of their lives. To have children and look after your husband and kids, may be even your in-laws—that was all there was to life. But now . . . I’m only thirty three, I realized the other day. And I have so many years ahead of me. What am I going to fill my life with? Abhi is growing up fast, he scarcely needs me now. And Shaan is busy. So what am I to do with myself? It seems to me that there is so much of me I have never used, never tried to use. I want to find out what there is that I can do. (90)

In order to 'find out' her potential, Tara begins composing poems. There she lays bare her heart. One thing is interesting that writing of poetry is essentially a solitary activity where no one can intrude. Tara clings to this solitary activity as it provides her the own space which in turn allows her to face her own self. Tara does not want her sister to undergo the same sufferings which she has borne all through her married life. She advises Radhika:

So beware, Radhu, don't let it happen to you. Keep yourself alive. When you marry, whoever you marry—or is it whomever—keep yourself intact. There's always a real you inside. Don't drown that real you in a man, in the family.  
(91)

After listening to Tara's advice, Radhika makes up her mind to break off her engagement with Ghanashyam. She is well aware that Ghanashyam will force her to 'drown' her 'real' self. Later when Radhika hesitates to propose Ram Mohan, she remembers again Tara's dictum: "Never, never marry a man who doesn't seem right to you. And when you find the right man, never let him go" (91). This advice provides her the fillip to confess her love for elderly Ram Mohan and encourages her to propose marriage to him.

*Ships that Pass* is out and out a critique of the social institution called marriage. Deshpande's craftsmanship has pictorially depicted the stifling side as well as liberating side of marriage. Radhika's sister Tara could not bear the brunt of marriage. Ever burgeoning hostility with her husband took her life. On the contrary, Radhika is extremely excited in her conjugal life:

One thing I'm sure of is that, as long as we're together, I don't care where we are. With this man, I know I can be myself. I'd thought, after Shaan and Akka, that I had lost faith in love. But no, I haven't. I believe in love—if friendship is part of it. Like it is with us. And since we began living together, I wake up in the morning with a sense of anticipation; each day is a new beginning. Why didn't anyone tell me marriage could be like this? (136)

Shashi Deshpande quite aesthetically posits that successful marriage thrives on friendship. From a woman's point of view, marriage should proffer her the space to cultivate her own self. The same marriage which takes the toll of life from Tara, makes Radhika optimistic about life. Thus the problem does not lie in marriage. Problem emanates from one's attitude towards the partner after marriage. The women characters in *Ships that Pass* ceaselessly search for their own 'room'. Whereas Tara fails miserably in her quest, Radhika comes out triumphant with the support of her husband's camaraderie.

### **Works Cited**

- Deshpande, Shashi. *Ships that Pass*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2012. Print.
- Dwivedi, A. N. "The Shorter Fiction of Shashi Deshpande: Search for Self". *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. R. S. Pathak. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998. Print.
- Geethamala, Elenore. *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Critical Evaluation*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2009. Print.
- Mukta, Atrey, and Vinay Kirpal. *Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of Her Fiction*. New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1998. Print.
- Naik, M. K., and Shyamala A. Narayan. *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2001. Print.
- Roy, Binod Kumar. *The Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2015. Print.