

## Feminist Perspective in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

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**Abstract**

No other woman novelist than Shashi Deshpande has been given accolades so greatly and accorded prominence and worldwide recognition for the projection of feminine sensibility in Indian English Literature. Her exploration of the female psyche by probing deep into the inner working of her mind is highly appreciated by the readers and greatly discussed among the researchers and critics. The novels of Shashi Deshpande are centred on women's psyche to understand their urges and despairs in a better way. Her protagonists advocate for 'A Room of One's Own and proclaim their rights on their bodies. She has portrayed the characters unsatisfied with the uncongenial social conditions that confront their aspirations, needs, urges and hopes. So they conduct themselves in different ways displaying different attitudes and temperaments. These characters undergo a remarkable dynamism in their personalities, and display satisfactory development in their attitude and outlook regarding life. The authors in this research analysis have attempted to examine in depth the various feminist issues projected in her novels through the characters of the main protagonists: *Indu of Roots and Shadows*, *Jaya of That Long Silence* and *Saru of The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a women's liberation movement and a fast-growing ideology committed to defining, establishing and defending their equality in political, economic and social spheres by revamping the institutionalized structure of the male- chauvinistic society to extend recognition of their rights, claims and achievements. Hole and Levine think that feminism, by definition, challenges the status of the woman. It questions the political, social and cultural institutions, ways of thinking and the very articulation of those thoughts. (Hole & Levine, 1975) The basic goal of the feminist perspective, as Maggie Humm states, is "to understand women's operation in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change it." (Humm, 1990, p. 10)

Mary Wollstonecraft's "The Vindication of the Rights of Women", John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Woman", and Oliver Schreiner's "Woman and Labour" are famous works that deal with feminist issues, but Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" is considered to be the Bible of feminism. Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" is also an important landmark in the evolution of the feminist movement. According to Beauvoir, the patriarchal culture considers women as the 'other' and is mainly responsible for the marginalization of women. In the English version of "The Second Sex" Beauvoir states, "She is not regarded as an autonomous being...She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not him concerning her. He is the subject, the 'Absolute', and she is the 'Other'. (Beauvoir, 1978, p. 295)

As movement feminism commenced in the western world and helped females secure equality in several fields by bringing about noticeable and widespread changes in the society there. Although it started in the West but influenced and spread to other parts of the world with the emergence of globalization during the last century. The third world countries like India and several African countries were also got influenced by it with the decline of colonial forces. Now it has become so effective and active that in every part of the world, there are many governmental and non-governmental organizations to take issues related to females. Therefore, nowadays, it is no longer a women's fight for their rights or against gender discrimination or bias. Rather it "stands for seeing the world through a woman's eyes and from a woman's perspective". (Hans, 2013)

If we talk about feminism in the Indian context, its roots can be traced to the early Vedic period. In India, it is a byproduct of feminist thoughts in general and western liberalism in particular. It got momentum and sustenance from the humanitarianism of Mahatma Gandhi; the role played by women in the freedom struggle, independence, women's rights guaranteed by the constitution, emphases on women's education and employment, new awareness and feminist consciousness created by print, electronic and social media. It resulted in feminist literary works that questioned the enslavement and oppression of women in patriarchal society along with pointing out the prejudiced and stereotypical roles of women in mainstream literature. Women who had been voiceless or non-existing entities hitherto got encouraged to subvert the patriarchal representation of gender, giving rise to a women-centric line of attack in women's writings.

The chief problem faced by a married woman in Indian society is her adjustment to her in-law's family. Traditions and conventions teach a woman to be ideal like Sita and Savitri. As

a result, she feels tempted to behave accordingly, which prohibits her from rising above the traditional boundaries. It creates adverse circumstances and increases vulnerability that does not allow her to express her feelings and emotions, let alone to stand firm against injustice. Therefore, she must keep her mouth shut and bear the abusive and suppressive circumstances silently. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak writes, "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization." (Spivak, 1988)

During post-independence period, India witnessed numerous social and cultural changes, and women found themselves at a crossroads. They were conscious of these changes regarding time; socio-cultural modes, and values that had given them an opportunity and responsibility to define themselves, their place in society, and their relationship with their surroundings and this consciousness led to the fragmentation of the very psyche of these women who were caught between the two worlds. Their conflicts, morality, psyche and their predicaments have given rise to a formidable line of female novelists who have come to the forefront to enrich Indian English Writing by their creative release of feminine sensibility to motivate Indian women to regain their long-lost liberty, equality, comradeship and self-identity. As a result, the new woman emerged who has a changed notion of life and who can voice a note of resentment whenever she feels stifled under the oppressive bondage and restrictions. It is true that "women's education, her rights of citizenship and other legal rights and above all her gainful employment and economic independence has tremendously influenced her outlook and conjugal relationship and attitude towards marriage." (Kapoor, 1976, p. 194)

Therefore, women have been the crux and central figure of these women writers' literary works. The eminent writers who enlightened the literary horizon of feminist literature in India are Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamla Dar, Eunice d'Souza, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Imtiaz Dharker, Geetha Hariharan, Manju Kapur etc.

Before studying feminist Perspective in the novels of Shashi Deshpande it is essential to delineate some of the features of feminism because it is not everything that is concerned with woman or feminine. Anyone who supports the cause of female and fights against injustice and discrimination done to them cannot be called a feminist. Though the exponents of feminism hold varying views on various aspects yet the essential ingredients propounded by this definite

philosophy include: quest for self; abolition of institutions that hinder female progress such as family, community and marriage; independent economic entity, and fight against gender discrimination.

It will be a fascinating exercise to study Shashi Deshpande's novels in this context. Indian middle-class women of the post-independence era are the prime concern of the writer in her fiction, which she realizes through her subtle characterization. She begins with characters and proceeds to weave the stories. She says: "The point is, I always begin with characters... even the themes emerge from characters who belong to the class I know best" (Deshpande, *A Woman's World All the Way*, 1987, p. 12)

The writer in her novels has presented middle-class women of post-independent India whose compromise of high ideals, expectations and aspirations of egalitarian future cherished while struggling against foreign rule and inhuman exploitation had lost its sheen. It was a time of widespread deprivation, and the people were caught in a self-centred competition to secure a respectable existence. Old family bonds existed, and new values had yet to take their roots. At that stage, institutions like family and marriage could not be dispensed with as was done in the industrialized West. Yet the atmosphere of high demands for rapid industrial growth in the country was attracting the people towards new values and the emerging perspectives found the earlier mores incompatible with adjusting with. The major novels of Shashi Deshpande in general and the novels under study project this double-bound situation of Indian middle women. She has not covered the deprived and dispossessed section of women under her canvass.

Shashi Deshpande, like her peers in India as well as in the West, had pronounced the concept of a free woman in her novel *That Long Silence*. However, her protagonist, Jaya, when she declares, "I could have told her about my excitement when I had started on the pill and taken in its possibilities, I'm a free woman now, I had thought, I've assumed control over my own body, over its clumsy, cumbersome processes. I will conceive only when I want to ..." (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 63). The fulfilment of self that Jaya experienced on this assertion is classic to the doctrine of feminism. Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, Jaya of *That Long Silence* and Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* are presented in a state of confusion but slowly, they go through a process of introspection and self-realization on gaining experience and knowledge and finally emerge as beings that are more confident, sober and hopeful and in control of themselves. For example, Jaya in *That Long Silence* concludes: "There is always hope." (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 204)

Feminism, as a definite philosophy, fiercely attacks the two institutions of family and marriage, describing them as obstacles in the path of women's progress and self-realization. Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, describes her feelings and understanding of family as a 'cradle of bondage' and marriage as "a pair of bullocks yoked together" (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 07). The main protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels seem to understand that marriage obstructs their individual growth. They think of marriage as the dark rooms where only terror awaits them. Saru, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, feels as if "she has exchanged one pair of pinching torturing shoes for another." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 74)

Like their parental home, marriage seems to be "the chalked lines drawn by others" Indu, the protagonist of *Roots and Shadow*, at the idea of demolition of Akka's house, comments, "yes, the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past. I felt clean as if I had cut away all the unnecessary uneven edges of me." (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 204). Regarding marriage, she thinks, "Behind the façade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargain to meet, mate and reproduce." (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 03) The battle cry of these protagonists towards autonomy is 'My life is my own. They first sought a room of their own through the marriage of their choice but soon got disappointed with their new homes. Saru, against her parents' wishes, married Manu but got disappointed and indulged in extramarital affairs with Boozie which is an expression of her freedom and autonomy. *That Long Silence* is also a scathing attack on family and marriage as social institutions. The feminist perception that these institutions hamper the natural growth and free expression of the individual is projected. Jaya, who had an extra-marital relationship with Kamat, could not stay and pay homage to her best friend on his death only because of the fear of ruining her marriage, so to hell with 'marriage'. The most striking revelation about Indu is that she liberates herself from the binding embraces of her husband and gains an independent posture. She feels no qualms about her sexual encounter with her cousin, Naren. She feels that what happens between her and Naren has no concern for her husband. "That had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together." (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 205)

These heroines of Shashi Deshpande are seen to be fired with the sexual liberation thrust of feminism as a key to self-fulfilment and self-liberation. Indu, who "loves her husband too passionately" (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 83) describes her rendezvous with Naren in a solitary night, "An ecstasy filled my body, and I could not be still anymore. There was a joyous sense of release of passion I could experience and show and participate in. I clung

to him convulsively....” I said, “Thank you, Naren.” (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, pp. 151-152) The next morning there was no awkwardness between them, and she “felt light-hearted and liberated.” (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 154) She knew well that Naren was irresponsible, unreliable, fickle and amoral even then, the next night, Indu again clung to him as if he was a pillar. She quite easily sheds guilt and shame over her adultery. Like Indu, Suru and Jaya also take liberty with their sex without any qualm, as though it has nothing to do with their married life. Like other feminists, Shashi Deshpande does not brace the question in her novels whether sex and marriage can be separated. Shashi Deshpande, like other exponents of feminism in India and in the West, feels like giving a go by to the institutions of marriage and family and, at the same time, favours the changes in the sexual perceptions for better fulfilment.

Jaya marries Mohan, a husband of her choice, but feels uncomfortable about her relationship with him. She had a passionate union with him yet felt alone. She describes her dissatisfaction with the “men-women relationship as nothing but a deep chasm between the two.” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 98) In her opinion, “They are separated forever, never more than at the moment of total physical togetherness.” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 07) By this comment of Jaya, we can infer the truth of her life that despite her assertion in choosing her husband, her marriage remains incompatible, unfulfilled, and an obstacle to the realization of herself. Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, asserts for self in defiance of her mother by seeking a profession as a doctor of medicine and then by getting married to Manu, the man she is in love with, yet could not find peace in her life. Saru, who had been so defiant in her childhood and adulthood feels hopeless and panic-seized with the approach of night. She becomes terrorized by the ‘dark’ at night because her husband would invade her body and torture it monstrously. She is caught in the grip of “familiar irritation, the familiar exasperation” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 17) because of an unbridgeable chasm between herself and her husband, Manu, even after spending fifteen long years of married life. She is a successful doctor and self-reliant lady, yet her married life turns out to be a fiasco. Manu becomes a sadist after Saru gives an interview to a lady reporter for a women’s magazine. His male ego and chauvinism get wounded when the reporter asks him how he feels when his wife earns bread and butter for the house. Saru’s dream of a happy married life with children, twittering and a loving husband to support in the struggle of life which she cherished as a result of her assertion and walking over her parental bondage, gets shattered, and she finds new circles of bondage in married life. Therefore, she again decides to assert herself by leaving her clinic to escape the oppressive relationship with her husband. Now she has a desire to “sleep the night

peacefully through. To wake up without pain. To go through tomorrow without apprehension.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 27) But on her return, she gets “such a congenial atmosphere only at her parental home with its peaceful surroundings.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 83) Her parental home is juxtaposed with her spousal house, where in her own words, “terror awaited for me in our room. I could not escape it.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 70) At this particular point, Saru finds herself to be a “two-in-one woman” and “a terrified, trapped animal.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 134) So she again ‘asserts in escape’ to her parental home, leaving her children and husband to their care.

Shashi Deshpande artistically describes the initial passive assertion of her heroines by using silence as a metaphor till these heroines find opportunities for active assertion. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru says, “Silence had been a habit for us.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 199) Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, about her cold relationship with Jayant, states in the following words. “I am passive and unresponsive; I am still and dead.” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 192) In *That Long Silence*, the heroine, Jaya, cherished a dream of a happy home with her husband and children, which turned out to be a chimaera at last. This unbreakable silence here, too, becomes a metaphor for a lack of communication, understanding and compassion. This state of affairs adversely affects her literary pursuits making them dry and lifeless, in the words of Sarabjit Sandhu. “This unhappiness is reflected not only in her (Jaya’s) conjugal life but also in her social life. Her books, her stories lack anger and emotion.” As a result, she loses her individuality and fails in her literary pursuits. This failure and frustration in her creative activities result from their strained relationship with her husband, which creates a void in her married life. This communication gap drifts the couple apart. In such a situation, Jaya inhibited finds her neighbour Kamat as a good companion. “After Kamat’s death, Jaya continues to live with Mohan but in a mood of emptiness.” This mood of utter emptiness and loneliness overpowers her, and then she realizes that she overpowers her, and then she realizes that she has been leading a cocooned life. Having realized her mistake, she finally resolves that she should “erase the silence” between herself and her husband. So she determines to assert actively. This silence is presented as a revolt in silence or a passive assertion of self that takes time to be active. Shashi Deshpande herself describes the meaning of silence by putting it in the following terms. “You learn a lot of tricks to get by in a (marriage) relationship. Silence is one of them.” After this realization Jaya cannot remain silent and a passive partner to Mohan. So she resolves to break that long silence that prevails in her life as an assertion for self.

Jaya, the protagonist of this novel takes lesson from her mother and two grandmothers and therefore resolves to break the silence. She proclaims, “I am not afraid any more the panic has gone.” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989) Thus she suggests that if women want a positive change in their situation, they should assert.

It can be stated that feminism of today lacks proper understanding and analysis of decisive diverse forces which shaped history at various stages of human development. Undoubtedly patriarchy, as a system, has been violent to woman but it is untrue to state that the man has done violence to the woman. It is wrong to equate the two though; it is generally done, sometimes, with malice to disastrous consequences and effects. Actually a person, male or female, shouldn't be blamed for the injustice done to the woman rather, it is patriarchy, as a system, evolved by money power forces to take over the less powerful, less fortunate and less assertive ones. It is baseless to conclude that some men at a supreme level of hierarchy purposely and happily became the instrument of such an exploitative and unjust history.

Conversely, history also gives examples of some women who rose to the supreme level in the hierarchy of power and riches, but there is no evidence that they were less evil to women. So it can be stated that the belief of feminists that man is responsible for the evils in the life of woman lacks serious understanding of the diverse responsible forces and such a belief based on partial understanding of the truth, in its wake, is sure to bring disaster if not doom. Therefore, a clear understanding of the system and network responsible for exploitation and oppression of women and a correct attitude and a viable solution to negotiate the path of liberation which is always full of seemingly unsurmountable obstacles is the need of the time. But many fiction writers in English today lack seriously this proper understanding of the problem and its possible solution. Shashi Deshpande is also one of them. Her novels are good examples of female assertion but for a cause not very clear even to her protagonists.

Shashi Deshpande herself declares in an interview that “all her characters are concerned with their ‘self’ and they learn to be honest to themselves.” (Tambe, 1996) Indu, the protagonist of *Roots and Shadows*, learns to concern with her ‘self’ and rejects all shadows and finally proclaims, “That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing.” (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 205) This proclamation is in a way that she asserts for her ‘self’ and expresses her will. She determines to overthrow the shadows of her husband, Jayant whom she has married as per her own choice in defiance to her parents. Indu decides to design a life of her own rejecting the authority of Akka in the family. So she leaves home and hopes that by not accepting the authority of Akka as mother figure in the family she will liberate



### *Feminist Perspective in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels*

herself and will live as she pleases without any bondage of family and society which Akka as well as the house symbolizes. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* hates her mother so much that she declares, "If you are a woman. I don't want to be one." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 55) She asserted her autonomy by marrying Manohar, her lover and considers it a milestone in quest of self-realization and a step forward to a liberated and happy life. Thus both Indu and Saru reject the familial 'enclosures' and assert for self choice in a world where the feeling of 'my life is my own' gives a heady feeling. Shashi Deshpande has projected mother figure as a metaphor of cruel patriarchy which must be rejected if her heroines have to assert their individuality in search of an ambience where they can exercise their will and feel free and liberated.

In the novels of Shashi Deshpande parental home symbolizes old values and traditions which have nothing to do with her heroines who have assimilated modern education and perspectives. Both Indu and Saru get married with the husband of their choice in defiance of their parental family. Saru hates her mother and is fed up with her role as a daughter. So she aspires that her new role and status as wife would reward her with both self-realization and freedom. She discards her family to assert her self for better opportunities. But, as another exercise of self-assertion, she has to leave her spousal home and go to her parental home to search her roots. This dilemma exhibits the immaturity and lack of understanding of both Indu and Saru about the concept of freedom and liberation in today's world of frustrations, vested interests and inflated egos. The indecisiveness and conflict within regarding her future course is evident when Saru asks her father not to open the door of their home when her husband Manu arrives there but immediately after this she requests her father to tell Manu 'to wait.' "I will be back as soon as I can". (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 202)

Now she is quite confident to assert her rights and face him with her own identity. She has undergone a metamorphosis after passing through this painful period of re-examination and transition. Now she is no longer in doubt regarding her potential as a human being and as a professional. She proclaims: "My life is my own." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 201) The protagonists of the three novels of Deshpande under study achieve a state of realization having experienced a real struggle in life. They have the realization that if they don't challenge and stand against the forces of injustice and oppression no formal institution or legal safety or economic solidarity is going to safeguard them. This certain attitude and assertion for self is must to solve the problems of woman's life. In the end comes the realization to them that freedom lies in having the courage to do and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it.

An irrefutable fact of our life is that oppression and injustice is inherent in social, political and economic system. Another incontrovertible fact is that males, as compared to females, are, for historical reasons, in the lead role. There are deprived sections in oodles and women are one of them which are at the receiving end.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande are concerned with woman's problems and provide interesting and rich content with a certain message for the reader in which assertion for self is the main theme. But one can't be labeled as exponent of feminism only because he or she is concerned to the problems of the feminine world. It had already been done by many people and institutions in history even before the beginning of feminism as a definite ideology with a philosophical base in the western society more so after world war second. It is natural for an intellectual and litterateur like Shashi Deshpande to react against the oppression and injustice inherent in our social, political and economic system where incompatible marriage, child marriage, divorce, rapes are common and still require satisfactory solutions. In her own words, "until women get over handicaps imposed on them by the society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will not have realized its full potential." (Tambe, 1996, p. 128)

Indu thought Akka to be an interfering, inconsiderate, old woman. But, after the latter's death and having listened to her stories, Indu realized that she had been pillar of power and strength and had acted by the way she had thought right according to her own belief. She had posed her faith in Indu's indomitable power and strength which made her feel obliged to rise herself up to Akka's expectations. She felt herself duty bound to fulfill the responsibility and obligation to the family. Her old uncle, long back, had told her that rules add grace and dignity to one's life. But now only after having a long experience of life she could realize and appreciate the meaning of his words. One enjoys the dignity of being disciplined if one freely does what he or she wants but within rules. Indu, in the end, achieved freedom without letting anyone interfere neither Akka, nor Atya, nor even her husband, Jayant. With the latent strength of wealth inherited from Akka she learns a new wisdom. The ethos of the novel is that two conflicting selves or opposing ideals can be harmonized neither by victory nor by defect but by understanding.

Through the predicaments of Indu, the novelist has represented the larger predicaments of Indian middle class woman. It is the time when new socio-economic forces after shaking the social and cultural modes have emerged to dominate and resulted in breakup of joint family system, the helm of Indian cultural life and also affected all kinds of relationships especially the relationship of husband and wife.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the novelist has presented the conflicts and convulsions of Saru, who in comparison to her younger brother is an ignored, neglected and oppressed child. The example of sheer gender discrimination on part of her mother who does not shower parental love to her female child even on special days like her birthday is presented here. This discrimination is more biting for Saru because her brother's birthday is celebrated with much fanfare. Naturally, Saru grows up with a grouse that her mother hates her. She takes her father into confidence and gets medical education against the wishes of her mother and later asserts her self and freedom of choice by marrying inter-cast with Manu whom she loves. In her own words: "I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted. (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 55)

In her married life Saru becomes a known, reputed, and successful doctor. But this professional success brings her failure in her married life as she gets more respect and attention than her husband. Neither she nor her husband is able to tackle this emerging situation. Till now, "he had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 37) Her husband gets disgusted in this situation who expresses it as "I am sick of this place." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 37) Neither Saru nor her husband does anything on their part to improve their conjugal harmony. Then after an interview that Saru gives for a woman's magazine and the lady interviewer also asks Manu how he feels when his wife earns not only bread and butter but is much more successful than him, Manu starts to assert his masculinity by assaulting Saru sexually at night while during the day time he remains normal, cheerful and loving. Now Saru gradually develops hatred towards man- woman relationship and the feeling of attachment and love that she feels in their relationship disappears. There remains a psychological conflict between them. Saru laments "When I came home I found him sitting with a brooding expression on his face that my heart gives painful, quivering little jumps." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 71) Saru gets frightened to the point that "each time it happened and I don't speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us." (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 88) She gets exhausted of these indoor and outdoor duties and when she gets the news that her mother has died she decides to go her parental home where she feels like an "unwelcome guest." But there she quickly gets herself in tune with this changed environment and gets time and opportunity to search inward. Having embarked on her journey inward she is full of remorse that her husband is a failure because she has destroyed

his manhood. She feels that she has done injustice to “her mother, husband, children and everybody else.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 198)

Saru has been presented by the writer as a mixture of rejection and acceptance; rigidity and flexibility; reality and fantasy; compromise and revolt. Saru, an inextricable blend of these characteristic, is the representative of middle class woman in the modern industrial social structure. On one hand, she has been brought up in a middle class family with cultural mores and values and on the other hand, she has received an education that inculcates rebellious attitude in her towards these traditional family mores making her a different person who can't accept anything contrary to the modern values she has got through her adopted and borrowed education. She feels that her consciousness has no match with that of her mother's and expresses it angrily to her mother, “I am not talking to you... You don't want me to have anything. You don't want me to live.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 128) The generation gap between the daughter and the mother becomes an agonizing trial where the daughter feels herself sandwiched between her aspirations and her family trappings.

The novelist deftly manipulates the narrative to reveal why Saru faces the identity crisis. Saru feels that all the opportunities that she gets for personal and professional advancement and happiness are deterred by the oppressive, over dominance of her mother who exhibits a callus attitude towards Saru, her education and other personal expansions. Moreover, her mother treats her like a step daughter and leaves no opportunity to snub her, sometimes even for trifles. In dearth of motherly love and affection Saru feels herself unwanted, insecure, unloved and even enslaved. So she wants to break up this “dependence syndrome” (Nahal, 1991, p. 17) by pursuing a professional career to acquire her identity that she hopes would be “the key that would unlock the door out of this life.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 126) And that “I had to make myself secure so that no one could ever say to me again...why are you alive?” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 44) Repeating the words her mother, in agony over the death of her brother, has said. But this ‘independence syndrome’ seems to be transient and bursts like a bubble as Saru herself proposes to leave her clinic. After leaving her clinic she visits her parental home and quickly adjusts herself there. Here she comes to know from her father about her mother's illness who suffered alone and died heroically and Saru feels jealous of it. Her anger melts away when she realizes that her mother's inner strength remained strong even in her sufferings and death. At a moment she confesses remorsefully to her father, “My brother died because I turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 198) But the novel ends with a

positive note suggesting that Saru has overcome her identity crisis and would achieve the wholeness and no longer run away from her 'self'. In the end she goes out to attend to a sick child and asks her father to receive Manu, her husband, on arrival and tell him to wait.

A thorough study and careful analysis of Shashi Deshpande's novels under this study reveals that she uses her art very adroitly to convey with sympathy the reality concerning middle class Indian woman as she has perceived it. The main thematic concern of her novels is indeed her contemporary Indian middle class woman's struggle to achieve and preserve her identity as a daughter, wife, and mother and above all as a human being. Her fiction is woman-centered and the feminine consciousness becomes the protagonist of her novels. She is well conversant with feminist theorists like Virginia Woolf and cherishes the basic tenets of feminism and presents them in Indian settings. Though she presents her side of the reality to the best of her ability as an artist yet her treatment of some of the issues is impractical, partial and incoherent. The issue of fidelity in married life is one of these issues. Another such issue is of free sex that needs to be addressed with care. Indu, Saru and Jaya the protagonists of the three novels taken up under this study are similar in their frank admission of pleasure in sex experience where emotions seem to play secondary or no roll at all. Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* forgets her 'loved man' and is unhesitant in having an affair with her professor, a man of easy virtues, only to please him and use him as a ladder for professional advancement. Jaya of *That Long Silence* has great physical appeal in her husband, Mohan yet she has relations with Kamat and this is presented as nothing abnormal. Presenting Indu, the protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* who develops physical relations with her cousin, Naren and finds the act very relaxing without having any qualms or feeling of infidelity is like supporting the case of free sex for entertainment and negating the institution of marriage. The projection of such notions by the writer as the manifestation of women's liberation remains incomplete or one-sided until she suggests a viable substitute to be adopted. So the writer's presentation of such cases through her heroines suggests that she propagates the beliefs of feminism through her novels. An unmistakable message that can be conferred from her novels is that the institutions like family and marriage are 'circles of bondage' that keep a woman suppressed, incomplete, backward and unfulfilled no matter that sometimes this fulfillment or advancement is purely personal and highly selfish to the point of crass individualism. Saru asserts her rights to get medical education and to marry the man of her choice but her assertion, as is the approach of feminism, seems to be one-sided especially when she, being the only child after her brother, Dharu's death, ignores her obligations and concerns to her parents. It is doubtless when she declares,

“For me they (parents) were already the past and meant nothing.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 34)

Another trend of feminism that gets projected in the novels under this study through their heroines Saru, Jaya and Indu is their rebellion against family. In parental family a woman gets the role of a daughter and a sister as well in husband's family she is a wife and a mother. But these heroines aspire to be free from both family and womanhood; the two chief concerns of feminism. The stress of these heroines is not on mere freedom but on freedom from family and the freedom latently rooted in sexual freedom. Their predicament patently seems domestic or professional but latently it is sexual which has been expressed by the writer quite explicitly in these novels. But sometimes this expression amounts to licentiousness on the border of promiscuity which can only be justified in terms of “My body is my own” (Woolf, 1929, p. 201) a concept expounded by feminism as freedom of choice. The conflict in Manu and Saru's relationship that results in sexual paralysis in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is well explained in Saru's own words, “He had been the young and I his bride. Now I am the lady doctor and he was my husband.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 37) Indu of *Roots and Shadows* assesses herself as anachronism on the sexual ground. “A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately and is ashamed of it.” (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, 1983, p. 92) Her sexual alienation leading to sexual paralysis deepens as she pretends to be unresponsive and passive. Jaya's case in *That Long Silence* is slightly different. Unlike Saru's and Indu's her marriage is an arranged one and she enjoys sex before love. But the belief of these characters regarding love, sex and marriage is quite different. Shashi Deshpande terms her characters as “thinking characters” whose perspectives and definitions of love, marriage and sex are influenced with their western education in general and the impact of western feminists on their creator in particular. These characters hardly give any importance to familial relations and define the categories of love, marriage and sex from their own point of views. Thus in the three novels under this study the strand of thoughts of the characters is identical and their outlook towards love, sex and marriage from sexual point of view connects them with feminist movement.

The protagonists of these three novels by Shashi Deshpande, without keeping in view the Indian ethos on the institution of marriage, view it with the sectarian feminist outlook as ‘circles of bondage’. They consider marriage as “nothing but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargain to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generation might continue.” (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 1980, p. 03) Indu of *Roots and Shadows* too envisages marriage as a “cage with two animals glaring hatred at each other”. (Deshpande,

### **Feminist Perspective in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels**

Roots and Shadows, 1983, p. 37) In *That Long Silence* the institution of marriage is equated with a children's game of playing "tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" (Deshpande, *That Long Silence*, 1989, p. 91) It appears as if sex alone sustains the man-woman relationship in these novels by Shashi Deshpande and her disparaging and questioning of the basic institutions of love, marriage and family that form the foundation of society are ample evidence to vindicate her affiliation to feminism though she might dislike being openly associated with it. But her heroines want to be free not only intellectually but sexually too. Sexually they are so crazy that they can go for extra-marital sex without any sense of guilty consciousness.

## **2. Conclusion**

The concept of feminism does not have a universal prescription. Rather it has different regional and continental variants with various national colours and flavours. Having analyzed her novels in detail based on principal doctrines, Shashi Deshpande's commitment to the Indian shade of feminism or the basic credo cannot disagree. She is a definite exponent of the Indian version of feminism though she did not become a part of the feminist liberation movement, which is not necessary for her as a writer. But she has certain convictions about feminism and believes that "until women get over handicaps imposed on by the society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will not have realized its full potential." (Tambe, 1996, p. 26) If we talk of feminism in the Indian context, Shashi Deshpande is certainly an exponent of it, but it is not that strident feminism of the western sort that considers males the principal cause of all the ills of women. Suman Bala has also remarked that "Shashi Deshpande is an Indian feminist writer who does not go to the extremes because she knows that radical feminist stand will not be in tune with the times and it is only with time that a total change is possible." (Bala, 2001) As an ardent exponent of feminism, she propagates all those principles of feminism which have become trademarks of this movement in the West. But being a sensitive writer, she is associated more with the characters' emotional world and their human relations. It is evident from her conversation with Geeta Vishvanath, "For me, all that matters is human relations." (Vishwanath, 2003, p. 229) Thus we can state that Deshpande has created a unique place for herself as an excellent craft person in Indian English fiction with her subtle characterization, authenticity in description and ability to fathom feminine aspirations hidden in the psyche of contemporary Indian middle-class women.

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