

## THE NEW WOMAN VERSUS THE OLD POWER STRUCTURE IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

RAVINDRA SINGH<sup>1</sup> & SHIVALI SINGH<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, K. K. (P. G.) College, Etawah, Uttar Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, SOSS, IFTM University, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

### ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and author Sriranga, was born in Dharwad of Karnataka in India. She got Sahitya Akademi Award and Padam Sri Award. She is called a woman writer. The main thematic concerns of her novels are woman's struggle, inner conflict and search for identity, parent-child relationship, and concept of marriage and sex. She portrays The New Woman in her fiction. They can be defined as one who is convent-educated; one who is professional in outlook and career-seeking; one who is seen at war against the male chauvinism, the tyranny of one's mothers and grand-mothers; one who is engaged in one's struggles against patriarchy, gender bias and discrimination in the family; one who holds one's independent views on marriage and sex; one who is prepared to sacrifice one's wifehood and motherhood for the sake of one's career, and one who does not hesitate even to use one's sex as a stepping-stone for the promotion of one's career. These women tried to demolish the old power structure in their families without creating an alternative social set up for them. Since these women fail to do so and at the same time fail to fit in the old power structure, they pass through the unimaginable anguish, grief and sufferings, and are found alienated, defeated and disintegrated in quest of their self-identities. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the new woman versus the old power structure in the family and society in the select novels of Shashi Deshpande and to delineate the fight back of female protagonists against injustice done to them.

**KEYWORDS:** New Woman, Struggle, Patriarchy, Society, Family

### INTRODUCTION

The New Woman in the novels of Shashi Deshpande can be defined as one who is convent-educated; one who is professional in outlook and career-seeking; one who is seen at war against the male chauvinism, the tyranny of one's mothers and grand-mothers; one who is engaged in one's struggles against patriarchy, gender bias and discrimination in the family; one who holds one's independent views on marriage and sex; one who is prepared to sacrifice one's wifehood and motherhood for the sake of one's career, and one who does not hesitate even to use one's sex as a stepping-stone for the promotion of one's career. Shashi Deshpande's New Women are generally seen enjoying pre-marital and post-marital sex. Since such women have a disturbed family life and split personalities, they turn out to be neglected and unwanted daughters, unloving wives, and undutiful mothers, and incur the curses of their parents, cruelties of their husbands and displeasure of their children. Such women protagonists engaged in a battle against patriarchy and orthodoxy in matter of religion, sex and cultural ethos cannot seek their refuge in the old power structure in their families and society. They have to carve out their own safety niches and evolve their own mechanism of social values and new pattern of their family life in

order to sustain themselves. Since these women fail to do so and at the same time fail to fit in the old power structure, they pass through the unimaginable anguish, grief and sufferings, and are found alienated, defeated and disintegrated in quest of their self-identities.

In the old family structure, it is the father who is the main bread-winner and head of the family. He is the ruler of his family and the ruled are his wife and his children. He exercises his patriarchal power over his family in order to assert his superiority and authority over his wife. But the New Woman wants to live in the family not as the ruled but as an equal partner having her say in each and every matter of her family. As a daughter, she wants to take her own decisions in matters of her career and marriage. As a wife and mother, she wants to be placed at the centre pushing the male to the periphery. Among Deshpande's New Women, some of them are career-seekers; some others are good housewives working as a pair of bullocks in the family, and many others are cynically misogynists. These women are misfits in the old patriarchal familial set up and social order. However, finding themselves placed on the roads never taken, they battle to come to terms with the realities of their life.

Shashi Deshpande's first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a story of a woman protagonist, Sarita who battles against her traditional patriarchal family and society for her professional success as a doctor and family woman and is subjected to a gender discrimination, countless cruelties, brutalities and nightmares. When she returns to her father's house for refuge after fifteen years of her love marriage, she finds all the doors closed for her.

Sarita was subjected to gender discrimination right from her birthday because her parents wanted to have a male child as their first born. Her troubles aggravated after the birth of her brother. Dhruva was given a preferential treatment by his parents because he was a son whereas Sarita was ignored because she was a female child. The birthday of Dhruva was a special occasion for her family. There was always a special puja on his birthday followed by a festive lunch in the afternoon and *aarti* in the evening. Sarita's birthdays were also celebrated but without any *puja* just to show that Dhruva was superior to his sister. This discriminatory treatment made a deep imprint on the psyche of Sarita. She resented it and was irritated. She formed a belligerent attitude towards her mother. Her troubles knew no bounds after the death of her younger brother. She was held responsible for her brother's death by her mother. She was treated like an outcaste in her own house. When Dhruva's dead body was brought in the house, his mother screamed hysterically at Sarita: *You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead? 1*

Sarita's mother never came to terms with her. She was a guilty daughter in the eyes of her mother. This guilt-consciousness never left her. It rather caused terrors for her in the dark in the later years. It became very difficult for her to breathe in the family surcharged with the atmosphere of bitterness, indifference and callousness so she worked hard in her studies to join the medical profession and live an independent and respectable life. But her admission to a medical college was opposed tooth and nail by her mother, Kamala. This made Sarita furious. She cried angrily looking at her mother: *You don't want me to have anything. You don't want me to do anything. You don't even want me to live.<sup>2</sup>*

Sarita's admission to a medical college was resisted by her mother because she was not a boy. In spite of a stiff resistance by her mother, Sarita joined the medical college and stayed in the college hostel in order to seek her freedom from her cursing and unforgiving mother. She getting away from her home and joining the college hostel was not just a relief but a sort of re-birth for her. But that was not enough for her liberation from her tyrannical mother. She sought her liberation through a man who could give her full love and financial support also. She caught hold of one of her old

classmates, Manohar alias Manu who was working as a lecturer in a college and was able to meet out Sarita's expenses. She made up her mind to go for a love marriage with him in spite of the fact that the boy belonged to a low caste. This she did in order to hurt her mother, to wound her and make her suffer. When Sarita's mother learnt that the boy was not of her caste, she cursed her daughter saying that she was dead for her since Dhurava's death. Sarita also vowed never to return to her mother's house. As a mark of her complete break off from her mother, she returned the ear-rings gifted to her by her mother.

Even after her departure from her patriarchal family dominated by her rude, unforgiving and tyrannical mother, Sarita did not feel at ease in the male-dominated society based on the old power structure. As the time rolled on her parents, she began to feel as if she were again being caged. She began to feel that she was gradually losing her hard-won freedom and she was just like a small boat drifted and towed by a larger ship. She grudged her husband because he had never any time for doing all the things she wanted. She felt: *You just tag on to him and drift, small boat towed by a larger ship.*<sup>3</sup>

Sarita began to get wings and put on airs after getting an appointment as a lady doctor in a hospital. Her white coat made her a distinguished one with an identity of her own. Wherever she went, she was recognized by as a lady doctor, paid respect and wished by people. She remained no more a small boat; she rather became a larger ship herself. Manohar could not tolerate people greeting his wife with their smiles and namastes. He felt inferior to her because his wife grew a few inches higher in social reputation whereas he was totally ignored. Manohar felt humiliated in the company of his wife. G. Dominic Savio rightly remarks: *The social acceptance and recognition she (Sarita) gains as a doctor and the demands on her time cleave a wedge in her relationship with Manu.*<sup>4</sup>

Sarita's indifference and unresponsive behaviour towards Manu made her life imbalanced and destroyed her marriage. Things in her family got more complicated when she opened her clinic with the help of a doctor who often hobnobbed with her even in the presence of her husband. All these events had a very adverse effect on the manhood of her husband. The husband not only turned impotent and unfit for her conjugal life but also vindictive. He sought a revenge on her at night. He turned a sadist and maniac, and inflicted injuries and bruises on her while love-making in bed. This was a new kind of terror that she faced single-handed. She could not share it with anyone. She concealed it in her heart like a skeleton in a cupboard. She could not go back to her parents for help.

But when Sarita heard about the death of her mother, she got an opportunity to visit her father and unlock before him the cupboard of her heart in which many skeletons were hidden. On homecoming, all the grievances of an old and monumental injustice surfaced before her mental horizon. She was no more a wife, nor a mother, nor a professional woman whom others looked up to. She was rather a wronged child, an unloved daughter and a scapegoat. After seeking clarifications from her father about the attitude of her mother while dying and his own attitude towards the death of her brother, she discussed her problems with her father but she refused to accept her father's advice for reconciliation with her husband. She rather asked him not to open the door to him if he happened to come to him. In this connection, Indira Nityanandam has rightly remarked:

*Sarita's homecoming helps her to sort out her problems, to analyse her life, to review and re-examine her psychic crisis but it does not provide her with a womb-like security but helps to raise questions which she has never dared to ask herself before.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Sarita opposes the old power structure in the family in the form of her traditional parents and husband and tries to carve out her own niche as a professional family woman blessed with two grown up children.

In *Roots and Shadows*, the chief female protagonist is Indu who like Sarita deserts her parental house to escape the tyranny of her widowed tyrannical Akka and Atya and harbours an ambition to change people and reform society. Indu inaugurates her rebellion against the old social order of her ancestral family by going in for an inter-caste marriage with Jayant against the wishes of her orthodox family. She turned her back upon her old family for years and threw a magic circle around her marriage. Like Sarita, she also carved out a career for herself in order to establish her individual identity and become economically independent. She joined *Women's Magazine* as a journalist. For the sake of her career, she sacrifices her motherhood. She prefers to go childless for her success in her career. She is the woman who evolves her own code of sex ethics and strives for her sex autonomy. In order to show to the wide world that she is an independent woman, she declares that her body is her own and she alone has a right over it, and she has every right to enjoy her body with a man of her liking. Consequently, she commits adultery twice in order to seek ecstasy in sex. But she soon realizes how she has wronged Jayant by cheating him of her true self. She feels guilty of concealing her sins from her husband. She also fears that if she is exposed, she may be abandoned or divorced by her husband.

When she returns to her old roots after chasing shadows for eleven years, she discovers that for her family women, she is no more than a childless woman. Her thought that all the women of her ancestral family would be impressed with her academic distinction, career, success and money is belied. For her family women, she is no more than a barren woman. She feels shocked at this treatment and fears that she might be hated by her husband for being a childless woman. Indu's euphoria to change people and reform society evaporates like the morning dew in the sun when her second story is rejected by the editor of *Women's Magazine*. All these events force her to revise her thinking about herself. She says:

*I have realized that it is not in me, the material of which revolutionaries are made. I no longer have any desire to mould people, to change them, to reform society.*<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the monolithic image of Indu as a liberated woman existing independently is broken. She seeks her happiness in small things and her dependence on her husband. She now realizes that the whole world is made of inter-dependent parts and that all the things are connected. That is why no one can be completely free. In spite of being rebellious, aggressive and adventurous, Indu seems to be more pragmatic and mature than Sarita ready to reconcile and accommodate herself with the changing situations.

*That Long Silence* is the third novel of Shashi Deshpande. In this novel, the chief woman protagonist is Jaya who unlike Sarita and Indu, passed seventeen years of her married life without staging any rebellion, without any nagging, higgling and grudging. She tried to live with her husband, Mohan in utter silence like a pair of bullocks yoked together. She rather went on suppressing her desires and ambitions without uttering a word against her husband and his backward and traditional family. In order to keep her image as a silent woman, she delicately balanced her relationship with Mohan and attended to his every need without any ifs and buts. Like the chorus of the Greek Drama, they were distanced from pain and suffering. But the reality was quite different. They presented a false image of themselves. They were not a pair of bullocks yoked together. They were rather two different persons—a man and a woman. Everything went well for seventeen years because Jaya crushed her Self under the weight of her long silence. The suppressed things lying deep in her unconscious mind began to disturb her from within later in moments of her loneliness. She found her undisturbed family

life unendurable, boring and monotonous. She often sighed for a catastrophe, a disaster to shake her out of her dull grooves.

Finally, a special disaster came to her family. Her husband was found involved in a financial scam and her family was in jeopardy. Mohan laid the entire blame at the door of his wife saying that he had done the wrong thing for her family. He told his wife that they had to move to their Dadar flat for some time and pass their troubled time there. As soon as these words fell into Jaya's ears, the ground started slipping from her feet. This unexpected and unwanted happening came to her like a bolt from the blue sky and shattered Jaya's Self to pieces like a dome of glass after a hailstorm. The monolith image of Jaya as a dutiful, faithful and silent woman like the bandaged Gandhari was broken to pieces. Her husband's sudden silence frightened her. The fear of her husband's committing suicide in order to escape ignominy, the fear of being abandoned by her husband, and the fear of being widowed haunted her mind all the time. She had terrible nightmares and dreams every day. Jaya's career as a housewife came to an end. Jaya had nothing to do in the Dadar flat. The woman who had chopped and cooked, cleaned, organized and cared for her family and home was gone. There was no more waiting for her as she was totally idle and empty-headed. Since her marriage, she had done nothing but waiting—waiting for her husband to come home, waiting for children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to return home, waiting for the milkman, the servant, etc. That waiting was gone for her. The image that Jaya had built up under the patronage of her patriarchal family was no more. She was haunted by the memories of her past. Fear founded and unfounded rose from the dark chamber of her mind to terrorise her. She was now a failed wife and mother. Even her sex life was badly affected.

The guilt which Jaya had successfully concealed from her husband so far surfaced at this critical point. Jaya was guilty of feticide. She did not let her third child live. The unborn child gave her troubles in her silent moments. The act of treachery against her husband and the thought of the aborted child sprang out in her unguarded moments. A shadowy figure of her unborn child in the wings frightened her and filled her with a sense of guilt and remorse. Jaya had another secret concealed from her husband. This secret was her extra-marital sex with Kamath. This also surfaced on her consciousness and pained her. In the absence of her husband, the fear of being widowed and the remorse for her past deeds never left her. The jolt she had received, the trauma she had suffered, and the disaster she had experienced—all injected in her a hope for a change in her. She realized: *If I have to plug the hole in the heart, I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us.*<sup>7</sup>

Their life would not be the same after the trouble had blown over. Something had been lost. Jaya remained no more the same woman. She was determined to launch her new career independent of her husband crossing the doors of his patriarchal house. The catastrophe awakened her from her deep sleep and destined her to break her long silence that she had kept for seventeen years respecting the traditions of her patriarchal family. It was Jaya's catharsis and new birth as a new woman because she rejected the image of "two bullocks yoked together".

*The Binding Vine* which is the fourth novel of Shashi Deshpande, is focused on the miserable plight of three women—Urmila, Mira and Shakuntala's daughter, Kalpana who were subjected to the tyranny of patriarchy and the rule of their husbands. Urmila, the protagonist of the novel was deprived of the company and love of her mother since her childhood. She was sent away to the care of her grand-parents. She grew up under the guardianship of Aju, Akka and the mother of her childhood friend, Vanna. Her estrangement from her mother created an unbridgeable distance between the

mother and the daughter. Urmila's attachment with Ranidurg, the home of her grand-father was so deep that she decided to get married to Kishore, the step-brother of Vanna, staging a revolt against her parents in the hope that, by doing so, she would restore through her husband that entire she had lost in her childhood.

But Urmila's hopes of her happiness through her husband were shattered to pieces. Since her husband had a job in the merchant navy, he was away from his wife for months. Urmila had to stay with her mother with her two small children and crave for the love of her husband. Even in the company of her husband, she never felt an emotional togetherness with him. In spite of her physical togetherness, she always felt that there was no emotional bond created between them. She had a feeling that her husband was withholding something from her and she would never reach it. She also discovered that marriage for a woman was just like an anchor. Once she was hooked to it, she could never come out of it. It was a steel trap for her.

Urmila came to face the new dilemma when her girl baby, Anu died after a short illness. She experienced a traumatic shock after the loss of her female baby, especially when her husband failed to come to share her grief. It was at this moment that she realized how girls were subjected to the gender bias in their families. What Urmila had learnt from her life was that women were subjected to the tyranny of patriarchy and marriage and gender discrimination in the Indian society.

Urmila also realized that her sorrows were nothing in comparison to those of her mother-in-law who was subjected to the pains of her forced marriage and her rape in marriage. Her mother-in-law got married when she was a student. She was married against her wish with a man whom she had no liking. She harboured a feeling of strong repulsion and distaste for unwilling and forced sex with a man whom she never accepted as her husband. The dark held great terrors for her as she was raped in marriage in the darkness of night.

The story of Mira, the mother-in-law of Urmila is followed by the story of Kalpana who was also subjected to the rape by the husband of the sister of her mother. Even Kalpana's mother, Shakuntala, had a miserable life after her marriage. Thus, Urmila's touch with the outside world taught her that the problems of the middle class women whether educated or ill-educated were almost the same in the patriarchal social set up. She was convinced that there would be no change in the plight of the middle class women so long as the rule of patriarchy prevailed in society.

*A Matter of Time* which is the fifth novel of Shashi Deshpande is focused on two women—Sumitra and her mother, Kalyani who were subjected to the cruelties of their husbands and the tyranny of patriarchy. Sumitra who is the protagonist of the novel was hostile to patriarchy and the rule of her husband in the family like Sarita, Indu, Jaya and Urmila, the women protagonists of the earlier novels. Sumitra, being the daughter of her cursed parents did not want to repeat the story of her parents in her own life.

Kalyani who was the mother of Sumitra was married against her wish. She was not allowed to complete her schooling. She was taken out of school and married off by her mother to her own brother, Shripati to keep her property in the family. When Kalyani's only son was lost on the way, she was blamed for this tragic incident by her husband. She was deserted by her husband, Shripati. Since that day they had been living in the same house without talking to each other. They had been living in complete silence for thirty five years, Sumitra as the daughter of Kalyani and Shripati had seen all that with her own eyes and was determined not to allow the patriarchal rule in her own family.

Sumitra was married to Gopal who was a lecturer in a university. After getting three daughters from her husband, she took her husband and her marriage casually. The mother and her three daughters were always together and Gopal was kept out of their magic circle. Gopal was distanced from his family so much that finally the marriage failed for both of them. They moved in two different orbits without any possibility of meeting again. Gopal and Sumitra had their own philosophy of marriage. They believed that marriages were made, unmade and re-made on the earth. Gopal believed that marriage was not meant for every one because it demanded a life-time commitment which was not possible for everyone. Sumitra, on the other hand, believed that marriage was a magic circle in which the woman and her children were together and the husband was an outsider. As soon as Sumitra's three daughters grew into adults, Gopal was kept outside their magic circle. Gopal, on the other hand, wanted democracy in the family. When he got badly alienated from his family, he decided to take a cowardly revenge on his family. Since he was the main bread-winner and provider of security in his family, he resigned his university job, deserted his family and disappeared all of a sudden. It was not because of his failure in their married life. It was rather on account of Sumitra's hardened attitude, pride and extreme possessiveness. In fact, there was a struggle for power in Sumitra's family. Sumitra wanted to dominate her family and keep her daughters under her control.

Gopal's resignation and his sudden disappearance were some things which Sumitra had never comprehended. The whole family was stunned over it. Gopal's desertion of his family was not just a tragedy; it was both a shame and a disgrace. When Sumitra and her daughters failed to get in touch with Gopal, they moved to the house in which Kalyani and her husband, Shripati had been living without talking to each other. It was from here that Sumitra and her daughters waged a war against patriarchy. Unfortunately in her hunt for a job and a rented house, Sumitra died in a bus-scooter accident leaving her fight against the rule of man for her three daughters.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the New Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande defied patriarchy and resented the gender discrimination in their families and society. They also tried to demolish the old power structure in their families without creating an alternative social set up for themselves. In the absence of new family set up which could replace the old family system and provide them the same type of social and economic security, the New Women were placed in dilemmas which they had never confronted and expected. The New Women, therefore, appear in the novels of Shashi Deshpande as neglected and unwanted daughters, unloved wives, undutiful mothers and victims of their husbands and mothers-in-law engaged in the never-ending battles against patriarchy and never knowing the fate of their struggle. What they felt at the end of their fight was that they had been struggling with the shadows and they had to return to their old roots so long as there was no dependable alternative family set up framed for them.

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