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**Studying Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist Writer: In the Light of Her Select**

**Novels**

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## ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. Shashi Deshpande uses irony in the majority of her novels to satirize the morals and manners of our society although she is not an ironist. She employs situational, attitudinal and verbal irony to telling effect. Her language is simple, direct and terse; close to the speaking voice. Sometimes, instead of full and long sentences, she uses words elliptically and minimally and this makes for force. Her heroines are sensitive to the changing times and situations, they revolt against the traditions in their search for freedom. The present paper is an analysis of Deshpande's select novels from feministic perspective. Deshpande's feminism is certainly not cynical or nihilistic. She analyses the universal significance of the woman's problem, thereby transcending the feminist perspective.

**Key Words: Feminism, Indian Women, Irony, Female Psyche, Revolt**

## Introduction

Shashi Deshpande has presented her women protagonists as oppressed in her novels. She feels that a woman, not only in India but also in other countries, is not treated at par with man in any sphere of human activity. She has been since post-Aryan age, oppressed and marginalized in the matters of sharing the available opportunity for fulfilment of her life. Deshpande is grimly aware of plight and the predicament of Indian woman. A careful study of her novels evinces that her women protagonists have been drawn from the middle- class society. Most of them are sensitive, intelligent, educated and career oriented. Their pain and torture have been highlighted through the roles of the women protagonist-Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila and Sumi - who find themselves trapped in the roles assigned to them by the society. They have been portrayed as struggling against social taboos and attempting to assert their individuality. Deshpande refers to the myths,



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epics, puranas as well as other holy books in which women, even though innocent, have suffered much.

### Deshpande as a Feminist Writer: A Study of Her Novels

In *Roots and Shadows* the traditional and modernist woman questions are to be found side by side. It has given a credible realistic background in the form of Mini's marriage as an occasion for a throwback to the myriad questions in the lives of an old middleclass Brahmin family which is on the brink of dissolution. This provides a realistic historical background which validates the dilemma of Indu as a modern and conscious woman, who has to tackle the conflicting demands of tradition and modernism, past and present. The old house, incorporating the joint family with its tradition and the fissures that have started appearing, becomes a symbol of the uncertainty that the tradition and modernity have to confront. But the creaks in the house and in the family and in the tradition are too many. The past has weakened its hold but there is no stable present to take its place.: A majority of the members of this family have branched off and they have little attachment to the old joint family. The old dilapidated house is the symbol of this integration: "...the plaster fell down. It's the same story all over the house. Even the new rooms." (*Roots and Shadows* 53)

Corresponding to the crumbling house is the crumbling joint family. It was a family which wielded power. But there has been social change which have reduced its privileged space. It is not only the income of the family that is falling but also its power. It is forcefully brought out in the words of Kaka to Indu:

The last two years even the mango crop failed miserably. If someone had told me this some years back, I'd never have believed it. When father was alive, he just had to go there and the fellows would fall at his feet. Now they've become; too big. They know they have the upper hand. They're arrogant, disrespectful. And for generations, we were like kings. (*Roots and Shadows* 53)

The entire story of Indu with her modernist concern is juxtaposed in the context of the traditions, which, like the old house and the joint family, are tottering on the weakened structure. Two very significant



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events, that is, Akka's death and Indu's marriage are deliberately telescoped so that Indu is brought to the centre of the story and has to play the 'lead' role in relation to these events. Indu with her modernism and also retaining the tradition of the Hindu cultural values is trying hard to delink. But it becomes the tangent for the novelist to take off and narrate the conflict and dilemmas that are staring in the face of the tradition and inevitable changes threatening the old. This accentuates the intensity of the conflict between the old and the uncertainty of the new. The novel becomes the story of Indu vacillating at the cross-roads of the past and present. The past with its historical actuality, although no more an entirely valid and stable reality, does provide validity to the ache of modernism that is perpetually putting a question mark on the tradition, particularly the socio-religious traditions of the Indian society in general and the Hindu middleclass in particular. In the process, the questions relating to women become a recurring pattern of the discourse in *Roots and Shadows*. By raising the conventional socio-religious issues relating to women, the novelist has problematized the modernist woman question. The conventional woman question focuses on the traditional view of woman and the modernist questions relate to the identity and space of women in the wake of weakening old traditions and emergence of a conscious, educated and thinking woman trying to carve a niche for her 'self and fulfillment.

Shashi Deshpande in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has also dealt with the woman question. In *Roots and Shadows* the traditional, social context of the woman question was largely highlighted to locate the personal and individual experiences of the woman protagonist, that is, Indu. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* the traditional social picture is so represented as to relate the trauma and troubles of Sara and her experiences as a woman as well as a human being. The focus on the personal and individualized identity of Sara is visualized in the context of her search for realizing her destiny not simply as a woman but also as a human being. Chandra Mauli has rightly observed that "a woman's quest for self-discovery is a major concern in the novels of Shashi Deshpande." (40)



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This remark fairly applies to the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The novel contextualizes Sara's experiences in the traditional Indian society. While exploring the myth of man's so-called superiority, the novel brings in focus Sara's awareness of her predicament and her desire to be recognized and to have an independent social image and not to be reduced as a woman centered in the gender specific attitude of the male dominated social structure. One of the most powerful social institutions for the female's colonization by the male is marriage. Besides an inferior role assigned to woman in the institution of marriage, there is a plethora of roles and rules that a woman has to abide by, which in turn leads to her subjugation. It is against this structure and its power that the woman as an individual and as a person has to contend.

Sara has to confront this boy-girl discrimination time and again, which will be discussed later in detail because the boy-girl question is integrated into the narrative of Sara as a woman and as a person. Here it is sufficient to note that a woman is over and over again reminded of her being a woman implying thereby her inferior status. For example, Sara even in the context of her profession as a doctor is given a title and recognition which is gender specific. No male doctor is talked about as a gentle man doctor or male doctor. He is just a doctor. But a woman doctor is not just a doctor but a lady doctor.

Deshpande had given new dimensions to the issues related to women. In her next novel *Small Remedies*, she has added humanism to her treatment of women and the reality of their life. We can term this dimension in *Small Remedies* as humanistic feminism for the reason that the women in this novel are contextualized against the background of the human relationship not just as women but also as creatures of Nature. However, the conventional concerns with women and society does find scattered and limited space in this novel as well. What is important to note in relation to the conventional issues is the beauty of Deshpande's location of these issues within the larger humanistic concerns of a variety of relationships. The well-known critic Vinod Kumar Singh has rightly observed, "The theme of the relationships is a part of Shashi Deshpande's larger social outlook." (90)



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The beauty of this aspect and its treatment lies in the subtle delineation and incorporation of these issues without becoming judgmental. As it will be seen later, the conventional issues are not allowed to interfere with the broadening of woman issues not limited to gender but expanding into human concerns. In short, it can be said that Deshpande has greatly justified her claim that she is not a feminist in the commonly accepted sense, "Thank God, I'm not a feminist,"<sup>97</sup>

As V.K. Singh observes, "Her [Deshpande] feminism is rooted in the socio-cultural ethos of India, which embraces modernity with a traditional outlook. She is very much concerned with women now largely I as human beings and not as simply persons who have to find their way out or be confined within the social structure. Deshpande herself says:

My writing has been categorized as writing about women or feminist writing. In this process, much in it has been missed. I have been denied the place and dignity of a writer who is dealing with issues that are human issues, of interest to all humanity.

That is why the three major characters, Savitribai, Leela and Madhu in their own different ways and under very different circumstances work out their destiny not simply as women but also as human beings. In the portrayal of their characters and the narration of their lives, Deshpande has treated them not so much as being victims of society and as other than the male. Their life-history is charted out in terms of their human aspirations. Their life is not a representation of the man-woman conflict.



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## Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist. A look at her novels will reveal her treatment of major women characters and will show how the themes in them are related to women's problems. A close analysis of her novels leaves no doubt about her genuine concern for women. Her protagonists are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male-dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for identity within marriage. Deshpande's novels contain much that is feminist. The realistic delineation of women as wife, mother and daughter, their search for identity and sexuality as well, leaves the readers in no doubt where her real sympathies lie.

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