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## Themes in the Recent Novels of Shashi Deshpande with Reference to *Small Remedies, Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit*

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Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India writing in English. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle class educated women who are sandwiched between tradition and modernity. She is entirely different from any of her contemporary women writers. Although critics indiscriminately dub her as a feminist, she is not a feminist in the sense that is probably applied to certain women writers. During the course of her narration while unfolding the drama of an individual's life – a woman's life, “she almost compatibly portrays Indian middle class women with their turmoils, convulsions, frustrations endurance.” (Sabita Ramachandran: Sashi Deshpande's Craft as a novelist”)

One admirable feature about her novels is, she conceals nothing and condemns nothing. Many of Deshpande's women characters learn to break free of the stereotypes which surround them – the stereotype of the mother, wife who remain silent and sacrifice their own needs and their own self. Although she writes about issues and problems – she is keen to point out that she is a writer of fiction. The struggles of her characters are those of ordinary women fighting to be themselves rather than conform to stereotypes of women. Her writings are complex but seamlessly woven narratives exploring the lives of people especially women. Her writings are related to the modern Indian women's beleaguered existence. Her recent novels published in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century – “Small Remedies”, “Moving On”, and “In The Country of Deceit” will make a rich contribution to women's studies. The central theme of these novels seems to be in the web of family relations.

Feminist perspective in her novels reveals her sincerity and ability in voicing the concerns of the urban educated middle class women trapped between tradition and modernity, her sensitive protagonists are fully conscious of being victims of gross gender discrimination prevalent in a conservative male dominated society.

Her novels cover a wide gamut of emotions and feelings. Larger space has been allotted for women characters in Deshpande's novels. But men characters are not shadowy, they are in fact, crucial to show the general agreement and disagreement between them. “She provides new ideal for better man-women relationship, there by broadening the scope of women existence, prescribing a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman.” (Sabita Ramachandran)

Deshpande's novels deserve the most critical observation; Deshpande as one feels is a psychologist by instinct. When Deshpande dives deep into the world of women's psyche, it seems that she leaves no part of it untouched. The nether-world observations of human psyche,

do not seem to defy the psychological probability. The reader is amazed, travels into the hitherto uncharted regions of the human mind and is left more unminded with the rich fund of knowledge about human nature. Sometimes the reader is tempted to believe that most of these experiences of her characters are but his/her own. They are so natural, so realistic that they strike sympathetic chords in the heart of the reader, reminiscent of his/her too intimate experiences.

There is a diverse variety of characters in her novels. They move about within the circle of family kaleidoscope. The protagonists of these three novels come from a sound familial background but their behaviour is something unconventional that shows that the writer stresses that there is no consistency in human character. For instance, Savitri Bai Indorekar, the grandame of the Gwalior Gharana, starts life as a dutiful daughter-in-law in an orthodox Brahmin household, but elopes with her Muslim lover and accompanist, Ghulam Saab; Leela, on the other hand, a Brahmin widow gives her life to the communist party, to work closely with factory workers of Bombay, also breaks the conventions of widowhood and marries a Christian, Joe.

These characters are really sensitive beings but unable to display what they really intend to. Either their voices are unheard or misinterpreted. The characters are also portrayed in a way that they are under some influence. Deshpande's women protagonists remain ideal. Both Savitri Bai and Leela in 'Small Remedies' appear as independent and significant, each having sentiments of dissimilar nature. Breaking the tradition is of late a thinking and they are unable to present themselves. Their search for peace and harmony is out of their orthodoxy. The stories of these women, independent spirits, both who give up respectability to gain love and unhappiness in equal measure. Not only this, in 'Small Remedies' Madhu, the biographer of Savitri Bai tries to make sense of her own life, writing the biography of Savitri Bai. Grieving the death of her only son Aditya, she hopes to find a way out of her own despair. "This is a kind of novel which presents a problem, analyses it and posits a kind of solution so that the focus is on the psychological process of becoming a mature person. The desperate search for meaning, the effort to find a sense of one's identity and one's relationship to the world outside, culminates in the realisation that loss is never total, and it is essential to realise it because, in any event, life has to be made possible." (Nanda Kumar, 'The Emerging Voice: A Comparative Study Of Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence and Small Remedies.')

It is not easy to incorporate so many social nuances in an introspective novel, dealing with abstract questions. But then, a fascination for what is difficult has always been Deshpande's forte. Madhu, the mouth piece of Deshpande gives the most striking truth that "It's always a losing battle. Such small remedies, these, to encounter the terrible disease of being human, of being mortal and vulnerable." (Small Remedies). She believes that "we are responsible for our actions that there are no excuses we can shelter behind." (Small Remedies). She also says that life is like concocting a poultice on the kitchen fire to fight a raging gangrene. The only remedy is to believe that tragedies, disasters and sorrows are part of the scheme – if it can be called that". Deshpande's novels delineate the eternal predicament of human existence through the various encounters of the heroines with life. Madhu recalls the words of Joe, the words which helped her once to accept her father's death; the same words enable her now to accept her son's death; "It hasn't gone anywhere, your life with your father is still there, it'll never go away". (Small Remedies-324).

Deshpande's novels are about women in self quest to posit the view that women in these novels have established themselves as autonomous beings, free from restrictions imposed by societal cultures, from their own fears and guilt that women have reached a stage of understanding the fundamental truth: "You have to find Yourself".

"One of the distinctive features of her novels is the subtle manipulation of female psychology. In terms of Freudian psychology – for instance, Madhu in 'Small Remedies' manifests clear signs of electra complex, strongly attached to her father. For example, When Munni tells her that her father has a mistress, she cuts off all connection with Munni immediately. Such strong reaction is more that of a wife than that of a daughter. It is interesting to note that her first sexual affair was at the time of her father's death, with a man who was her father's special friend, a kind of father figure to her. Not only this Madhu's clinging to her son Aditya is also typically oedipal." (Nanda Kumar)

Deshpande brings out the powerful dynamism in her novels delineating the peculiarities that control everything though the characters do not speak – Mai (Vasu, Manjari's mother) in 'Moving on' is a woman of inflexible will but there is some sort of remoteness expressed in her personality as if she was not wholly present. Through she doesn't speak anything, she is powerful and dynamic. Manjari, the protagonist of 'Moving on' is presented as a girl who needed everybody's approval, becomes a rebel marrying Shyam, a photographer, much against her parents' will. Later Manjari observes that she cannot give any solid reason for not marrying Raja, her cousin, who too was a widower. But suprisingly, she has a liason with her tenant, Raman and she feels that it is only a biological need and she used him as an outlet for her natural physical desire and there is nothing like love between them- this way Deshpande portrays the unpredictability of human behaviour. "In this novel 'Moving on' Manjari's sexuality is explicitly portrayed. Manjari like Deshpande's other Women characters is bold and steadfast. What makes Manjari's sexuality explicit is the betrayal of her body. Her husband's betrayal and his illicit relationship with her sister, Malu have already made her a frustrated being; on the other hand, her long detachment with a male body arouses her desire. As a result, she sleeps with her tenant, much younger than her. It is absolutely her physical desire, the mind has nothing to do with it. "only the body, his body, only my body, and my starved body. No thoughts, no feelings, only sensations"(257) (Trayee Sinha : A study of shashi Deshpande's women characters : Feminism in search of identity)

Deshpande's candidness in expressing her feeling through her characters about the sexual relations of men and women are shockingly true and verve. She is a keen observant of human nature. Her portrayal of characters is authentic and credible. She shows a genuine concern for the human predicament in all her works and as a woman writer, she deals mainly with gender related experience. None of her women characters are out of the way but she presents every nuance of her characters with an artistic detachment.

One of the bold attempts made by Deshpande is to touch the private domain of her women characters. She explicitly talks about women's sexuality, physical relations, extra-marital affairs, sex without marriage. It is almost unthinkable for an Indian unmarried girl to make a relation with a married man – as Devayani did in *In the country of deceit* her culture cannot permit her to do that. But that is not the limitation of Deshpande's women characters. ([www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com) Galaxy International multi disciplinary Research journal ISSN2278- 9529 Vol.1. Issue III 5 July 2012 Galaxy). She is guided by the pleasure principle and fulfills the

desire of her body. Though in a country like India overt Sexuality of a woman is considered a shame, Deshpande has never tried to conceal the sexual needs of a woman (Trayee Sinha) she conceals nothing ; She condemns nothing (Trayee Sinha).

Devayani in “ In the country of Deceit”, a flower of culture, educated maiden , brave enough to face all the trials and tribulations of the family, a well- bred young lady hailing from a sophisticated middle class family, enters the country of deceit(falls in love) with a much older, married DSP, Ashok Chinappa, having a nine year old daughter. If one delves deep into the psyche of Devayani, one certainly comes out with the truth that beneath the Veneer of her sophisticated front, there lies the primitive instinct of well glossed over by the outward mask of the so called civilization, that explodes at an unguarded moment and betrays the ugly beast of what Freud calls ‘Libido’ – the blind sex force that craves for fulfillment at any cost. Only this psychological explanation would justify what seems to be a travesty of Devayani when she takes a U-turn in her behaviour. She knows well that their affair is a relationship without a future and that it ends in a blind alley.

Deshpande doesn't seem to embrace any particular philosophical view point and no label of any denomination can describe her vision of life, such as we find in some unique writers like Shakespeare, is clearly manifest in her novels. The familial ties between father and daughter, mother, wife and husband are dealt with effectively by her. She presents her views through her characters like in ‘ Moving on’ Baba (BadriNarayan) tells his daughter, Manjari ‘Nothing is so strong that it will never break’. The same motto applies no less effectively to human relations !. All human relations are tenuous and therefore are liable to break..... and the only exception is the truly natural relationship that which exists between a mother and a child. He (BadriNarayan) reflects “My daughter, I thought, my child I told myself. Did it give me the right to take over her life? We come to live as individuals; to be a parent is to be an instrument, the means of letting another human enter the world and have the experience of living – that's all she is the bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”.(Moving On)

Sometimes she adopts the view point of an existentialist; and in extreme moments, she appears to be nihilistic too! Badrinarayan (Baba) writes in his diary “And so I go back to my question: what is that controls our lives? I have never believed in Fate or Destiny, not in the sense of something that makes puppets of us. There's no great plan, no creator with a great design. I believe that we are freak occurrences in a universe which in itself is a freak occurrence. Set in motion, it has no choice but to keep going. But when I look back and see how our plans were overturned, how nothing turned out as we had expected it to, I have to rethink. And no, I still don't believe in fate or destiny.” (Moving On)

“Deshpande in “In the country of Deceit” picks up the theme of adult love, hitherto unexplored even in her own novels. She believes that love is a basic human emotion and there is nothing banal about it. However one cannot walk away from the consequences of the choices we make in life. In this way while taking up the theme of love in the backdrop of the feminine sensibility, the author goes on to describe the protagonist's quest in search of answers to some of the existential questions of life. Devayani falls in love with the DSP Ashok, who is already married and had a nine year old girl and soon realizes how everything in life is not that easy to be classified as right or wrong the ' Ananda' which the protagonist experiences and describes nowhere makes her look like a voluptuous female. On this way the issues of women sensuality and sexuality taken up by the author implies rejection of prudery associated with them. At the



same tone one cannot overlook the fact that the author has a very balanced approach. She is meticulous about the socio- cultural milieu of the society for which she writes. The love story of Devayani has no future and she was fully conscious of it from the very beginning. This however, never belittles the sorrow which feels on betrayal. She could not escape from the repercussions of the choices she made this seems to be the message of the author to this open minded novel. The reader is left with the food for thinking that traditional approach may find Devayani guilty but there is much more in life that cannot be over looked. One leaves the novel with the ponderings of this sensitive protagonist who is in quest of meaning in her life and the place of her choices in the scheme (Rekha Narula : Dispelling of a chimera: In the country of Deceit)

Deshpande occasionally depicts the hedonistic side of life---for it is in most cases, especially in modern life, an essential concomitant of life style but she takes to see that doesn't touch the fringes of Bohemianism. Manjari's conversation with her father expresses this;

“I went out swiftly to Baba and asked him, ‘Baba do you mind my having a drink?

Why should I?

This----This orthodox Brahmin thinks I shouldn't be drinking

Not in your presence, he says.’ (Moving on)

It is quite evident from her novels that Deshpande has a marked propensity for the pleasures of the flesh. Her characters though belong to middle class not upper middle class, indulge in drinking at home and in clubs as a part of their life style.

Deshpande has frequently presented in her novels the tragic drama created by death. She has faithfully revealed the feelings of despair, gloom, confusion and isolation which follow the death of a close one. For instance, the death of Madhu's only child in ‘Small Remedies’ shatters her life to pieces and further embitters her relationships with her husband. Time's duality of power on human life is well conveyed by Deshpande. It hurts and it heals. It destroys and it creates. For instance, Madhu, corroded by grief over the sudden, ghastly death of Aditya, her 17 year old son, feels that the heavens had fallen upon her but slowly she recovers from that shock; As a diversion from it, she undertakes to write the biography of Savitri Bai. With the passage of time, our senses become benumbed and our pain becomes lessened. New activities engage our mind and once again we feel the thrill of life.

Besides the main theme, Deshpande presents many other themes which are secondary but essential to the novel. For instance, ‘In the country of Deceit’----- the Story of a retired film actress, Rani, Who marries K.N (Kailash Nath) with two children, Neha and Rohan of her second marriage with K.N, a big business magnet. Her(Rani) nonchalance or indifference either to joy or sorrows is not born out of stoicism ---- It is a well cultivated attitude to life to accept things as they come in their stride! Or may be due to her want of deeper cogitations or concerns about life. Many thoughtful reflections are made by Deshpande through her characters like Devayani reflects on the relationship between K.N and Rani.

“I had always thought of K.N and Rani as two people who had come together for mutual convenience. For her, an easy life with a wealthy man, a haven after the turbulence of her earlier life. And for him, a beautiful wife, one more possession he could be proud of. I had noticed too that when they were together they were polite with each other, never intimate.” (In The Country Of Deceit)

Deshpande also presents other themes like the many diseases and maladies which are commonly death with in her novels. Sindhu, Devayani’s aunt in the country of deceit suffering from cancer, Her mother Pushpa suffering from epilepsy, Baba in ‘Moving on’ dies of cancer, Madhu’s father in ‘Small Remedies’ dies of heart failure ‘Leela’ dies of tuberculosis and Mai in ‘Moving On’ suffering from diabetes etc. Shashi Deshpande makes insightful observations about human experience and human nature through the mouth piece of Sindhu and through Devayani, gives a pen portrait of her father as a colossal failure in practical life.

Deshpande’s novels pulsate with life; vital and energetic. The reader feels the very heart beat of every character, small or big, significant or otherwise. There is that throb, there is that life, even when some material or physical surroundings are described, they also simmer with the current of some living impulse in them --- The narration of the uncurling of bud in the novel ‘Moving on’ is life like.

“We look at the bud, one petal already a little uncurled. Yes it’s beginning. We can’t go now until we’ve seen the flower bloom; even I know that ..... ‘It’s like we are unwilling to disturb the process, as if we are unwilling to disturb the process, as if we are watching something as private and miraculous as the process of birth. The gradual unfolding seems to contain the drama of life itself.”

Deshpande seems to have presented a healthy view of marriage despite many a discomfiture resulting from it. There are no plots in her novels, it seems, but they are there very much--- these plots are woven with as delicate a material as the human relations that emerge quite naturally, at least they appear to be as natural as they are inevitable --- The element of tragedy is there as well as the element of comedy. Deshpande’s wit and humour are present throughout the novels wherever the situation demands. In the novel ‘Moving On’ Badri Narayan reflects on his first mother’s death and says;

“ There were a great many ways of dying then and women had more opportunities of dying young than men; I learnt this during the course of my medical studies”

Jiji’s conception of ‘love’, It is like the measles; get it once and you acquire immunity. Yes, love comes only once in one’s life and the rest of it is only desire’ --- Her tongue –in-cheek, nature.

Familial ties, conspicuous changes in the attitudes of individuals, social changes, opposing the old rigid orthodox conventions, casteism receding into the hazy past, emergence of new code of ethics, inter caste marriages, the birth of a new society by imperceptible degrees, the new generation and the social changes in pre-independent India through conflicts between the old and the new generation recur through out her novels. She lays a special emphasis on the passage of time in her novels. Her novels mainly deal with complex human relations within the

bounds of a ‘family’; which in her own novels is a nexus of familial relationship -- a veritable labyrinthine relationship – but a labyrinth from which you can find a safe exit!

The reader may gather so much about the characters by reading between the lines. She states facts as she sees them most objectively. She doesn't raise her accusing finger at anything or anybody; She simply presents them as they are; It is for the reader to form his own judgment or opinion. There is not much of an authorial exegesis. The reader can easily recognize the author's own opinions expressed in parenthesis --- but the context in which these observations are made, makes it crystal clear that they slip from the lips of the novelist. One can gather from these sporadic utterances which are interspersed throughout, the true glimpses of the writer's personality.

Deshpande skillfully unfolds the drama of human life with all its intricacies and minute details and has been successful in doing so in all her works in general and this work once again proves the mastery of Shashi Deshpande when it comes to her dealing with complex matters from women's life as her assertion, suppression, sensuality and her place in society in general. This is done striking a balance keeping in mind the socio cultural milieu of the Indian society.

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