www.watchmanjournal.com ISSN: 2456-9526

The Watchman

An International, Refereed & Peer Reviewed Journal

Vol. 10 No. 3 (2026)

OPEN ACCESS

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23629915

Women's Search for Identity: Feminist Consciousness in Indian Society through Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

Nandini

Research Scholar

Department of English

Central University of Haryana,

Mahendergarh, Haryana, India

Email: ynandini871@gmail.com

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande holds an influential position in Indian English Literature for her multifaceted portrayal of women in a male-dominated Indian society. Her novels move away from traditional portrayals of feminist oppression, focusing instead on the emotional lives of middle-aged women in a patriarchal society and their search for identity within social obligations and cultural traditions. The paper analyses the feminist consciousness in selected novels of Shashi Deshpande, namely *The Dark Holds No Terrors, Roots and Shadows, and That Long Silence*. Through feminist literary criticism, the paper focuses on the female protagonists of the above novels and how they face silence and oppression in the name of being women, and thus feel themselves to be somehow lower than their male counterparts. The paper examines how characters in Deshpande's novels gradually resist patriarchy through self-realization rather than through rebellion. Deshpande, through her novels, presents a narrative in which being female does not mean feeling ashamed and remaining silent in decision-making, nor following the paths set by their male counterparts, but rather standing up for their own rights and dignity. Deshpande presents a narrative of post-colonial society, particularly within the Indian middle class, by positioning women as central figures in her novels.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Identity, post-colonialism, Indian Society

Introduction:

Indian English literature has seen several works focused on female representation and gender inequality in Indian society. Shashi Deshpande stands apart from other writers as, in her novels, Deshpande portrays a resemblance with the reality and does not endorse females for the

confrontation and rebellion nature with the male-dominated household but chooses the option of self- realisation of their potential in their struggling middle class life which revolves around their duties of being a good wife, a good mother and where their self identities seems to be lost. Feminist consciousness means being aware of oneself, having a better understanding of one's potential, and fighting for equal respect and position in society, as men do, be it political or financial. Female consciousness does not mean to oppose men, but instead it means to identify the oppressiveness and to find their own autonomy and individuality as beautifully defined by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She emphasises the importance of economic independence and personal space in the development of women's intellectual and creative identities. She argues: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf xx).

In the Indian context, the feminist consciousness is mainly focused on family, tradition, marriage, and society. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, the female protagonists are middle-class in modern India. The women in the novels are not shown as revolutionaries but as simple women who bear the burden of society's expectations. The burden is the struggle with silence, negligence, and internal conflicts. The protagonists gradually find self-awareness and an awakened identity, seeking the empowerment they are entitled to. The paper analyses the themes of patriarchy, silence, self-identity, and resistance discussed in the three novels of Shashi Deshpande, namely *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows*. It examines feminist consciousness in Indian society and how it differs from that in the West.

Indian Feminism and Feminist Consciousness:

The concept of feminist consciousness refers to how women develop their self-identity and self-awareness regarding their rights in society across all fields of life, be it academic, political, economic, or social. It is not a movement against men or a total rejection of traditionally inculcated values; it is simply a call for equal recognition alongside the other gender in humankind. The respect for their aspirations, dreams, and individuality is all that women demand. It encourages women to find their place within the societal structure and not to be rebels against the society they live in.

The definition of feminism varies across the world. In the West, feminism argues the legal, economic, and political oppression faced by women against men. The focus of "Western Feminism" is on issues of voting rights. It also includes job opportunities, reproductive rights, and liberty of thought. But in Asian contexts, and especially in India, the definition of feminism is slightly more complex. Though it covers all the aspects raised in the West, feminism in India is also defined by history, culture, upbringing, and social background.

Indian feminism is shaped by social values, family relationships, community values, traditions, and culture from an individual's childhood, and it plays a huge role in their day-to-day life. As a result, feminism in India seeks to strike a balance between individual liberty and social responsibility. They do not believe in rejecting the traditional institutions of marriage, family, and parenthood, which are deeply rooted in emotion, but in finding a middle path that provides emotional and moral support, equal chances, and a dignified life. The situation of women in India is quite different from the Western world. They are supposed to fulfill multiple responsibilities all at once. Women in modern India are no doubt encouraged to pursue higher education, as

compared to the past. Still, they are expected to shoulder family responsibilities, including serving as primary caregivers, and to continue family and social traditions. The dual responsibilities sometimes create a personal conflict between pursuing personal ambitions and sacrificing for social obligations. From childhood, women in India learn to prioritize others' needs, which leads to a gradual loss of their own freedom.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande hold significance in the portrayal of Indian feminism. The novels' plots depict the struggles and journey of the middle-class Indian woman as she navigates the patriarchal structure. The protagonists of the novels are not portrayed as victims or as oppressed; nor are they portrayed as revolutionaries seeking to overturn the social system. But they are portrayed as ordinary individuals who regularly try to balance personal ambitions with social responsibilities. The most distinctive feature of Deshpande's novels is their emphasis on women's psychology. She very nicely shows that a patriarchal society does not mean the visibility of oppression of women. Still, very often it is seen that the patriarchal system gradually goes into how women perceive themselves and what their roles are in society. In her novels, protagonists initially accept silence and sacrifice, believing it comes naturally to them as women because of the thought processes they develop over their lives. However, the character slowly develops and begins to question those expectations and responsibilities, giving rise to feminist consciousness. Her character begins to transform through gradual introspection and self-awareness, and she gathers the courage to confront the unacceptable truths. Deshpande's suggests that logical and meaningful changes come through honest communication with oneself. The protagonists in her novels do not think to abandon their families, but they strive to build independent, dignified lives for themselves. Her novels depict a true sense of feminism in India that encompasses self-realization, emotional independence, and a strong connection to the reality of Indian society.

Patriarchy and the Oppression of Women in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*:

The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was first published in 1980 and tells the story of an educated woman who experiences emotional and psychological struggles. Through Sarita, commonly known as Suru, the protagonist of the novel, Deshpande very effectively depicts gender discrimination in a patriarchal society that is not visible in physical form but is easily seen in emotional neglect from childhood to adulthood. The plot is about Sarita, who, from childhood, experiences unequal treatment from her family solely because she is a woman. At the same time, her younger brother, Dhruva, enjoys preferential treatment from their mother, who constantly criticizes Sarita. Saru's childhood experiences reveal the psychological consequences of discrimination within the family. Her mother's repeated criticism affects her self-confidence and creates a lasting sense of rejection. Recalling her childhood, Saru observes: I was an ugly girl. At least my mother told me so" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* xx).

This unfair treatment between siblings, where sons are preferred more than daughters, shows the reality of the traditional mentality in Indian households. The feeling of being unwanted and deprived of the warmth a child expects from their parents carries with Saru throughout her life. The accidental death of Dhruva makes her relationship with her mother more complicated, as her mother blames Saru for the tragedy, making her more isolated from her family. The novel tells how patriarchy plays a significant role in the woman's decision to choose her education and career

path. Saru decides to become a doctor and live a happy life with economic stability and independence with a novel profession, but her mother opposes her decision. However, even after becoming a professional and tasting success, she continues to fight the resistance in her personal life. Marriage, in India, is considered a social event and a source of companionship and security; patriarchal thinking is also present in it. Saru marries Manohar, commonly known as Manu, believing that her love for him will provide the emotional support she has lacked since childhood. Still, the relationship, which seemed stable at first, began to be affected as Saru became more professionally successful than Manu. Saru's success has shaken the patriarchal belief that a man must hold a dominant position in the household. Saru's professional success gradually disturbs the balance of power within her marriage. Manu finds it difficult to accept his wife's growing recognition because of the traditional expectation that a husband should maintain a superior position. This patriarchal assumption is reflected in the statement: "A wife should be a few feet behind her husband" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* xx).

Due to Saru's increasing respect and recognition, Manu's insecurity also grows, and this shift in dominance becomes unacceptable for him, resulting in the physical abuse of his wife out of frustration. Deshpande shows that patriarchy burdens men as well by injecting the feeling of losing authority, which leads to conflict. Saru's struggle within herself is the most crucial part of the novel. She suppressed her emotions since her childhood only to maintain the good image of her family and the image that society expects women to keep their domestic sufferings to themselves. Sarita's returned to her parental home after many years and keeping herself away from pressures of married life, she confronted herself with the emotions and wounds she has been carrying in her heart all through years and getting to the conclusion that genuine freedom cannot be achieved by becoming financial stable and professional success but only by having emotional independence, love and warmth which a normal human being is entitled regardless of the gender.

The Dark Holds No Terrors very subtly describes that patriarchy is present at every stage of women's life, and it continues to have an impact on them. The unequal power distribution, the meaningless authority of a man over a woman, and no place for the emotional value of a woman exist in reality in Indian society. Deshpande encourages women to question the societal structure and offers a thoughtful understanding of the emotional breakdown they experience.

Identity and Resistance in *Roots and Shadows*:

First published in 1983, the novel *Roots and Shadows* talks about the conflict between individual identity and social expectations. Indu, the protagonist of the novel, through whom Deshpande demonstrates the struggle of a woman who seeks her own identity without leaving her cultural roots. The novel underscores that internal resistance to societal norms does not necessarily manifest as rebellion but rather gradually through reflection and questioning of the beliefs one has held over the years. Indu, a young woman, wants to develop her own identity as an educated, independent woman and marries Jayant against her family's wishes, believing that leaving her traditional family will make her life easier and more comfortable. She believes that marriage is a way to escape the rigid customs and restrictions she felt imposed on her since childhood, but gradually, in the novel, it becomes clear that physical distance from her family does not necessarily make her emotionally independent. Although Indu attempts to escape the restrictions imposed by

her traditional family, she gradually realises that physical separation cannot completely remove the influence of her upbringing. Her continuing emotional attachment to her family is expressed in the following words: "I had run away from them, but they were still part of me" (*Roots and Shadows* xx).

After the death of Akka, the authoritative death of the family, Indu is forced to return to her childhood home after many years. The return marks an important point in her life as she begins to reflect on her journey from childhood to adulthood. The ancestral home means not only a physical setting but also an emotional one for her. It reminds her of the traditional values, customs, and also the patriarchy that continues among the members of the family. Indu started asking herself deep questions, and she had been ignoring them all along. During her stay at her ancestral house, Indu observed the lifestyles and behavior of other women there and noticed a pattern of sacrifice and silence. Most of these women spent their lives fulfilling only the duties imposed upon them, and they were never asked about their own aspirations and desires. The identities of these women were shaped by others' demands and desires, not by their own opinions and choices. Indu began to think that oppression survives not only through external forces but also through social practices passed down from one generation to another, with no one questioning them.

The novel also assesses the emotional conflict women experienced between traditional and modern identities. Indu is educated and enjoys a certain degree of independence, but guilt and uncertainty still engulf her heart. Deshpande here reflects that a true sense of achievement can only be reached if women continue to seek validation from society and do not follow their thoughts and be emotionally independent. Indu continues to reflect on her life, and slowly she comes to understand that true freedom is not achieved by fulfilling others' expectations but by following her heart and her own values. The realization is a gradual process that requires her to challenge the beliefs she has held in her heart since childhood. Her resistance is thus not directed at any one person but rather at the whole system that restricts women's autonomy. Indu's gradual self-examination leads her towards a stronger awareness of her individuality. She begins to understand that personal identity cannot be determined entirely by family expectations or social conventions. Her growing determination is reflected in the declaration: 'I have to be myself, no one else can do it for me" (*Roots and Shadows* xx)

The important aspect of Deshpande's novels is that she does not present the realization of resistance as dramatic or as a confrontation with others, but rather through an honest and tough self-examination that shakes up the whole belief system. Indu, too, learns that to form her own identity, she does need to leave her roots, but she must question the individuality she sought. *Roots and Shadows* focuses on the idea that resistance and rebellion begin only when a woman stops defining herself by others' expectations and demands and instead finds self-realization and true identity. Deshpande beautifully explained a realistic understanding of women's empowerment through Indu's journey.

Silence and Selfhood in *That Long Silence*:

That Long Silence is regarded as a significant milestone in Indian feminist literature, and Shashi Deshpande won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, published in 1988. The novel explores the emotional and psychological aspects of a young, educated woman named Jaya and how silence

becomes part of her life. Jaya willingly suppresses her intellectual abilities because she believes she should support the traditional values of Indian society to follow the path set by her husband, Mohan. Jaya is an educated woman and, like every other human being, has her intellectual aspirations, but after getting married, she chooses to suppress her self-identity to become an ideal wife and mother, an epitome of sacrifice. She has been married for seventeen years, and in all those years, she has tried to avoid her aspirations and be silent. Jaya's understanding of marriage is deeply influenced by the traditional belief that a woman should depend upon her husband for protection and security. This conventional perception of marital relationships is expressed through the comparison: "A husband is like a sheltering tree" (*That Long Silence* xx)

Deshpande here conveys that sometimes being silent is not necessarily a personal choice, but that the social structure forces an educated woman like Jaya to prioritize not her own desires but those of her husband and her family. Deshpande, again very beautifully, depicts that self-realization and self-thoughts are keys to identifying yourself. Jaya's life takes a turn when Mohan is charged with corruption and misconduct, and the family is forced to leave their house and settle into a comparatively small apartment. The sudden change in her surroundings led Jaya to introspect and examine how long she had suppressed herself to fulfill the desires of others that society had imposed on her and to sustain her marriage. Jaya begins to reflect on her belief system about how women are taught to remain obedient and silent. They are expected to prioritize family values over their own happiness. Women gradually accept it as their destiny, and with time, this suppression often leads to emotional breakdown and a feeling of incompleteness. Jaya chooses writing as the means of her self-discovery. She remembers the time before marriage, when she always wanted to be a writer and could portray human psychology with full honesty. Over time, she chose to abandon her aspiration to be a writer to do the work acceptable to society: being a dutiful wife and mother who belongs in the kitchen and does household work.

One of the novel's main themes is how silence slowly erodes a person's individuality. The protagonist realizes that being silent has not only distanced her from proper communication with her husband but also with herself. She finds that years of avoiding honest communication have harmed her intellectual level and her own self. Deshpande shows here that silence does not make the relationship bloom but rather ends it. Jaya gradually recognises that her silence has become a habitual response to the expectations imposed upon her as a wife. Rather than expressing disagreement or asserting her opinions, she has learned to suppress her feelings. Reflecting upon this condition, she acknowledges: "I had learned it at last- no questions, no retorts, only silence" (*That Long Silence* xx).

At the same time, as in her other novels, Deshpande does not advocate the full rejection of family and society or rebellion in any physical form. She conveys that rebellion should come only from within, with mutual respect, acceptance of others' thoughts, and emotional support. Jaya realizes that to attain her individuality, she does not need to stir the harmony of her family.

In the end, the novel shows that "The Long Silence" has ended, and Jaya realizes that her decision to speak and write truly empowers her. When she decided not to remain silent in the conversation with Mohan, it marked the beginning of her journey toward autonomy. Deshpande leaves the readers to decide how self-imposed restrictions became resistance for a female losing

her autonomy and how the journey from being silent to standing up for herself led to liberation without abandoning her family and society, a true feminist consciousness.

Shashi Deshpande's Feminist Vision: Beyond Rebellion:

The standout aspect of Shashi Deshpande's novels on feminism is her refusal to accept simple binaries between men and women. She avoids portraying every male as the oppressor and females as the oppressed in her novels. Through her novels, she shows that the patriarchal system harms both genders. Men are pressured to maintain household authority by dominating the economic sphere, being the sole breadwinner for the family, and staying away from the kitchen and child care. Women are expected to be the epitome of sacrifice and one who should keep the responsibilities and duties of being a wife and mother first and abandon her own identity and aspirations. In her novels, the women act as protagonists and do not seek revenge against the men but slowly find themselves through self-realization and a thoughtful process. Women in her novels find their autonomy by recognizing that they are their own, having allowed others to suppress their individuality, and by taking steps to enjoy their lives on their own terms; they are the only ones who need to find validation from themselves, without disturbing their families' peace and harmony. Several themes in her novels reflect her feminist consciousness. Deshpande believes that in finding self-awareness, a woman must not blame others for their cause but should recognize that oppression is only a mental growth, and they should be courageous to follow their path and fulfill their aspirations.

Communication is a major theme in Deshpande's novels. She believes that honest communication is the key to a healthy relationship and a peaceful life. She believes that for a better society, women's participation is essential, and that women should overcome the inequalities they face by fostering effective communication where ideas are discussed. Respect is given to an individual's aspirations, regardless of gender. Deshpande also talks about emotional independence. She advocates that women should form their own identities and need not need any approval from society. She makes it clear in her novels, through her characters, that rather than rejecting her family and social responsibility, an Indian woman should seize opportunities and work on them not only for her own growth but also for her family and society. Through characters like Sarita, Indu, and Jaya, Deshpande portrays feminism as not about replacing others' authority. Feminism is finding one's own place and seeking one's own validation to fulfill every individual's aspirations, not through rebellion but through self-realization and confronting one's own heart.

Conclusion:

The standout of Shashi Deshpande's writing is the realistic portrayal of feminism in Indian society, focusing on complex themes woven into its fabric. She has chosen middle-class women in her novels who are educated yet still resist their own growth and individuality, due to the constant repetition of the idea that women are symbols of sacrifice, and thus have hidden their desires and aspirations in their hearts for years. In the analysis of the above-discussed novels, it can be seen that the characters develop their feminist consciousness through the gradual awakening of their thoughts. The protagonists of the novels engage in honest communication with themselves, ultimately finding themselves and the courage to transform their lives on their own terms without abandoning their responsibilities towards their families and society. Deshpande's fiction holds

relevance even today, as the problems she discusses- faced by women in India are real and continue in modern societies as well. She distinguishes herself from radical feminist approaches and focuses on the grounded reality of feminism in Indian society. She never glorifies a rebellious mindset but instead encourages women to negotiate and reflect on themselves to construct their own individuality without harming others' dignity. She rightfully believes that feminism is not only about attaining political and legal rights but also about acceptance on an emotional level.

In the end, it can be said that, as per the novels of Shashi Deshpande, feminism is truly realized when women find their voices, challenge the silence they have developed within themselves since childhood, and recognize themselves as complete individuals rather than as subordinates to others. Deshpande advocates that communication and emotional independence are essential to forming a women-empowered society, especially in a country like India. She rejects any form of rebellion with others, or going against the family values or culture. Deshpande wants readers to acknowledge that true liberation can only be achieved by believing in oneself and in one's own dignity, rather than by surrendering oneself.

Work Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.

Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*. Orient Paperbacks, 1985.

Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books India, 2008.

Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Penguin Books India, 2009.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1999.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt, 2005.