
Free Will and Women in Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande depicts her female characters as modern women in an era of industrialization who are determined to achieve personal growth and a true sense of self without compromising the cultural and traditional values of their society. Shobha De adeptly displays her female protagonists as autonomous beings with the ability to exercise their own agency. She has expressed the hopes and aspirations of affluent homemakers who refuse to be limited by their current status. This research aims to demonstrate the variability of women's attitudes and behaviors based on their societal context. This has been achieved by emphasizing the literary contributions of Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Feminism, Free will, Choices

The relationship between a man and a woman has been subject to significant transformations throughout history. Throughout history, this relationship has undergone several transformations in various ways. In particular, the gender roles that are associated with men and women have contributed to the fact that this is one of the most complicated interactions that occur between humans. What was once a relationship that was founded on equality has gradually transformed into a type of relationship that is characterized by patriarchy, in which men hold more influential positions. Not only do these shifts have an impact on the dynamic that exists between the sexes, but they also have an impact on the way that society regards its female members. A certain kind of role reversal characterizes the modern period. There is a growing sentiment among women that they want to be acknowledged as influential individuals. One gets the impression that she takes her autonomy and decisions exceptionally seriously. In their books, Indian English novelists Shashi Deshpande

and Shobha De express the revolt and protest in the connection between a man and a woman. They are primarily concerned with women currently residing in contemporary Indian society. Both authors give a genuine depiction of the urban lifestyle, family, and culture that impact the patterns of man-woman relationships currently in place.

In recent years, Indian English Literature has attracted considerable attention, not only in India but also in other nations. A substantial proportion of modern Indian writing in the English genre consists of fictional works authored by women. Resolute and autonomous women are compelled to confront the distress caused by failed relationships, and female authors in the English language provide an illuminating and comprehensive grasp of the challenges faced by contemporary women in a traditional society where double standards are widely accepted. Women who understand their emotional needs are actively striving for personal satisfaction. They are rejecting traditional rituals and societal norms and desiring a more progressive and non-traditional lifestyle.

Both Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande are modern Indian women writers who have achieved the most significant success in English. In this article, an attempt has been made to illustrate how the mentality and actions of women vary depending on the society to which they belong. This has been achieved by concentrating on the literary works of Shashi Deshpande and Shoba de. Shashi Deshpande's fiction stands out due to her portrayal of financially independent, middle-class women who are well-educated, which is a notable aspect of her work.

The novels written by Shobha de can be seen as a reflection of the lifestyles of the upper middle class and the elite in the metropolitan environment. The lives of boring homemakers, their loveless, wealthy husbands, and their families are the subjects of her investigation. Through boldness, self-assurance, and professionalism in an urban setting, she consistently strives to provide her female characters with unique identities within the contemporary culture. The urban culture she depicts is characterised by a lack of merging into a single entity through marriage, rather emphasising the function of being romantic partners. All human values have been eradicated due to the materialistic success of the metropolitan society.

As a result of Shashi's careful consideration, the problem of women who, despite achieving all kinds of rights, are now battling to accommodate rather than to break away from the old world has been thoroughly addressed. Her works mainly focus on the challenges female characters face in adjusting to new circumstances and resolving internal issues, as well as their ultimate efforts to conform to the norms of a traditional society. She does not portray a woman who represents either the traditional, traditional image or the contemporary, westernized image. She represents

the "every woman" who struggles to transcend tradition but is compelled to conform to it involuntarily. The new female characters in her works are dedicated to challenging convention and established norms since they do not view marriage as a contractual arrangement between men and women.

The narrative of her works commences with an unconventional union, subsequently addressing the difficulties of adapting to unfamiliar situations and resolving internal conflicts faced by the female protagonists. This culminates in their endeavours to conform to the societal expectations of traditional roles. The realization that one must have the courage to act on one's convictions and the drive and tenacity to carry out one's beliefs occurs after the process. That is sufficient to create harmony in one's life.

Education and the state of the economy have brought about a shift in mentality and a sense of obligation to work in the Indian society considered to be middle-class. Both the woman's role in the household and the woman's role in the workforce are imposed upon her, and she cannot combine the two positions successfully. The idea of living a life of a submissive and dark creature as a married woman is not something she is interested in. As stated in the article titled "The Changing status of the working women in India," Promila Kapoor thinks that the husband is primarily to blame for the conflicts that arise.

They like wives to take up jobs but dislike them to change at all as far as their attitude towards their roles and statuses at home are concerned and dislike their traditional responsibilities being neglected which results from their Pre-occupation without – of home vocation. Their attitude towards their wives being employed is found to be ambivalent". (73)

In *The Dark holds no Terrors*, the marriage of Saru to Manu is a clear and definite expression and confirmation of her feminine sensitivity.: "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 35). However, as she establishes herself as a doctor, the circumstances undergo a transformation, "he had been the young man and I, his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband" (37). Saru's married life has grown into a cause of irritation due to her busy work schedule and unwillingness to allocate time for herself and her family. As Saru grows increasingly engrossed in her career, she neglects her spouse. Due to her job commitments, she is frequently away from Manu for long durations, resulting in her arrival home late at night. "He sulked and I was either impatient with him or Ignored him" (92). Manu and Saru's marriage is gradually becoming more unbalanced due to the pressure of double responsibilities. She would like to stay at home, where she could Supervise and attend

to the needs of the children, prepare meals, and clean up after herself. With a shocked expression, Manu responds to Saru's proposition by saying, "You are joking" (80). She suggests that she should quit her job, and his first instinct is to ask, "And how will we live?" (81). Manu thinks this will decrease their standard of living, and he declares, "on my salary? Come on Saru, don't be silly, you know how much I earn" (73).

If Saru succeeds in her chosen field, Manu's male ego suffers due to her superior mentality. The sexual attacks that he commits against Saru at night are an expression of his masculinity at work. On the other hand, the pleasant and joyful husband during the day transforms into a libidinous and lecherous rapist at night. When he wakes up, he acts in a manner that is entirely devoid of any deviations or changes. Upon returning to her parents' residence, her father displays neither compassion nor empathy towards her and treats her as an unwelcome guest. At her father's house, Saru has enough time to objectively analyze the underlying elements contributing to her husband's two personality traits. Consequently, she will have the chance better to understand herself and her interactions with her husband. Despite Saru's deep remorse over the dissolution of their marriage, she holds Manu responsible for destroying the timeless notion that women might find fulfillment via matrimony. Despite her desire for liberation from her fear-inducing and devoid-of-love situation, she nevertheless experiences feelings of guilt around the dissolution of their marital union. Once all is said and completed, she can confront reality, and the darkness no longer evokes terror.

Within the narrative of *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande has depicted the paradoxical situation of a female author, a young housewife. As a writer, she is expected to provide her perspectives and thoughts to the public, yet she keeps silent as she investigates her history, struggles with her present, and attempts to connect with her future. In contrast to her husband Mohan, who firmly adheres to ancient customs, Jaya is fundamentally a conformist when sitting by the fire, awaiting her husband's return, and enjoying warm meals. Nevertheless, Jaya perceives this as just despair. Their lack of mutual understanding stems primarily from their divergent views. However, ultimately, she succumbs to her husband's requests. Mukta, the individual residing next to Jaya, becomes aware of her admission of guilt. Upon recognizing that this is the sole alternative to salvage her marriage, she elects to reach a compromise.

Regarding the couple's physical intimacy, the situation remains one where the male exerts control while the wife experiences discomfort. The lady must observe silence and endure all circumstances, even if her husband inflicts suffering upon her.

Despite her discontent with her marital life, Jaya reflects on her background, upbringing, and the religious teachings she was subjected to during her infancy. As far as Jaya is concerned, women have chosen to allow themselves to be victimised rather than negotiate for partnership. Dissatisfaction among women is not solely attributable to men; it is also a result of other factors. It is essential for women to acknowledge their responsibility for who they are and to recognise the extent to which they have contributed to their victimisation. Instead of placing blame on others, women should take responsibility for themselves. They can only start to make changes in their lives by first engaging in self-reflection, gaining an awareness of themselves, and being vigilant and courageous. They will not be able to rely on others to fight their conflicts; instead, they will have to fight their wars.

In Indian culture, once a girl is married to a man, regardless of whether the marriage was arranged or a love marriage, the husband assumes full power over her. When Mohan was detected engaging in unethical behaviour and was required to be inaccessible for a set amount of time, she went along with him without question.

The continuation of her writings was withheld from her. Her picture becomes similar to that of a bird equipped with wings and aware that it is capable of flying, but for some reason, it does not fly. Similarly, Jaya is conscious of her capabilities and is aware that she can openly reveal them; nonetheless, she refrains from doing so. It has caused her a great deal of anguish to learn that the writer that she possesses has been unable to emerge due to the presence of her spouse.

As a result, the women in Shashi Deshpande's novels believe that marriage is more of a "trap" than a relationship since it causes them to lose their individuality. They see marriage as a system that allows one to become dependent on another. Even though they are disillusioned with marriage and everything it implies, they can maintain their identity by recognising the constraints they have placed on themselves personally and privately. They can ultimately affirm their uniqueness within the confines of the binding relationship. Deshpande maintains that marriage is the foundation of society and that the structure of marriage is not the thing that is stifling; instead, it is the persona of the wife. When the protagonist makes her comeback, she does so with the intention of being seen as an individual rather than merely a character or persona.

The capacity of Shobha De to portray the social status of contemporary metropolitan women and the difficulties they encounter is a critical component in her widespread acclaim and appeal as a writer. She is a contemporary writer who sees women's exclusion and displacement and uses her work to fight back. She passionately opposes male hegemony and works tirelessly to dismantle patriarchy.

Shobha De's female fans are more experienced than their male companions. Even though women in India are marginalised by their spouses in a society that men control, Shobha De's representations of women are distinct. Her women express their disapproval of the conventional portrayal of Indian women by their words and actions. As a result of her experience as a liberated woman, she can be considered the pioneer of the new generation of Indian women.

Regarding the upper-class society of New India, Shobha De's protagonist is a representative of the New Indian woman. Khushwant Singh exemplifies an outdated perspective on the condition of Indian women in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, "This is all that the majority of Indian women know about sex; it is an unpleasant subjection to men's desire; it is required in order to have sons; and it is understandable because it is brief."(Singh 42- 43)

The protagonist of the novel "Sisters", Mikki is currently facing a sense of seclusion after the sudden demise of her parents. Mikki's decision to marry Binny sets her apart from the bulk of Shobha De's other female protagonists, who typically liberate themselves from the limitations of married life or matrimony. When she initially gets married, she experiences a sense of safety and stability. The kind of life that she leads is not something that she enjoys. All of her possessions are given to Binny, and she is even denied the opportunity to become a mother because she is required to maintain her physical fitness for him. Mikki disapproves of his wanting to be an active partner in life and business. The circumstances that Mikki finds herself in throughout the book shed light on the harsh reality of the patriarchal culture.

The women of Shobha De have been freed from the restraints imposed by the economy. They are looking for personal independence, and when they are denied it, they become defiant. This is what they are searching for. As a means of venting their rage, they either violate the pledges taken during marriage or engage in extramarital affairs.

Regarding her identity as a woman and a human being, Mikki is perpetually at odds with herself. As a result of Binny's suspicions regarding her virginity, she is forcibly removed from his residence, which shatters her fantasy of enjoying the fruits of marital life. The traditional image of a woman is something that she can destroy, and she harbours a deep-seated loathing for the culture that patriarchal men dominate. According to what is written by Simone de Beauvoir, "What they demand today is to be recognised as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality" (Beauvoir 123).

There is no evidence of masculine chauvinism in the female characters she creates in her stories. It is also true that they are entitled to the same rights as males. In the beginning, Mikki consents to marry Navin, expecting that he will help her save

the businesses that her father had founded. Whenever she realises that he would not be helpful to her, she makes an unwavering decision to terminate her engagement.

Mikki's sister, Alisha, experiences a lack of inner contentment due to her affair with Navin. Her connection with Dr. Kurien, the physician who treated her mother, was purely passionate and did not give her any sense of fulfilment. At first, Dr. Kurien was quite hesitant, but eventually, he came around and accepted her love. On the other hand, the passing of his youngest kid causes him to experience a shocking revelation, and he moves away from Alisha very immediately afterwards. Mikki decided to forget about Dr. Kurien by doing hypnosis and taking medicines.

Shobha De's works illuminate the misery, instability, and agony that characterize the lives of affluent women despite their seeming wealth. When women realize they are unsatisfied in their marriages, they actively seek alternative relationships that provide them greater fulfillment. Almost all of her female acquaintances engaged in sexual encounters before being married. Shobha De seems to be mocking the mentalities of well-educated and refined males who are unable to understand the true intentions of attractive women. Due to the majority of men's failure to surpass the constraints of physical attractiveness, women are reduced to being simple objects of visual representation.

The storyline of *Second Thoughts* revolves around Maya, a youthful Bengali girl from a middle-class household. The young bride is more enamored with Bombay than the prospect of marrying Ranjan. Over time, she understands how to withstand Bombay's intense heat and passion in her marriage. In this piece, Shobha De has explored the inherent emptiness of the Indian institution of marriage.

When Ranjan and Maya first meet before the wedding, Maya's mother expresses her desire for her daughter to get a job later in life. Ranjan does not like this idea and proclaims, "I am earning well enough to support a wife and family." "I believe that it is the responsibility of a woman to run a good home" (De 11). "In any Indian family, the comforts of the husband always come first," her uncle says before Maya can decide whether she agrees or disagrees with him. Following that is everything else. (11)

Obstacles frequently thwart Maya's desire for romance and excitement. The sharp-edged words that she hears, such as "There are certain rules," abruptly snap and dissipate her wants. No matter how much you dislike them, you must comply with them (83). Ranjan's responsibilities towards Maya include providing financial help, a suitable house, and four nutritious meals every day. From his perspective, he had successfully kept his promise; the decision to grant her approval was now in Maya's hands. It is precisely this disinterested attitude on Ranjan's part that causes Maya a

great deal of pain. Ranjan frequently reminds Maya of the responsibilities of being a married woman. He is hardly conscious that she is present in his house.

There is a genuine loss of interest on Ranjan's part in Maya for reasons connected to their physical relationship. If Ranjan continues to be uncompromising in his sexual relationships, she is very certain that she will not have any children. She is entirely sure about this. Maya timidly hugs Ranjan and embraces him when he returns from Calcutta ten days later. However, Ranjan reacts as if he had been shocked by an electric current and jumps backwards. Following a prolonged period of trembling in bed, he exhibited signs of difficulty in breathing, and his eyes were firmly shut. When Maya, feeling disheartened and isolated, eventually lays her head on the pillow, Ranjan starts to snore. He is entirely oblivious to the pain he has inflicted by his deeds. Due to their contrasting temperaments and lack of compatibility, their relationship is unsuccessful in terms of physical intimacy and other aspects. She wonders if he places her in the same category as his competitors or if he needs more faith in her. Once she dares to ask him, Ranjan responds without taking his eyes from the television screen and asks her to "stop behaving like a cheap woman." He does this without taking his eyes off the TV. By employing the weapon of flattery, Nikhil can successfully carve out a place for himself in Maya's heart by employing his words. To alleviate the feelings of isolation that she was experiencing, Maya created a volatile and passionate friendship with Nikhil, a young neighbour who was attending college. She is well aware that neither Ranjan nor Nikhil would be able to offer her the fulfilment of her fantasies. Her head would have blown without taking these breaks and dreams. However, these dreams served as a safety valve.

Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande both utilised the technique of first-person narration to establish the legitimacy of their respective works. This is accomplished by having the protagonist read her inner thoughts, representing contemporary educated women's mentality. The conventional and the unusual are the two categories of roles that women perform in Indian fiction. When it comes to comparison, there are specific differences between the two. The traditional lady may jeopardise her happiness to ensure the overall health and happiness of the family unit. Characters in Shashi's work are examples of this group, comprised of individuals who fight to adapt rather than break away from the conventional world. As a result of their transgression of the social norms that are generally acceptable, those who are unorthodox are thought to suffer. Death is the only option available to them unless their experiences provide them with the knowledge necessary to understand the wisdom of the old methods. Not only do the characters in Shobha De's work experience humiliation in terms of their social, economic, and cultural lives, but they also discover that they can

overcome adversity, make concessions, and ultimately come to terms with their existing situation.

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