

# Gender and The Cultured Female as Depicted by Shashi Deshpande

**Manisha Lal**

Assistant Professor (English)

Received: February 10, 2019

Accepted: March 29, 2019

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Feminism is a word which summarizes many things in itself. It is a storehouse of all those movements which advocate the rights of females. Feminism tries to define the status of women through the political, cultural, economic and social set up. There has been a constant struggle to fight for the equal status. The earth is inhabited approximately in same numbers by males and females and they have no problem with the existence of one another. But still there is a discord and this has to be dealt with in the changing times. The division of work has changed and there has been a lot of pressure on women. They have to constantly fight for their rights. They are made to feel guilty for not managing work and home properly. Feminist theory, which has risen from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining social roles played by women. Many theories are used to understand the issues of the social and cultural construction of gender and sex. In the same line, we see Shashi Deshpande, an Indian author, writing about females in her novels.*

---

## Hypothesis

1. Many theories are used to explain the social and cultural construction of gender and sex. Some state that women behave in a particular manner because of the biological construct.
2. Other theories hold the cultural construct responsible for the character formation of a woman.

## Research Analysis

Shashi Deshpande has written stories which are about women: her privations, agonies and tensions, angers and fears. Shashi Deshpande doesn't feel very elated when she is labeled a writer who is a woman or about the feminist writer tag. Shashi Deshpande feels like a feminist as a human being but she does not label herself as a writer promoting or advocating feminism. She has stated about herself that "I write as a writer but am identified as a woman writer. I am nothing more than a novelist and a short-story writer but people seek more glorified titles to elevate you to stardom." She further adds "If critics and reviewers insist on calling me a woman writer, then 'man' should be prefixed to male writers as well". According to her "Women writers are expected to write for women's magazines and be read by women readers only." Her stories have portrayed that side of females where the most prominent thing is that they have to compromise. It is that ingredient in the life of the women in India who belong to the middle class. Women face a dilemma because they are not able to defy the conventions of the society or morals pertaining to traditional setup, middle class women find themselves subdued by despairs and wishes, hopes and failures, hatreds and affections, solitude and indifference, oppressiveness and suppression, discord in marriages and chauvinistic tendencies of males. The description of a woman is still the same as it was in Virginia Woolf's period. Woman is given importance but only where man doesn't feel the insecurity. In reality, every woman is judged on the parameter of reality and myth. She is considered nothing but a "womb" and her whole existence is judged by the male dominated society as "secondary".

In Shashi Deshpande's works, we find the importance of a woman in a household only when she is needed to take care of her child, to do some cooking for family, when a care taker is needed for her in laws- and whenever there is a need for a non- salaried twenty- four hour full time maid. We see that there is a constant struggle and although woman is the nucleus of any story, the question about her own tale remains unanswered, everything is dull and unfocussed because a woman's life is an untold tale. There will be no story of her life. One of Deshpande's women characters in 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' is Sarita, who is called Saru. Since the initial stage of her life, she is told and in fact reminded by her mother that she is a "woman". For Saru there are specified rules for what to do and what not to do. Since her young years, she was constantly told to take care of her skin color and the reason given to her was that if her complexion is fair she will easily be given importance by her mother- in- law and husband. "Don't go in the sun, you will get darker" these words spoken by her mother hurt her a lot and made a very significant impression on her mind. Character like Saru created by Shashi Deshpande becomes a rebel. Her mother refuses to support her and tries to stop her from going ahead in her career of medicine. She is able to realize her dream of

becoming a doctor by revolting. Saru again revolts against her mother when she is against her marrying Manohar, who is not from the same community and belongs to a lower caste. Deshpande focuses on creating a set up where most of the women are devoid of financial and ideological freedom. She has developed characters which are in pursuit of creating a place for themselves.

Shashi Deshpande has depicted the patriarchal setup in Indian society which is male dominated. A society which has a patriarchal setup faces a lot of problems in transferring the emphasis from males to females. In Indian context, it is evident in the history also if men and women are accorded the status of equality by the society then it is essential to make women part of the story. Since time immemorial the area of literature is considered the strong hold of males and females are considered as subservient to them. It was not possible for a woman to even think about education and to be able to govern the literary sector was unfathomable. Shashi Deshpande's main thematic concern deals with a woman's fights and aversions in the context of Indian society. She makes a continuous and rigorous effort on her part to proclaim her individuality whether it is as a mother, daughter, sister or a wife and there is also a very strong feeling to assert woman as an existing being. She makes an effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as a human being. She also tries to delineate her female characters as modern and as per the existing society. The existing cult of patriarchy has created a sort of norm for the society which arms males of our society with a power that can always push the females to the borders most of the time. This makes the woman the marginalized section for the first reason she is a woman and for another reason that she is not on the same platform as man. Here Saru is in a fix as her husband Manohar is suffering from frustrated sexuality. She suffers and the life becomes a bottomless abyss for her, she is psychologically traumatized, and she in her condition decides to go to her father and leaves her husband's place. Here we can see that an Indian woman when leaves the house of her in-laws has to take refuge in her father's house. From the protected so called haven of her husband's house she has to move to her father's house. She is an independent woman and she tries to find out her individuality and in this endeavour she tries to help people who are needy by providing medical help. Her character can be understood when we study her in psychological aspects. Since her very young days she was given a very clear idea that gender discrimination is the existing reality and one cannot surpass it in Indian society. Her mother made her aware of the fact that boys are assets and girls are the burdens on their families and therefore their position will also remain the same that is inferior in the family as well as the society. In Saru's story, her feminism rises from this discrimination. Most of the time we fail to understand the feminism generating in young minds because of these generalized statements made consciously or unconsciously by the parents or the elderly members of the society. She creates a notion in her head which emerges from her mother's statements and her aversion on bearing a daughter which she terms as a calamity and calls it "terrible." Saru the protagonist has two affairs with Boozie and Padmakar Rao after she breaks up with her husband Manohar. Shashi Deshpande gives this independence to her female protagonist to be free from one specific partner.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent literary figures of the current times. She is known as a literary artist who can study the trends in the psychology of the females in the present scenario with the effects of the past. She has specially written about the Indian woman characters who are middle class, educated, cultured, urban and even empowered sometimes. Women, sometimes, are unable to see through the snare kept for them under the male dominated patriarchal society. With the study of Deshpande's novels, we can hope to unveil the conspiracy to keep the women in their secondary status happy and satisfied. Study of Deshpande's novels gives an insight into the lives of women. She tends to lead us into that truth which brings to light the patriarchal framework which has been able to keep the women under this spell of being like a goddess and sacrificing herself for everyone. This depiction by a women novelist has been called as a feminist promotional strategy but the writer is just telling a story and her female characters are a little bit bold for the society to accept. Society does not accept anything which does not conform to rules or is a little digression from the set social parameters. Even Shashi Deshpande has accepted this that she was advocating for the rights of the women to some extent. She is a writer and she does write as a female but not as a feminist. In her essay "Of Kitchens and Goddesses", she feels that women are bound to restricted spaces. She says, "Perhaps it was at that moment that I stepped over the threshold and into the kitchen. For, as if the focus had shifted, my vision suddenly changed. And, instead of that safe warm haven of my childhood, I saw another kitchen, where women were chained to endless, tedious labor, crouching for hours before a smoking fire." Simon De Beauvoir has stated on this complex co-existence of two sexes in her book "The Second Sex", "Man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas women represent only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity." Considering the writer's concept from the colonized point of view in our

country, women are the other and marginalized entities. It has more or less a politically motivated ideology. There is a struggle against the injustice and oppression. This is the main reason her characters strive constantly to create a place of their own in this world.

Similarly, in her other novels like *Roots and Shadows*, *Small Remedies*, *That Long Silence*, *Moving On*, women characters like Indu, Madhu and Jaya don't stick to one particular man. Shashi Deshpande has taken an extremely courageous step by not conforming to the traditional parameters and she has moved away from that culturally constructed set of norms which are like traditionally constructed rules for females but can be molded when concerned with males. Paradox is the word which aptly summarizes the dual standards our society. Having extramarital affairs for a man is a common thing in our society but for a woman, it is not only objectionable, it is against her being. Whatever we try to imply by the word equality in applying to a woman it becomes a myth. In her novel *Moving On*, the sexuality of Manjari who is the main character is presented explicitly. Manjari is bold and stubborn like Deshpande's female characters. She takes the decision to marry Shyam even when her parents were reluctant. She decides to give up her studies also and stops studying medicine. But her life gets complicated when her husband Shyam makes her sister Malu pregnant. Manjari's sister dies after delivery and her husband commits suicide. It is impossible to put into words the amount of pain Manjari went through. She tries hard to somehow collect herself but the illicit relationship of her husband and the agony of broken trust make her a living being hollow from within. Indu is made to feel the pain of being a woman by the society in *Roots and Shadows*. From the very onset, she was constantly reminded of her identity of a woman, a girl. And she was told to develop herself as a female. She was told to adhere to certain restrictions which were imposed on her for being a girl "As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. 'Why'? I had asked "Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said for a female to live and survive." Another protagonist Jaya has to constantly struggle between her two selves that of a wife and a creative writer. We see that most of the female characters remain submissive and they actually want their husbands to see their reluctance and their non conformation in it. Jaya's husband sees the reluctance in her silence. He considers it as her protest. Kamat, who lives in a house near Jaya's house supports her. We see that Shashi Deshpande has left an option for her female protagonists that if they are not in sync with their lives, they are not tied till their death with the same man but can look forward to other men who are more suited to them. Kamat understands Jaya and he encourages her to pursue her love of writing. The notion that a woman can think of another man even when her husband is alive is in itself very modern especially for Indian society. The novelist wants the society to understand it as a matter of choice and not in terms of committing a sin. The novelist here does not want to mitigate or lessen the importance of marriage but she wants them to make their own choice. Even if the choice is to return to their husbands it should be theirs and not because this is how the females have to behave in a culturally constructed society. She gives to them the freedom to choose. When the women are cultured in this manner, they think of their children, their families and their husband and they go back for their sake. This is not their submission but the realization of what is of importance to them. Women can take any decision but they must remember their own self first.

If men today have become modern and their outlook has changed so has there been a drastic change in the thinking of the women around the world. The women today are not restricted to the traditionally divided role. They are not just happy playing the part of a mother or doing household jobs, the other aspect of their life are also important to them. They are ambitious and want to earn name, fame and respect which is not possible to have within the four walls of house. Sometimes the outer world is even more important than their house. The novelist presents her female characters as autonomous individuals. She tries to put her emphasis on the women's self expression and this is irrespective of her race, caste or class. She hasn't limited her characters to the privileged but has also included the poor women belonging to very low economic strata of the society. She speaks about the rights of equality for women in all spaces. She tells a story and that story speaks for equality and in between the lines we find the issues of gender and sex.

**Conclusion:** Deshpande's novels have women characters and they are what society has made them. Sometimes her women characters are bold and they are capable of asserting themselves and sometimes they are meek and submissive. The heroines in Shashi Deshpande's novels sometimes keep the word compromise as their second nature. Deshpande has never been the writer of a particular class. She tries to bring all types of women from the periphery to the centre. There is a constant search of identity which is sometimes called feminism. But her characters have to search for their identities from within their culturally constructed stereotypes and the credit goes to the novelist for bringing out this question through multiple voices. There is a need to give due importance to these voices of women as the society is not yet ready to

accept them as human beings. The standards of equality are far off from being a reality and are still nothing but myths which are acceptable in a vague sense only.

### **Bibliography**

1. Beauvoir Simone de. The Second Sex. Translation H.M Harshley, London: Vintage,1997
2. Deshpande, Shashi. The Dark Holds No Terrors. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990.
3. That Long Silence. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.
4. Binding Vine. London: Virago, 1992.
5. Roots and Shadows. Disha Books, New Delhi. Orient Longman, 1983.
6. A Matter of Time. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996