

Shashi Deshpande's Female protagonists: Emerging 'New' Women

Dr. Tukaram S. Sawant

Associate Professor

Tuljaram Chaturchand College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Baramati,.

Pune

Baramati

Maharashtra

India

Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Academy Award winning novelist, is concerned with the projection of sorrows and sufferings, plight and predicament, pain and anguish, suppression and exploitation of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. She shows her concern about women who are restless on account of orthodox and established norms, beliefs, customs and conventions deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. She raises her voice of protest against injustice done to women in the name of gender-discrimination. She wants her women to set themselves free from male-ego and male-domination. She wants them to defy man-made laws, rules and ideologies. She wants them to assert themselves by taking their own decisions all by themselves. She considers herself a humanist feminist intending to make women realize their inner strength and potentiality and arrive at the solution to their issues and problems on their own without depending on their male-counterparts. Her protagonists come to the realization that their revolt against patriarchy can not be the only solution of their problems. They fight their own battle and emerge as bold, challenging and rebellious women ready to move towards self-awareness and emancipation. She wants them to be complete and independent human beings, to be 'new' and 'modern' in the true sense of the term. The present article intends to critically

assess Deshpande's women-oriented novels with special focus on her female protagonists emerging as 'new' women.

Key words: emancipation, iconoclastic, invisibility, revolutionary, self-actualization, traumatic.

Shashi Deshpande, a popular Indian woman novelist in English, has ten novels, two novellas and a large number of short stories to her credit. She also is the author of a non-fictional book entitled, *Writing from the Margin* and four books for children. Her women-oriented novels primarily deal with middle-class career-oriented Indian women with their sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, plight and predicament, suppression and exploitation in Indian patriarchal set-up. Being a sensitive feminist, she raises a voice of protest against injustice done to them in the name of gender-discrimination, an issue deeply rooted in Indian society in one form or the other. She is basically concerned with the projection of emerging 'new' women ready to have their own ways remaining well within the boundaries of Indian family and society. She wants her women, who are caught between individual dreams and aspirations on one side and social demands and requirements on the other, to be economically, ideologically mentally, intellectually and emotionally free and strong. She wants them to be complete and independent human individuals, equal to their male-counterparts.

Anita Myles writes: "Shashi Deshpande, in all her novels, exhibits a sharp psychological insight into the subtleties of the human mind and society. She focuses in detail on the working of the psyche of her women characters who plunge into periods of psychic disturbance due to traumatic experiences of life. Nevertheless, the suffering leads to a stage of self-introspection and later self-discovery which evinces a fresh perception of life. Ultimately her characters emerge out of the crisis as strong women willing to compromise with life as it comes. In her analysis of the post-modern dilemma of women, she concentrates on career women and the problems they face outside the threshold of their homes in a basically male-dominated social setup". (Myles 11). She wants her women not to remain meek, submissive, silent, passive and

tolerant but to emerge as strong, confident and assertive characters in their own way, attempting to and succeeding in striking a fine balance between traditional beliefs and individual needs. She wants them to be 'new' and 'modern' in the true sense of the term. The present article is an attempt to peep deep into the inner psyche and consciousness of her protagonists emerging as 'new' women determined to move on with their lives with courage, confidence and determination.

A new woman is one who is bold and strong, rebellious and revolutionary, who has an open mind to accept new ideas, who believes in the principles of individuality, equality and freedom and who strongly and fearlessly reacts against orthodox norms and beliefs, customs and conventions which are in favour of men. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values . . . The emancipated woman wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal . . . Man, however, becomes indignant when he treats her as a free and independent being and then realizes that she is still a trap for him; if he gratifies and satisfies her in her posture as prey, he finds her claims to autonomy irritating; whatever he does, he feels tricked and she feels wronged". (Beauvoir 726-727). A 'new' woman is one who is conscious of herself as a free and independent individual willing to live with a heightened sense of dignity, status and individuality. She is a product of a new social and economic order in which she casts aside her passivity, silence and invisibility.

Deshpande believes that the strength of the woman lies in the power of her feminine sensibility and that the woman's self-assertion, her awareness of the very strength of her feminine sensibility can save her from Indian patriarchy. Her women undertake a journey towards self-awareness, self-realization, self-assertion and self-discovery. According to Usha Bande, Shashi Deshpande makes her women protagonists move "towards self-awareness at

various levels and finally to an assertion for autonomy and freedom. The picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive". Deshpande wants her female protagonists to be new and modern challenging and defying man-made customs and conventions. Her female protagonists undertake a psychological journey of self-realization with the purpose of making themselves free and independent individuals. They are capable enough to discover and assert their self, identity and individuality. They have a strong urge to make themselves bold and confident and to find space for themselves in order to grow and develop on their own. (Bande 14). Her women use their inner strength, their determination and confidence to fight against injustice done to them.

Deshpande's protagonists are educated, career-oriented and economically independent. They fight to prove themselves as individuals attempting to set themselves free from traditional, social and moral constraints and hoping to live their lives with status and dignity. They gradually learn to fight their own battle through self-effacing dependence, aggressive self-assertion, and iconoclastic rage. They emerge as 'new' women with new hopes and dreams, new attitude to life, and with an urge, courage and confidence to start their lives afresh. They are determined to live without fear, fear of being unloved, misjudged and misunderstood. They are typical Indian women with a strong desire to assert their self, identity and individuality. Hers are the women who struggle to find and preserve their identity as free human beings. They undertake a successful journey towards their intellectual, psychological and emotional growth and development. They are strong in the sense that they refuse to sacrifice their self and individuality and ultimately emerge as 'new' women ready to face their life with courage, confidence and determination.

Sarita, the protagonist of the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a modern woman who strongly resents the attack of Indian patriarchal society on her identity and individuality. She is a symbol of a progressive woman who always tries to exercise her influence on others. She desires to join medicine in order to be economically independent. With her father's support, she goes for her medical education. She works hard to realize her dream. Being ambitious and

revolutionary by nature, she rebels against her parents and marries Manu and leaves her parental home. Though initially happy in her marital life, her marriage becomes a trap in which she is caught to endure marital violence imposed on her almost every night by her sadist husband. She returns to her parental home to escape from her relentless routine and all her unbearable nightmares and her husband's sadism. During her stay at her parental home, away from her husband and his sexual assaults, she learns a lot from Madhav who unknowingly makes her change her approach to her life. She is motivated by his words: 'My life is my own'. These words bring out a sudden change in her internal behaviour. She realizes that self-trust plays a constructive role in human life. She believes: "If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk". (Deshpande 220). She remembers Baba's motivating question: "Are you not sufficient for yourself?" (Deshpande 220). She realizes that she has been her own enemy all through her life. She herself is responsible for her own plight and predicament. Her character itself is her destiny. With this renewed knowledge and realization, she emerges as a 'new' woman ready to face her marital life on her own terms and conditions.

Indu, the protagonist of the novel, *Roots and Shadows*, symbolizes 'new' women who live in a close association with society keeping aside all narrow and outdated social norms and conventions. She has been rebellious against wrong practices prevalent in Indian society right from her childhood. She is against blind faiths and superstitions, dowry system, class-distinction, caste-system, and gender-discrimination. However, being a girl, she suffers a lot in the name of gender-discrimination in her childhood. She follows the footsteps of Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, by running away and marrying Jayant, a man of different caste, in order to liberate herself from the trap of her ancestral home. Her marriage makes her a typical Indian wife living her life as per the wish of her husband. She gets frustrated in her marital life. For her, marriage becomes a cage with two animals, husband and wife, glaring hatred at each other. During Akka's illness, she gets a chance to set herself free from the trap of marriage. Away from her husband, she breaks all conventions by getting involved in a physical relationship with Naren. However, she is not happy away from her husband. She begins to believe that it is she who is to be blamed

for the marital discord that separated her from her husband, it is she who has created the hell out of the heaven, and it is she who has locked herself in the cage and thrown away the keys. She gets a golden opportunity to question, to rethink about her life, her career as a writer, her marriage, her relationship with her husband, her relationship with the people from her ancestral family, and about her illusion of hard-won freedom. Finally, tired of a familial dispute and conflict, feeling guilty of her physical relationship with Naren, tired of keeping herself away from her husband, she decides to go back to her marital home and to start her life afresh.

Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, *That Long Silence*, has been a mute sufferer right from her childhood. She, a typical Indian wife, accepts Mohan, her husband as a sheltering tree. She, a mother of two children, follows her husband blindly and obediently. She lives only for her husband and children. However, she is far away from happiness in her marital life. After Mohan leaves her, she begins to feel that her marriage is almost over. Though she believes that it is difficult for the woman to live without her husband, she decides to follow the footsteps of bold and tough Mukta. She, with her frustrations in her seventeen-year-old marriage, her failure both as a wife and a creative writer, finally comes to the realization, in her temporary moments of withdrawal, that 'silence' can never be the solution of her problems. She decides to erase her long silence, to throw off the label of a mute and silent sufferer and not to be a mere shadow of her husband. She decides to follow Krishna's advice to Arjuna: '*Yatheccchasi tatha kuru*', the words that mean, 'Do as you desire', in her life. She decides to do what she desires. She confidently says: "I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone". (191). She rejects the image of marriage as two bullocks yoked together. She emerges as a new woman by rejecting the name 'Suhasini' given to her by her husband. She is determined to assert herself and individuality and to move on with her marriage on her own terms.

Sumi, the protagonist of the novel, *A Matter of Time*, is a victim of her husband, Gopal's desertion. She suffers silently and struggles to bring up her daughters all by herself. Her pride and self-respect do not allow her to be a parasite in her ancestral family. She accepts her fate, finds a job, and gets involved in the writing of a play for a class performance. She exhibits

strength of mind by deciding to start a new phase of her life without her husband. She is strong and bold enough to carry out her responsibility as a mother. She does not give up her struggle to live, adjusts herself with present circumstances and takes a very bold decision to move ahead in her life without any bitterness for the man who is the root cause of her sorrows and sufferings. She successfully shoulders the responsibility of the whole family after her husband leaves the house. She emerges as a 'new' woman, all set and determined to begin her life anew as a teacher and a creative writer. Deciding to leave the darkness of her marital life behind, she is determined to go along her own way by accepting a job in a residential school without bothering about her husband. She is confident when she says: "This is the first thing in my life I think that I've got for myself . . . I've been so lazy all my life. And now suddenly I want to do so many things". (Deshpande 230-231). It is unfortunate that she dies in an accident before she can begin a fresh life on her own.

Aru, Sumi's eldest daughter, is a new woman in the true sense of the term. She struggles to know the marital experiences of three women, Manorama, Kalyani and Sumi, who surround her. She realizes that Manorama is domineering; Kalyani is enduring and her mother Sumi, silent and indifferent. With her experience of these three married women, closely related to her, she steps into her womanhood and is ready to face her life as it comes to her lot. Being a rebel, she rebels against her own father, Gopal, and his walking out on his family for the reasons not known to anybody. She is irritated by the injustice done to her mother, Sumi and her grandmother, Kalyani. She, very strongly, reacts against male-oriented society in which Indian women are victimized as a result of conventions and traditions which are in favour of men. She is competent enough to accept the role of the man in the family all by herself after her mother's death. She does not need any support from her father. She is ready to live and to look after her younger sisters and her grand-mother. She, with a smile of encouragement and confidence says: "Yes, Papa, you go. We'll be all right, we'll be quite all right, don't worry about us". (Deshpande 246). She, being a 'new' woman exposes unjustifiable laws and norms of a patriarchal society, and is determined to live freely and independently on her own.

Urmila, the protagonist of the novel, *The Binding Vine*, is a clever and educated woman working as a lecturer in a degree college. She marries Kishore, a young man serving in a merchant navy, against the wish of her parents. She feels lonely and incomplete in her marital life about which she says, “. . . Marriage with a man who flits into my life a few months in a year and flits out again, leaving nothing of himself behind . . . Often after he has gone, I find in myself a frantic grappling for his image, as if in going he has taken that away as well. Then he returns and we pick up the course of our lives from the moment of his return”. (164). She believes that human relationship survives on hope. For her husband, marriage is: “The two of us in a closed room and we can’t go out”. (137). However, so-called happiness and peace of her marital life is destroyed by the unexpected death of her female child, Anu. Though it is difficult and painful for her to leap into the future without her daughter, she is strong enough to deal with her grief all by herself. In spite of her sorrows and sufferings, she never sheds tears but, boldly says: “I am trying to deal with my grief. I don’t need anyone”. (Deshpande 23). She strongly believes that the main urge in human life is always to survive in spite of difficulties and calamities, failures and defeats. She thinks that she is confident enough to manage everything on her own. A voice inside her always says: “Urmi’s so smart, so competent”. (173). She is portrayed as an independent woman who is psychologically and emotionally very strong. She rebels against the patriarchal tyranny and expresses her anger against injustice and oppression enforced on women like Mira, Shakutai, Kalpana and many more in a cruel and callous male-dominated society.

Madhu, the protagonist of the novel, *Small Remedies*, is fully conscious of the fact that women are the victims of social evils like gender-discrimination and marital violence. She is characterized by the spirit of rebelliousness which is expressed through her rejection of her assigned role in her family and society, her refusal to follow the traditional ways of life, her aversion to the practice of favouring the male child and her disregard for the conventional social taboos. Caught in her own despair over the loss of her only son, Aditya, she tries to find a way out of her own grief with courage and confidence. She is a ‘new’ woman in the true sense of the

term as she raises a voice of protest against injustice done to women in the name of gender-discrimination. Savitribai and Leela, too, represent 'new' Indian women who have courage, confidence, urge and ambition to rebel against and violate the established norms, beliefs, customs, and conventions of Indian society. The novel explores the lives of two women, Savitribai who is obsessed with music and Leela who is a passionate believer in communism. Savitribai, born in an orthodox Hindu family, elopes with her Muslim lover, Ghulaam Saab to pursue her career in the field of music while gentle and strong-willed Leela gives her life to the party and to working with the factory workers in Mumbai.

The novel, *Moving on*, is an exploration of the journey of a middle-class Indian woman from meekness, submissiveness, patience, silence, obedience and passive resistance to her self-discovery, self-reliance, self-realization, development of individuality and to the making of a 'new' woman who is strong and confident enough to have her own way in life without any co-operation from and dependence on the male. After her husband, Shyam's death, Manjari, the protagonist, boldly and confidently tries her level best to be self-dependent and self-sufficient. Being an Indian mother, she desires to look after her children, but the desires of her body begin to distract her attention. Sexual desire in her is so dominant that she gets involved in physical relationships with other men. She considers herself an optimist who believes in the potentiality of life and strongly believes that life, at any cost, has to move on and on. She opposes and reacts against the things which she doesn't like. She rebels against the oppressive patriarchal society, and the spirit of revolt provides her the right impetus, inspiration and motivation to move on with courage, confidence and determination. Her father, Badrinath considers disobedience, revolt and rebellion an indication of growth and development. He says: "To me obedience is not the original sin; in fact, I don't see it a sin at all. It is a part of growing up, of moving on". (Deshpande 205). Her mother, Vasu, is an ardent advocate and supporter of freedom. She expresses her anger at and avarice to the patriarchal society through the stories she writes. Her stories are an expression of her 'self', her genius and personality. Writing becomes an important

means for her to fight against her society that imposes many restraints on the female. In a sense, she uses her writing as a means of social change and reform.

Deshpande's latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*, is a story of love between two persons from different fields - Aparna, an oncologist and Hari, a rising singer. It draws us deep into the pleasures, sorrows, contradictions and conflicts of falling in love and marrying. It moves around the theme of sex, love and marriage. Aparna's first marriage is a tragic failure. After she decides to end her marriage, she, being a 'new' woman, wants to get rid of everything associated with it, with the man she has married. She discards everything she has, including her *mangalsutra* and her ring. She loses her trust in marriage and decides not to marry again. She meets Shree Hari Pandit and falls in his love. Their frequent visits bring them emotionally and physically together. Hari is eager to marry her but she is not prepared to marry him. Being afraid of marriage, she is determined not to marry again. In a response to his question, 'will you marry me, Aparna?', she responds: "Hari, I love you and I want us to live together. I am as sure of that as I am of anything else in this life. But I am not sure about marriage". . . Marriage makes a tight knot, marriage means expectations. We'll quarrel about money, you won't take my money, we'll quarrel about small things. No, I don't want to go through all that again. I've lived alone for too long, Hari, I am not sure I can live my life according to somebody else's ideas". (251-253). She offers herself physically to him and wants to a part of his life without marrying him. She prefers a live-in relationship to a marital relationship. She thinks of her own idea of living with Hari - not tied in the tight bond of marriage, but tied together only by love. She thinks a lot and ultimately prepares herself to be caught in the trap of marriage.

Deshpande's women protagonists are determined to reject the age-old myth of femininity that makes the woman a typical Indian woman, a martyr, a heroine, just a stupid fool, to use Indu's words, a woman moving around her husband, living for her husband, submitting her self and individuality, and to live a life of a human being as a free and independent individual. Indu and Jaya, after self-realization on their part, decide to confront their husbands and live their life afresh. Instead of running away from the problems, they are determined to face them. They, thus,

strike a balance between their total surrender to their husbands and their aggressive revolt against them. Indu and Jaya, hoping for happiness and peace in their life, decide to move on with their marital lives with renewed hope and confidence. They decide not to submit passively or cravenly to the circumstances around them, but with courage, confidence, determination, dignity and strength. Deshpande's women including Urmi, Madhu, Manjari, Aparna have been portrayed as human beings with their strengths and weaknesses, with their flaws and follies. They are certainly not perfect and complete human beings. However, with virtues as well as vices in them, they succeed in emerging as 'new' women ready to face their lives afresh.

References:

1. Bande, Usha and Atma Ram. (2003). *Woman in Indian Short Stories: Feminist Perspective*. Jaipur and New Delhi; Rawat Publications. Print.
2. Beauvoir, Simone de. (1972). *The Second Sex*. H. M. Parshley. (Trans. and ed.), New Delhi; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
3. Deshpande, Shashi. (1980). *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
4. Deshpande, Shashi. (1983). *Roots and Shadows*. New Delhi; Orient Longman Ltd. Print.
5. Deshpande, Shashi. (1988). *That Long Silence*. New Delhi; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
6. Deshpande, Shashi. (1992). *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
7. Deshpande, Shashi. (1996). *A Matter of Time*. New Delhi; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
8. Deshpande, Shashi. (2000). *Small Remedies*. Gurgaon; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
9. Deshpande, Shashi. (2004). *Moving On*. New Delhi; Penguin Books Ltd. Print.
10. Deshpande, Shashi. (2015). *Strangers to Ourselves*. Noida; HarperCollins Publishers.
11. Myles, Anita. (2006). *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelist in English*. New Delhi; Sarup and Sons. Print.