

Shashi Deshpande's Feminist Perspective: A Voice for Indian Women

Khairul Islam¹, Tarali Nayak²

¹Asst. Professor, Barkhetri College, Narayanpur, Mukalmua

²Asst. Professor, Barpeta Law College, Barpeta

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of India's most prominent feminist writers, known for her extraordinary portrayal of women's struggles within the socio-cultural framework of Indian society. Through her novels and short stories, she explores the intricate gender dynamics, tradition, and identity, reflecting the realities of Indian middle-class women. Deshpande's works are not just narratives of oppression but also highlight the emotional and psychological dilemmas faced by women and gives a vivid pen picture of patriarchy, empowerment and self-discovery. This article gives an idea about feminism and explores Deshpande's feminist perspective through her select works 'That Long Silence', 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', and 'A Matter of Time'. It examines how Deshpande redefines feminism in an Indian context, advocating for women's agency, autonomy, and voice while acknowledging the complexity of their lived realities.

Keywords: Prominent, feminist-writers, socio-cultural, gender dynamics, patriarchy, empowerment, autonomy

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement aimed at achieving equality between genders. It seeks to address and dismantle systemic inequalities, discrimination, and injustices faced by women and marginalized genders due to patriarchal structures. Feminism advocates for equal rights, opportunities, and representation in all aspects of life, including education, employment, politics, and personal freedom. Thus it is said that equality, empowerment, intersectionality, social justice, awareness of patriarchy are the key principles of feminism. Whatever may be, feminism has evolved through various waves, each addressing different issues. First wave of feminism started in England in 1903 which focused on legal rights like suffrage that is voting rights for women. It was known as Suffragette Movement initiated under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst. Second wave expanded to workplace rights, reproductive rights, and challenging gender roles. Third wave emphasized diversity, individualism, and intersectionality. Fourth wave emphasizes on online activism, combating sexual harassment, and intersectional justice. It may be mentioned here that feminism is not about elevating one gender over another but about creating a society where all genders have equal opportunities and respect. Feminism in the Indian context has evolved uniquely, shaped by India's cultural, social, and historical diversity. It addresses issues of gender inequality, patriarchy, caste, religion, and economic disparity, reflecting the intersectional challenges Indian women face. If we consider feminism chronologically then we find that in Ancient India women were revered in religious texts and had rights to education, property, and participation in social life. However, patriarchal norms gradually led to their subjugation.

In Medieval India Practices like child marriage, Sati, and Purdah became widespread, severely restricting women's freedoms. In Colonial Period Social Reform Movements began addressing gender issues. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule campaigned against Sati, child marriage, and the lack of women's education.

Feminism in Indian literature often reflects the intersection of gender with tradition, culture, and social norms. Shashi Deshpande, through her works, presents an Indian feminist ethos that critiques patriarchal structures while addressing the internal conflicts women face regarding intersectionality, violence against women, economic empowerment, and representation of women. Unlike radical Western feminism, Deshpande's approach is rooted in the cultural and familial realities of Indian society, making her narratives deeply relatable and authentic.

Objective of the study is to establish Shashi Deshpande as a significant voice in feminist literature by analyzing her contribution to understanding and addressing women's issues in the Indian context. Moreover it aims to analyze women's Identity and empowerment, examine gender roles and relationship, understand intersectionality in feminism, and to highlight the role of silence and speech.

This study employs a 'Qualitative' and 'Analytical' research methodologies involving close textual analysis of selected novels of Shashi Deshpande. The novels selected for study includes *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *A Matter of Time*. These works have been chosen for their in-depth portrayal of female characters that experience various hurdles in their lives. Various Articles, Seminar Papers, Magazines, Research Papers, writings on women writers and Books on Indian writing in English, especially on Shashi Deshpande have been studied for the proposed study.

Feminism in Deshpande's 'That Long Silence' revolves around Jaya, the protagonist, a middle-class, educated woman, and her journey of self-discovery. Through her narrative, Deshpande highlights the feminist concerns of identity, voice, and agency in a male-dominated society. Jaya's life reflects the societal expectations placed on women to prioritize their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. She suppresses her ambitions and desires to conform to the traditional ideals of womanhood. The novel critiques how patriarchal norms silence women's voices and make them reluctantly compel to suppress their individuality. The "long silence" in Jaya's life symbolizes the enforced muteness of women in patriarchal households. Her struggle to break this silence reflects her journey toward self-awareness and emancipation. Jaya's marriage to Mohan is portrayed as unequal, where her opinions and aspirations are often ignored. The novel explores the emotional and psychological toll of adjusting to societal expectations in a marital relationship. Deshpande's feminist perspective gives a voice to women's inner worlds. Her characters articulate their desires, frustrations, and fears, shedding light on the emotional toll of living in a patriarchal society.

Shashi Deshpande's novel "The Dark Holds No Terrors" is a profound exploration of feminism in the Indian context, focusing on the struggles of a woman caught between traditional expectations and her quest for individuality and agency. The novel centers around Sarita (Saru), the protagonist, and her journey toward self-awareness, autonomy, and reconciliation with her identity as a woman, wife, daughter, and professional. The novel critiques the patriarchal setup that privileges men and subjugates women. Saru's parents openly favor her brother, Dhruva, reflecting societal norms that devalue daughters. Saru's mother constantly reminds her of her inferior position as a girl, reinforcing traditional gender role. Saru's marriage to Manohar (Manu) becomes a battlefield where power dynamics shift as she becomes more professionally successful. Manohar's physical abuse and his resentment toward Saru's success highlight the fragile masculinity that thrives on patriarchal norms. The novel exposes

how women are expected to suppress their achievements to preserve marital harmony. Saru's success as a doctor contrasts sharply with her struggles in her personal life. The novel portrays the double burden women face excelling in their careers while fulfilling societal expectations as wives and mothers. Saru's journey is one of self-discovery, where she confronts her fears, guilt, and unresolved trauma. Her return to her childhood home symbolizes a confrontation with her past, leading to eventual self-acceptance. On the other hand, the novel addresses marital rape, a taboo subject matter in Indian society. Manohar's violent sexual behavior reflects the patriarchal entitlement over women's bodies. Saru's silence and internalization of this abuse point to the societal conditioning that discourages women from speaking out. Saru's strained relationship with her mother reflects generational conflicts in feminist discourses. Her mother's rigid adherence to traditional norms contrasts with Saru's desire for independence, revealing the complexities of feminism within familial relationships. Saru represents the modern Indian woman torn between traditional values and her aspirations for autonomy. The novel highlights the challenges faced by women who navigate these conflicting identities.

Shashi Deshpande's novel "A Matter of Time" explores feminism through the lens of familial relationships, female identity, and the intersection of tradition and modernity. The novel provides a deeply introspective narrative of three generations of women within a traditional Indian family, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and search for autonomy. The novel critiques the patriarchal structure of Indian society, which assigns predefined roles to women and limits their choices. Gopal's abandonment of his wife Sumi and their daughters reflects the power imbalance in traditional marriages, where men hold the privilege of escape, while women bear the burden of familial responsibility. Kalyani, the grandmother represents the silent endurance of the older generation. She embodies the traditional role of a submissive wife, even as her husband isolates himself emotionally and spiritually. Sumi, the mother navigates her abandonment with dignity and resilience. Unlike her mother, she refuses to be defined solely by her marriage. Aru, the daughter represents the younger generation. She confronts societal norms and actively seeks to understand her identity and choices. Thus each woman in the story navigates this silence in her own way, either by enduring it or attempting to make them free from silence.

To conclude we can say that Shashi Deshpande's works are a testament to her role as a voice for Indian women. By portraying their struggles and resilience with empathy and authenticity, she challenges societal norms and advocates for change. Her feminist perspective, deeply rooted in Indian realities, has made her a vital figure in contemporary literature, offering inspiration and insight into the lives of Indian women. Deshpande's legacy lies in her ability to articulate the unspoken, giving a voice to those who have long been silenced.

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