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Existential Perspective in the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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**Abstract**

Shashi Deshpande writes from an existential point of view. Through such a perspective, the novelist, through fiction tries to grapple with the existential project that humans undertake. In this process, the novel in the hands of novelist becomes cerebral, delving into the inner recesses of consciousness and trying to explore the human psyche. However, existentialism in Indian English novelists is not a mere superimposition of an alien philosophy (Existentialism as an original philosophy is associated with French writers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus) out the Indian Scene. Instead, the existential situation that the novelists encounter an alienation occurring due to the western education coming in conflict with native ideals.

The human is supposed to be the instrument for perpetuating this continuity because she not only bears children to keep the family lineage going, but is also considered to be the 'godless - in the house' who should keep the family united. Deshpande also suggests that active and independent participation in a consumer society is the road to female emancipation: 'Once you take up a job you become an independent person.' This statement may suggest that female emancipation lies outside or additional to the realms of self-enlightenment or that liberation of self must necessity have a material rather than a spiritual base at least in the first instance.

The Dark Holds No Terrors by Shashi Deshpande is a totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man's superiority and the myth of a woman being a paragon of all virtues. It is based on the problems faced by a career woman, a refreshingly new phenomenon in Indian English fiction, depicting quest of identity & existence.

Shashi Deshpande's novel 'The Dark Hold No Terrors' is about is about Saru - an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife - who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unbearably strained and

she returns home for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva.

*Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel, is about the struggle of the protagonist Indu who is a representative of the educated middle-class. It describes her assertion of her individuality to achieve freedom leading to her confrontation with her family and the male-dominated society. Feeling smothered in an oppressive male-dominated and tradition-bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality. It tells about Indu's painful self-analysis.

Many other themes form part of the novel like the theme of bohemianism and the sorry state of women. Indu returns to her ancestral home after a gap of eleven years, which is occasioned by her cousin Mini's marriage. She leaves home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loves, She returns on being summoned by Akka, the domineering matriarch, as Akka is on her deathbed. Akka has made her sole heiress to her property which the others resent. Deshpande presents with vivid details a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household, and the myriad women characters, their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments, and their anguish.

Among the myriad women characters is the old tyrannical matriarch Akka. She is rich and

childless, and decides to stay in her brother's house after her husband's death where she wields absolute control with her venomous tongue. It reduces Indu's grandfather Kaka into a tongue-tied, submissive character.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. Many women writers tried their hand at expressing this long silence that had turned women into non-entities. Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya the main woman character of the novel and her quest for the self or identity or existence. The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into the old Dadar flat in Mumbai from their cosy and palatial house. Her husband is involved in a financial malpractice and an inquiry against him is set up. Mohan is consoled to find that the children, Rahul and Rati, are away on a long tour with their family friends, and expects Jaya to go into hiding with him, which she refuses to comply with. It is here in the small Dadar flat that she becomes an introvert and goes into deep contemplation of her past and her childhood. Had there been no such crisis in their life, she would never have given a thought to her individuality.

Adele King opines: "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is."

A pair of bullocks yoked together... that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here. It was an eerie sensation I had while climbing up the stairs with him, as if there was for that one infinitesimal moment a pause in my being, and I, detached from myself, saw this... a pair of bullocks yoked together.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) is very much similar to her earlier novels, as it sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world, where she has very little scope to give voice to her concerns. Although the story in this particular novel at the superficial level appears to be very identical to her other novels, but if one explores it deeply he can easily sense the peculiarity in it. In all other novels we find that the protagonist is of paramount importance and all the other characters are used to feature her concerns and feelings. But in this novel

the minor characters play a very significant role; the protagonist Urmi plays the role of anchor, it is she who is used by the novelist very cleverly to expose the sufferings of women from different sections of our society. *The Binding Vine* deals with the multi-facetedness of its central character Urmi. Urmi is an intelligent, educated middle-class wife, who is employed as a lecturer in a college. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women of our society. She is one who affirms her independence and freedom in each and every judgment of her life. Urmi united in marriage with the man whom she preferred, but is desperate in her married life because of her ego and to some extent Kishore her husband is accountable for it. The problem with Urmi is that she is brimming with confidence, as is financially independent and well settled in her life. Due to this economic stability she has developed a kind of super ego in herself which makes her reluctant to submit before her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa (her sister-in-law) and her mother before their spouses.

This novel 'The Binding Vine' shows how a woman of good education and earning could react to the so-called issues against women in the male chauvinistic society, thereby inculcating the spirit of solidarity among women and ushering in an assured secure world to all women. While depicting the agony of a wife, who is the victim of marital rape, she portrays the plight of women raped outside marriage and those who would rather suffer in silence in the name of the family honour.

Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian Novelist. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, for the novel 'That Long Silence'. Shashi Deshpande's novels primarily present a social world of many complex relationships. She is regarded as a feminist writer and frequently writes about women belonging to the Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional, environment and are struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self-identity and independence. Shashi Deshpande gives minute details of development of girl-child in her novels. She has displayed a series of girl-children, where each girl faces a different problem within the family. She also brings forth the issue of violence against women, whether physical, mental or emotional, which is a concern that crosses

all borders and all classes of women. Feminism and its crusade against a male dominated society are of special importance in the Indian context and thus also find a special place in Deshpande's novels.

*Small Remedies* is really the biography of Madhu's life, starting from her childhood, with an indulgent physician father, a stern male nanny, and the unreliable Munni as her best friend, and moving through her adolescence and college years, raised by a kind aunt named Leela after her father died. Leela was a communist party worker and trade union activist.

They went on with the dying desire towards their achievements facing the hardships while life threw upon them. They never looked back. Passing through the alienation, rebellion and aggression if necessary, they achieved their dream of being a 'new' woman. They have their own dreams and they learn

how to realize those dreams despite social barriers. They suffer a lot in their desire for the "unfeminine" right to freedom. Women, though talented, gifted with courage, are sidelined as they are women.

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