

CHAPTER – II

Shashi Deshpande: Life And Career

Indian – English short story has been enriched by various talented women writers. The contribution of Shashi Deshpande is outstanding to short story. She is one of the few writers who write equally in both forms, the novel and the short story. She has received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1991 for her novel *That Long Silence* (1988). Her another novel *Roots And Shadows* (1983) was awarded with ‘Thirumathi Rangmmal Award’ for the best novel written and published in India for the year 1982 – 83.

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938, in Dharwad, Karnataka, in South India. Sriranga, her father, was a great dramatist, writer and Sanskrit scholar. There is a major influence of her father on her writing. Her father was a Sanskrit scholar taught Sanskrit in college, he wrote in Kannada, read English and had married a Marathi wife. Her home was a harmonious mixture of languages. According to Shashi Deshpande there are three things in her early life that have shaped her as a writer; her father was a writer, she was educated exclusively in English and was born a female.¹ She was educated in Dharwad, Mumbai and Bangalore, taking degrees in economics and law. In her school days she has read Jane Austen, the Bronte’s, Hardy, Dickens, and George Eliot. She is familiar with Kalidas and Bhavbhuti in Sanskrit literature. She also has read Peter Cheyhey and Agatha Christie which made her to write detective fiction.

She got married to a pathologist and had two children. At the age of thirty she went to England with her husband and children. Her husband suggested her to write about her life and experience in England. She wrote three articles on her England trip. This is the beginning of her

writing. Shashi Deshpande feels herself lucky because in her childhood home and in her married home there was full freedom to her to think, to live and to work her own way.² After her marriage she has completed a journalism course from Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai. There after she took up a job as a journalist in the magazine *The Onlooker*. She worked there for two months. It is very significant in her writing career because she started writing short stories for the magazine. At first she wrote many short stories in isolation and no one was aware about her writing. But latter the women's magazine 'Femina' and 'Eve's Weekly' published her short stories. She got consolation prize for one of her short stories published in 'Eve's Weekly'.

The works of Shashi Deshpande has become famous at national and international level. There are thirteen novels on her credit, out of which four are for children. Her contribution also includes five short story collections, one screenplay *Drishtee (1990)* and a collection of essays.

1. Novels :

(i) *The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980)*-

The novel focuses the world of successful doctor, Sarita. Sarita is economically independent but she is a middle-class wife. Sarita's husband Manu feels embarrassed with the success of his wife. The male-ego and Indian tradition destroy the life of Sarita. Sarita is made conscious of her gender at her early childhood. Finally Sarita compromises with her husband, Manu.

“ Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980)* is women reflecting in her (Shashi Deshpande) small town upbringing, domineering mother, a jealous husband and a failing

jealous husband and a failing marriage, waking up to the realizing knowledge that there is more to life than dependency on husband and parents and social acceptance.”³

The novel depicts the sexual harassment of Saru by Manu.

(ii) *If I Die Today* (1982) –

This novel is her detective novel. The setting of her novel is in the campus of medical college and hospital. Guru, a cancer patient, who is admitted in the hospital, destroys the peaceful life of the doctors. In the novel there are two murders. The narrator, Manju helps the story to unfold.

(iii) *Roots And Shadows* (1983)-

The protagonist of the novel, Indu is well-educated, modern, middle-class woman. The novel pictures the world of Indu. Her husband, Jayant is a well-educated but a conservative type of man. The story deals with the agony of Indu in a tradition-bound and male dominated society. Siddhartha Sharma describes the character of Indu as,

“Feeling smothered in an oppressive male- dominated and traditional bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality.”⁴

(iv) *Come Up And Be Dead* (1985) -

This is another detective fiction by Shashi Deshpande. The novel sets in girl's school. This novel was first published in a magazine in serials. Kshama is a central character. In the story there are many mysterious deaths in to girl's school.

(v) *That Long Silence* (1988)-

Jaya is a protagonist of the novel. She is well-educated, modern woman. She is a writer too.

“*That Long Silence* is a picture of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. The novel portrays the conflict between the narrators split self-the writer and the housewife.”⁵

Mohan is an ambitious man. The Indian tradition reflects in the novel that husband is a centre and main support in the family and without him the family becomes insecure and unsheltered. According to Shashi Deshpande,

“A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the most autobiographical of all my writing, not in the personal details but in the thinking and ideas.”⁶

Further she states that with the writing of this novel she became conscious of herself as a feminist.⁷ The protagonist, Jaya rebels against the male-dominated society and denies to play the traditional roles of a wife and mother.

(vi) *The Binding Vine* (1993)-

The Binding Vine depicts the story of Urmila. Like other protagonists of Deshpande she is an educated, middle-class wife. With Urmila the story focuses on

“Mira (Urmila’s mother-in-law) who is a victim of marital rape and Shakuntala” (a rape-victim’s mother)⁸

Deshpande in this novel comments on the issues like sexual violence, rape and society and marriage in Indian society. Unlike her other protagonists Urmila fights not for herself but for other women.

(vii) *A Matter of Time* (1996)-

Unlike the other protagonist of Shashi Deshpande a male character is a centre of the story. At the first time she makes a man, Gopal the protagonist of the novel. Three generations of women of the same family are presented here. Gopal has abandoned his family. Sumi is in mental trauma because of his abandonment. After that she takes up a job for herself and for her daughters. She has coped with the tragedy with remarkable stoicism. The society gives worst punishment to Sumi because she is a rejected woman by her husband.

(viii) *Small Remedies* (2000)-

The novel narrates the tragic story of a famous classical singer Savitribai Indorker, doyenne of the Gwalior Gharana. Madhu Saptarishi is writing a biography on Savitribai Indorkar. Both Madhu and Savitribai experience suffering in marriage. Both are the victims of the double standards of society.

(ix) *Mooving On* (2004)-

The latest novel by Shashi Deshpande is about the families. It picturises the moving of life besides all the difficulties and problems. The novel moves in between past and present. *Mooving On* is about Manjari or Jiji Ahuja who is a complex character mingling between the conflicting demands and roles of her life. The novel also portrays the lives of other characters like Narayan or Baba, his wife Vasu or Mai and Malvika (Malu).

The novels of Shashi Deshpande depict the women's search for self, a vivid picture of female psyche, relationships of protagonist and place of female in the society. She puts forth the problems which a woman faces in day-to-day life. Her experiences and observations are reflected in her novels. The novels *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time*, *Small Remedies* depict the domestic life of an individual. The novels *If I Die Today* and *Come Up And Be Dead* are detective novels. There is an influence of Agatha Christie on the detective fiction of Shashi Deshpande.

2. Children's Fiction –

Shashi Deshpande has written four children's novels for her two young sons and later published them. *3 Novels* is a collection of three novels. *A Summer Adventure*, *Hidden Treasure*, *The only Witness*.

(i) *A Summer Adventure* (1986)-

This is the first story in the collection. Polly, Dinu, Minu, live in a small town and waiting for cousin, Ravi. He comes from Bombay to spend his holidays with Polly, Dinu and Minu. The story deals with the

spent their holidays with Polly, Dinu and Minu. The story deals with the attempts of children to solve the mystery of robbery. At the end the whole mystery is revealed.

(ii) *The Hidden Treasure (1980)-*

The story takes place in a village, on kaka's farmhouse. The children get involved in finding the treasure and this makes their Diwali vacation memorable. The elements like mystery, adventure, action, child life and humor are used effectively by Shashi Deshpande. She very beautifully portrays the world of children in the story. Ravi, Dinu, Minu and Polly are the main characters in the novel. The novel ends happily. Children solve the riddle finally and they become successful in finding out the treasure.

(iii) *The Only Witness (1980) –*

In this story Polly, Dinu, Minu visit to Bombay to spend their holidays with Ravi. Children try to find out bank robbers. At the end Sanju is found and the mystery is revealed.

(iv) *The Narayanpur Incident (1982) –*

This is a story of children who participate in Indian freedom struggle. There are Appa, Amma, their children Mohan (eighteen year old), Babu (fourteen year old), and Manju in the story. All have strong faith on Gandhi and want to fight for freedom. In the story there is a beautiful portrayal of town life and village life in the story. The story ends on the happy note. All members unite, Appa is released from the jail and Mohan comes out of hiding. *The Narayanpura Incident* is a different novel from other three novels of Shashi Deshpande.

The world of children, their excitements, curiosity, and innocence are beautifully pictured by Shashi Deshpande. Every novel has an optimistic end. Adventure is a common theme in all the novels. Deshpande uses very simple language, as it is children fiction. Deshpande shows that how society, neighbors affect the children's mind.

3. Short Story Collections -

There are five short story collections on her credit. *The Legacy and other Stories* (1978), *It Was Dark* (1986), *The Miracle and other Stories* (1986), *It Was Nightingale* (1986) and *The Intrusion and other Stories* (1994). Shashi Deshpande has written more than ninety short stories and those significant are published in two volumes, *Collected Stories, Volume 1 and 2*.

There is also a collection of essays written by Shashi Deshpande entitled *Writing from the Margins*. This is her non-fiction writing. Her essays in this collection have universal appeal. The essays are written in Indian context in the social realities of the everyday life.

The short stories of Shashi Deshpande are about familial relationships, social as well as psychological problems. The themes of mother-daughter relationship, man-woman relationship, woman's search for self-identity not only as woman but also as human being are seen in her short stories. Her concern shows that she wants to talk about the familial as well as social problems through her stories. Usha Bande observes that,

“Shashi Deshpande's stories show frankness and boldness not found so far in Indo-English short fiction. Her women tend to be the architects of their own fate. Hers

are the authentic, poignant tales of the middle-class, educated women and their exploitation in a conventional, male-dominated society.”⁹

Primary focus of the works of Shashi Deshpande is woman, her emotional loss, woman bereft of love, understanding and companionship. She wants to talk about how traditional customs are outdated and irrelevant in today’s world, how the women in Indian society are opposed by various social norms. According to Geetha T. N.,

“Shashi Deshpande’s chief thematic concern with women’s struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most of all as human being.”¹⁰

In the novels and short stories of Deshpande there is a portrayal of woman in various roles. Her protagonists are mother, daughter, wife, grandmother, sister, daughter-in-law, and mother-in-law and so on. In her works Deshpande deals with the problems of woman like woman’s search for love, quest for self-identity beyond the traditional roles, and psychological, sexual, emotional problems. Though her women are caught between various conflicts like conflict between tradition and modernity, they are optimistic. She puts forth the life as it is.

In the most of the works of Deshpande there is an emotional loss. The woman bereft of love, understanding and companionship is the

centre of her works. Her novels show her genuine concern for women. A scholar of Shashi Deshpande's writing Siddhartha Sharma points out,

“Her protagonists are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for their identity within marriage.”¹¹

The theme of rape within the marriage is discussed by Deshpande in her fiction. This subject is not frankly discussed by society even today.

“Deshpande's work has helped to break the silence on some women's issues which were not discussed in the past and to raise people's awareness.”¹²

The female characters of Shashi Deshpande are middle class women. They are well educated, brilliant, career oriented. They are, according to Sondkar,

“tied in the shackles of norms, taboos, culture, tradition and behavioral patterns.”¹³

Her protagonists' revolt against man made stereotype roles. But they do not disturb their family and relationships. Deshpande's women suffer a mental trauma and emotional conflict. They do not turn their back to

problems. They face bravely every problem and become successful to solve the problems.

Most of her characters are common men and women. One can identify himself with her character. It makes the reader one with the work.

As the writing of Deshpande is women centered many interviewers ask her as to what extent does she consider herself a feminist? Shashi Deshpande answers,

“I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it.”¹⁴

But she denies to apply western feminist theories to her works.

Deshpande uses very simple English language. There is no artificiality in her language. She uses an average, middle class English language. Her language reflects the Indian middle class life. Siddhartha Sharma points out,

“she writes about the middle class people and the language used is also middle class English,

sometimes a little incorrect by the British standereds.”¹⁵

Shashi Deshpande mostly uses the combination of the first person and third person narrative technique. She also employs the flashback technique effectively. In all her works Deshpande’s protagonists go back into the past memories and compare their present to past.

Many of her short stories are based on Hindu mythologies like Mahabharata. According to Dr. Hemang Desai,

“In the short stories Shashi Deshpande has breathed in life in the mythical women characters and has made them retell their tales of agony and privation. In these stories she tries to analyze what myths mean to women and how they affect their lives.”¹⁶

Shashi Deshpande began her writing with short stories. So short stories play very important role in her writing career. She has used many of her short stories to develop her novels. The three themes- mother-daughter relationship, theme of man-woman relationship and the theme of woman’s search for self identity are often found in her short stories. Many researchers have dealt with her literary works; however, most of the research done is related to her novels. Many have tried to probe into her short stories from different angles. The present research attempts to do the thematic study of her selected short stories. The stories

probe into the inner psyche of woman. Shashi Deshpande, in her short stories, deals with the life of Indian women in the modern period and some of her short stories deal with the life of women depicted in the epic of 'The Mahabharata'.

There are about ninety short stories on her credit, out of which forty eight short stories are published in two volumes by Penguin Books. The present study deals with the selected short stories from these two volumes.

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