

***“On the Road to Self-discovery: A Selective Study of Women
Protagonists in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande.”***

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**THESIS SUBMITTED TO ANDHRA UNIVERSITY
VISAKHAPATNAM
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
NOVEMBER- 2018**

CONCLUSION

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“On the Road to Self-discovery: A Selective Study of Women Protagonists in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande” is reflective of the gaining strength of women's voices in Indian English novel. Women, being caught in the gender-inequality and injustices in patriarchal set up continue to struggle harder to prove their existence. As Sarla Palkar remarks these women are the “Victims of patriarchy and also of their own silence” (*Indian Women Novelists*, p. 168).

Undeniably, Deshpande presents the suppression of women “with greater self-consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement and often with a sense of outrage”. She depicts the inner chaos of the women vividly in a cool and sensitive prose. The quest for self-discovery, identity, possession, liberty, peace and harmony of the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences borne out of the prohibitive nature of the Indian patriarchal society. On the contrary, in Deshpande’s fictional world the men, may be husbands, fathers or lovers are stereo-types operating within the frame work of patriarchy with its under currents of oppression. While the majority of husbands in the novels are found to be patriarchal in their approach towards life, the older men particularly the fathers are projected as broad-minded. Surprisingly the male friends are ‘feminist’ in their approach and sympathize with the protagonists’ lot. Deshpande’s male characters only serve as foil to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully.

The study shows that the protagonists in Deshpande’s novels are on the road to self-discovery. Usually some domestic crisis or other propels them into an inward journey that raises pertinent questions regarding their existence and self. Besides, Shashi Deshpande’s novels make the reader brood over the human predicament of alienation and the variegated manifestations of time we all experience-past resides

with the present. The novels often digress into Indian myths, fables and folktales that show the power of tradition and the society's reluctance to change. At the same time her novels are infused with a rich inclusiveness, which in itself enhances the possibilities of hope for these women protagonists. Deshpande's novels are essentially reflective of the situation of the beleaguered contemporary Indian women, which she depicts with great artistic finesse and astounding originality.

Thus what we find between the covers of these novels is a commendably realistic depiction of the contemporary Indian women's predicament and the pragmatic solutions. The novelist finds at that accord the novels, an imperishable importance for their affirmative eloquence on women's issues in relation to their societal roles. Through her portrayal of Indian middle-class women's existence in India, Shashi Deshpande not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary career oriented woman. Tradition symbolizes the Indian way of life, while modernity essentially refers to the assertion of the independent individual self. Her protagonists at the beginning of their quest find that they have passively accepted their socially ordained roles. Deshpande advocates, to realize herself, a woman must be true to her own self drawing out her hidden and intuitive strength to venture out of the established framework, to discover her potential as an individual and give expression to her inner space and self.

The women-centric narratives provide an intimate insight into the psyche of the middle-class Indian woman, oppressed by her inferior social position and hemmed in by her patriarchal socialization. The novels also draw a blue print for better man-woman relationships that can broaden the scope of human existence especially that of women.

In all the novels Deshpande effectively portrays the trials and tribulations of a woman but propels her not to be stuck with her lot. Instead she invests women with a radical outlook that can help them break away from stereo typical idealization. It is therefore, imperative that the novelist attempts to write from women's point of view to project the emotions and experiences of a woman as a wife, mother and as an individual facing psychological and sociological challenges. It is no exaggeration to state that Deshpande's novels do influence the Indian life and society to a large extent. True to the concerns of women writers, Deshpande focuses especially on the plight of the modern Indian woman trying to understand herself to preserve her identity as a wife, mother and above all as a human being through a realistic portrayal of the contemporary middle class woman. The writer's primary concern is to sensitize society in recognizing woman as an individual being, self-supporting and self-reliant both physically and emotionally. Jaya of *That Long Silence* is a prototype of a woman who initially rebels against the unjust customs and practices prevalent in society which stifle women to finally emerge as a complete woman.

Shashi Deshpande emphasizes that woman must cease to consider herself an object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than in the hands of men. A woman must basically adorn herself for her own self rather than for man if only she wishes to be equal to man. Even in the present age no matter if a woman is well qualified, or occupies a higher position in career, or has her own ambitions, she has to strive to balance her many roles, balance her dreams and wishes in the contemporary world. If warranted, she should be prepared to sacrifice her profession for the good of the family; she is forever nagged by questions of "who am I?" "What am I living for?" "What is my identity?" "Why did I get education?" "What is my financial stability?". Her inner chaos troubles her constantly.

For a woman, living without an identity amounts to extreme pain which lasts for a life time. Living by suppressing dreams, wishes, career and ambitions for the sake of the family makes her meek and diffident. Even in this modern age, woman has to continuously convince her self and soul that she is happy only in looking after her family, yet suffering inwardly in quest of her own ‘Self’. The analysis of the novels reveals that the protagonists are initially in a state of confusion but slowly as each novel unfold, we find that they go through a process of introspection and self-analysis leading to revelation of self.

At the end of the novels, the protagonists emerge as more confident, more in control of themselves, their surroundings and significantly more hopeful. The novelist very tactfully creates issues and situations out of the ordinary focusing on women and their plight in a society in transition where the shift is from tradition to modernity. As a consequence, tensions emerge where woman is the direct sufferer. Deshpande gives more importance to family relationships and how women have responded to the socio-economic transition, operating within the parameters set by the society of her time. She, not being an outright feminist, quietly highlights revolutionary ideas, about the representation of female voice and women’s quest for an identity all within the framework of family. She also wisely stresses upon a woman’s dire need to be practical in order to move a step ahead to gain her own individuality and create a better life for herself in the family and world.

Shashi Deshpande concentrates on the tortures and sufferings of middle-class Indian women who are educated, sensitive and are conscious of their legal, social and conjugal rights. She highlights the household conflicts between wife and husband operating at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels. Being fully aware of the patriarchal set-up of Indian society, she does not encourage any kind of confrontation

or militancy between man and woman, between husband and wife instead pin points the inner struggle and sufferings of the new class of Indian women through the characters like Indu who raise many basic questions regarding modern women who are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the west. Indu's acceptance of western values and her search for liberty with a precondition of unfettered growth and maturity, despite the insidious conflict between tradition and modernity, ultimately results in her emergence as a fullfledged human being.

Deshpande's protagonists are discontented with the undigested and contradicting ideologies with the family and society. Therefore, they are ready to re-define themselves with new spirit and aspirations. The novelist paves way on how to break away from the long drawn suffering of women wrapped in silence by becoming assertive and courageous so as to march towards progress for self-fulfillment resulting in a peaceful life.

The novelist suggests that a woman must give expression to her inner space and self; at the same time, she need not reject the social institution of marriage and family or her basic human values. The values and the parameters on which she designed her protagonists make them appear as breathing individuals who possess personal traits and characteristics that set them apart from the routine. To highlight some of the characters discussing Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, whose name is "small, sharp and clear, like her face..." is however, passive, and has silenced and muffled her own voice consciously. She has the potential to re-define herself. Urmila in *The Binding Vine* is the plain looking young woman who wears glasses, and blouses that do not match her saris. There are astonishing resemblances too among the protagonists-they are intrinsically defiant and committed to oppose oppression.

Together they represent a new, collective voice of dynamic young women who are not going to lead circumscribed lives.

Deshpande presents the conflicts of her protagonists without presenting any direct solutions. She lets the different choices speak for themselves, the choice to confirm or to break free. Sometimes she seems to be faintly echoing the sentiments of de Beauvoir, who she admits, has influenced her, and according to whom it is women who “have to define, measure, and explore their special domain”. Deshpande believes that women have so deeply internalized the dominant mores that sometimes despite being better endowed than most other Indian women, her protagonists cannot visualize an independent identity for themselves.

Through these portrayals, Deshpande is also trying to explode the myth of the ‘educated Indian woman’ who, it is popularly assumed, is automatically liberated. The novels show how education can give women the freedom and the courage to ‘explore’themselves and reach a positive end. Education has made it possible for women to assert themselves with determination as individuals, to set their own limits in relation to themselves, their family and society.

All the protagonists taken for the study -Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila, Sumi and Madhu are shown to be in a state of confusion at the beginning and as the novel unfolds, they go through a process of introspection, self-analysis to reach a state of self-realisation that leads them towards harmony within and without. At the end, they emerge as more confident, more in control of themselves and significantly, more hopeful and wholesome. As Jaya in *That Long Silence* concludes, “ But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible” (p.193).

Through an analysis of Shashi Deshpande's protagonists – Saru, Indu, Jaya, Urmī, Sumi and Madhu, the study affirms that women can progress in life from being a victim to a fulfilled woman by striving towards self-discovery, after having crossed all the other read blocks in the journey called life.