

## Looking into the Major Characters in the Selected Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Close Study

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### **Abstract:**

Shashi Deshpande, a renowned name in Indian English Literature, delineated in her novels the plight of the middle-class Indian women, their sufferings, their struggle for identity, their marital relationship and the conflicts of their minds as if they are hovering between 'orthodoxy' and 'modernity'. The ego of their male counterparts also adds to their misery. Surpassing all these impediments Deshpande projected her protagonists as the 'sculptor of new womanhood'. This paper focuses on the, male ego, the traditional patriarchal society which makes its prey not only women but also men and on the psychology of the major characters of her selected novels, namely "Dark Holds No Terror "and "Roots and Shadows".

**Keywords:** Feminism, Male ego, patriarchal society, new woman, gender discrimination.

Feminism in Deshpande: The French philosopher Charles Fourier first coined the term 'feminism'. Feminism is that movement which demands equal social, political, economic and personal rights of women along with men. This movement started in India in the late 1970s. Though Shashi Deshpande never associated herself with any group of writers (especially feminist) within country or in abroad, she has successfully depicted in her novels the miseries of the middle-class Indian women: their problems, yearnings, aspirations, failures, foibles and their struggles to preserve their identity. Theirs journey is a journey of self-revelation overcoming all these impediments. Compared to her female characters, her male characters are typed and typical. They are more or less flat characters with traditional middle-class mentality. Indian feminist writers attempt to challenge the patriarchal structure

of their society in a variety of ways. Shashi Deshpande is also not an exception. But Unlike other Indian feminist writers, namely Barnita Bagchi, Rita Banerjee, Meghna Pant, in Shashi Deshpande's characters we find an intermingling of tradition and modernity. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that her protagonists are modern enough with their education, intellect but yet they can't totally transgress their roots, their own tradition and finally they keep faith in their inner strength.

The Projection of 'male ego': Deshpande's main focus is on the marital relationship of the middle-class Indian family. Her male characters are dimmed and enfeebled in comparison to her female protagonists. Her protagonists, though much superior to their partners, are trapped in this social situation as if they are caged in the claustrophobic atmosphere. Ego of their male counterparts, rising from their 'inferiority complex', have a great influence on their lives. Now what is this ego? According to Sigmund Freud where 'id' is the primitive instincts of human beings, ego is his rational self that repressed the instinct. Again 'superego' indulges in morality principle. This superego persuades 'ego' to turn to morality principle rather than simply realistic one and to strive for perfection. Ego mediates between the pressure of 'id' and 'superego'. Freud later argued that the ego has an unconscious aspect as well. Sometimes it pampers forbidden sexual act (forbidden in respect of society) like 'id' rather than repressing the desire. In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926), Freud stated, "The ego renounces these functions, which are within its sphere, in order not to have to undertake fresh measure of repression-in order to avoid coming into conflict with the id (Freud ch-1). According to Foucault human beings has an inherent instigation for supremacy and authority. None can hold it permanently. Rather, it consolidates from one person to another. Usually, men relish the power and authority in a patriarchal society. But their powers are in stake when the women become aware of their own strength and claim their rights in society. Shantha Manikantan, counselling psychologist says, "we see men with exaggerated judgment of their capabilities and importance everywhere-at home, work or in a social institution. Most people assume the male ego is an issue of superiority. But it can also stem from a complex that alternates between superiority and inferiority, resulting in the desire to impress others". We find the same case in the life of Manohar and Jayant in the "Dark Holds No Terror" 'and "Roots and Shadows" respectively. Sekhar Seshadri, professor, the unit of child and adolescent psychiatry, Nimhans, Bangalore says: "Boys are conditioned to believe that power resides in them. Also, they are expected to protect family honour and controls

girls and women. Which is what gives them an ego boost'. Deshpande skilfully portrayed the 'male ego' in her novels.

### **Analysis of the major characters in the "Dark Holds No Terror"**

Sarita, the protagonist, is a victim of the traditional patriarchal society where the female child is ignored in favour of male child. From her childhood she was devoid of parental love. Her mother always ignored her in favour of her brother Dhruva. According to Nagaswami, author, psychiatrist and relationship consultant: "The male ego has probably been over-hyped just a bit. In our patriarchal society, unwanted attention given to the male child has made it an issue in the relationship even in the 21st century". This is true in case of Dhruva too. Here Saru's mother is a typical representative of the patriarchal society who always thinks that women are inferior to men. They should be submissive and should not claim their educational and social rights. Their activities should be restricted to household chores. The main objective of her life was to get her daughter married. She forbade Sarita to go to the Sun only for the fear of getting dark in complexion. She vehemently opposed Sarita's idea of studying medicine not only because of financial problem but also for the fact that she didn't approve women's higher education. She was an authoritative woman who, though dominated her husband a bit, worshipped 'Tulsi' so that her husband could survive her. Her wish got fulfilled as she died of cancer before her husband. She never liked Sarita and rebuked her frequently as an ugly girl and made her responsible for her brother's death. Even when after Sarita's marriage to Manohar, Prof. Kulkarni asked her about Sarita, she contemptuously denied her daughter's existence: "I don't have any daughter. I had a son and he died." (Deshpande 178).

Baba was an affectionate father figure. Though he behaved like a puppet under the influence of his wife, he regained his original self whenever it was required. He supported Sarita's idea of studying MBBS and helped her as much as he could. He even tried to persuade his wife that Sarita was not responsible for the death of their son Dhruva and stood at Saru's side. He even consoled Sarita that she had done nothing wrong to her mother when she made her responsible for her mother's unhappiness. He is unique with his personality, love and affection.

On the other hand, Manohar's love for Sarita was not true-hearted as it arose not from his emotion, but from his intellect. Though he had true feelings for Jayanti, the most beautiful girl in the Arts college, he concealed it and continued his affair with Sarita as he envisaged a

better cosy future with Sarita, an MBBS. He ensnared Sarita in the guise of love with no possibility of retreating but moving on. Actually, he wanted to gain financial security through Sarita. He was an emerging poet before his marriage, a dear student of Prof. Kulkarni. But after marriage his career as a poet began to diminish and he felt an inferiority complex beside Sarita's rapid success as an M.D in Paediatrics. The attitudes of his colleagues, such as their taunting regarding the fact that they couldn't afford a trip to 'Ooty' as their wives were not doctor, also add to his resentment. His male ego got hurt and he became a sadist. He got pleasure by torturing Sarita sexually to quench his lust, to satisfy his male ego and to suppress his failure in the professional life.

Sarita, being devoid of parental love because of her brother, became rebellious. Her decision to marry Manohar, a low caste, is also an act of rebellion defying her parent's decision. She never wanted to place herself in her mother's position who was a typical, traditional middle-class woman. Rather she wanted to educate herself and to gain economic independence as an insurance against subordination. She was a high-spirited woman who knew how to gain position in the society. With her confidence and self-determination, she became an MBBS doctor. It would not be excessive if we say, she was a bit self-centred too. Her family, especially her father endured financial crisis for making her an MBBS; yet she broke off all her affinity with her family when her parents did not approve her relationship with Jayant. Practically she paid no heed to their affairs. After marriage, she acquired an M.D degree and established herself as a successful paediatrician. She didn't even hesitate to hold the helping hands of Prof. Boozie. She responded to his flirtation to fulfil her desire of attaining higher education and position in society. She justified her relationship with Boozie by this way, "I told myself my relationship with this man wouldn't hurt Manu. It was just a teacher student relationship. If he put his hand on my shoulder, slapped me on my back, held my hand or hugged me.... that was just his mannerism and meant nothing. It had nothing to do with Manu and me."(Deshpande 133). Though she justified herself, we can realize that there is a conflict in her mind regarding the fact that whether she is right in enduring Boozie's flirtation or not. Boozie, on the other hand, wanted to conceal his homosexual nature by trying to be intimate with Sarita publicly. She was such a woman to whom rituals, religious ceremonies meant almost nothing. She considered her decision of studying medicine and marrying Manohar as a kind of freedom against her parental bondage. Though she realized later that it was nothing but the replacement of bondage. She resembles Indu in "Roots and Shadows" 'in that case. She was professionally successful, but very much lonely and

dissatisfied in the core of her heart. The readers too feel pangs for her miseries. She seemed to be truculent in some cases, but she suffered from conflict and guilty feeling for that too. She thought, "...My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood". (Deshpande 198). The incident of her brother Dhruba's death by drowning keeps her haunting throughout her life. She self-analyzed her relationship with her brother again and again. She pondered over the fact that probably she was envious of her brother. Though her relationship with her mother was of hatred, she couldn't resist herself from going back to her parental home to meet her father when she heard of her mother's death from Prof. Kulkarni. It is true that she is an intelligent, rebellious, self-determined woman and in some aspects self-centred too, but she is also sensitive. Her demands are as simple as this: "...my demands are to sleep peacefully the night through and to wake up without pain" (Deshpande 27). Deshpande unfolds Sarita's inner self to show her agony, her frustration. Her portrayal of Sarita makes her almost a real character of society.

Traditional patriarchal society does not approve a career-oriented woman and wants to dominate her anyways. Here, the male chauvinism and ego of Manohar got hurt when Sarita surpassed him in the professional field. He became a sadist. Sarita thought of getting divorce many a time by going to a lawyer, but ultimately, she couldn't 'draw aside the curtain' of her private life (Deshpande 97) in front of a lawyer. 'Dark' becomes the symbol of 'terror', nightmare to Sarita, but she couldn't get rid of it as she didn't want to be unsuccessful in her marriage by breaking off the relationship. She thought that the life of a woman was only to comply with the wishes of her man. In her childhood when she helped her mother in making butter, Mai kaki teased her by saying: 'Do this every day and your hands will be so soft and smooth, your husband will never let go of them' (Deshpande 163). She wondered 'is everything in a girl's life is to fulfil the single purpose of pleasing her husband? But what can one do if she fails to do that?' (Deshpande 163). She became mentally frustrated and realized well that professional achievement had nothing to do with domestic happiness.

Being dejected in her conjugal life, Sarita decided to return to her parental home after her mother's death to take care of her father. Here, for Sarita, the house became the symbol of strength and reconciliation. But her deep-rooted pain of being an unwanted child just because of gender discrimination, came back once again when she found that Madhav, her father's student took the place of her brother. She felt again unwanted like her childhood. But gradually she developed her relationship with Madhav as her younger brother. The close

proximity of her father, his caring attitudes consoled her from pain. She regained her strength and realized that one had to be satisfied with oneself and that there was no refuge elsewhere to bring an end to one's problem. She had the feeling that terror and darkness are always within us and one had to go on with all these. So, at her father's suggestion she decided to return to her husband to reconcile with him. Darkness was over and she re-entered life with mental strength to face the realities. Here, of course, her middle-class affinity abstains her from getting divorce from her husband and stay alone in her remaining life. Rather she values her tradition and keeps faith on her inner strength.

### **Analysis of the major characters in the "Roots and Shadows"**

Indu is the protagonist of this novel. She belongs to a conservative joint Bramhin family. She lost her mother at the time of her birth and she was left to 'Akka's' care by her father when she was just 15 days old. Though she grew up by observing the traditional, orthodox attitudes of her family members, she remained distinct from them by her self-assertion, determination, education, intellect and her negation of the typical middle-class mentality. She abhors the idea of male domination and the image of women as meek, mild and submissive who shouldn't have a voice to rise against injustice and domestic oppression. She beautifully sketches out the excessive physical diligence of the women of a big family: "Droves of women worked continuously in the kitchen, against a deadline it seemed they couldn't possibly meet."(Deshpande 07).

She was very selective and choosy in bestowing her love and affection among her family members. She hated most of her family members (except a few) because of their meanness, shrewdness, self-centeredness and a typical middle-class mentality. Among her preferred list there were 'Atya', 'Kaka', 'old Uncle', Naren and 'Baba'. From 'Atya' and 'Kaka' she attained parental love and affection. She got solace and comfort in the vicinity of old uncle, a distant relative of her family, who could answer almost all of her questions to conciliate her. Since her childhood she was advised to restrict her activities within certain limits. As Indu recalled later: "As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive...you must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive. (Deshpande 136). But Indu vehemently abominates this kind of attitudes and subjugation. She is the representative of modern women who can transgress all the taboos and restrictions of the so-called middle-class women. She

became economically independent and married Jayant, a man belonging to another caste, against the decision of her conservative family only to preserve her self-will. To speak of the mentality of the middle class women, Indu self-introspects: "To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand-children...they were still for them the only success a woman could have...Each one of them, riddled with ignorance, prejudice and superstition..." (Deshpande 278). She despises this kind of living but she is not happy too in her self-chosen marital life as she later confides in Naren: "...Are we doomed to living meaningless, futile lives? Is there no escape? I am afraid Naren...I'm afraid..." (Deshpande 137).

She disdains her family members (except some persons) not only for their typical middle-class mentality, but also for their meanness, shrewdness and hypocritical nature; their inclination for talking behind each other. She even became a victim of domestic violence in the hands of her uncle-in-law who tried to molest her in the camouflage of helping her in learning a bicycle. She despised 'Akka' for her dominating and interfering nature. But when she came to know of 'Akka's' past life, her sufferings, her sexual oppression by her husband from Sunanda 'Atya', she perceived her better. She considered 'Akka' as the 'prop' of her family. Though Indu hated her family members for their attitudes, she couldn't turn her back on them. She left her parental home with a vow never to return there again. She considered this to be a kind of freedom from bondage. But after marriage, she realized that the bondage couldn't be totally eradicated, it could only replace its form. Though she was utterly disappointed in her conjugal life as Jayant always took her for granted without paying any attention to her will, she always intended to conceal the friction of her marital life from her family. She didn't want to show her marriage as a 'failure'. In that case she takes the same path of Sarita in "Dark Holds No Terror". From her own life she experiences the fact that love is nothing but a 'hoax', a 'trap'. What is truth is not the love but the 'sexual instinct' and 'self-interest'. Deshpande presents Indu as a self-assertive woman, but why she succumbs to her husband's will suppressing her own will? Her revelation to Naren is like that: "...I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure..." (Deshpande 136).

she decided to return to her parental home after being informed of 'Akka's' illness. Old homely atmosphere soothed her mental agony. She became intimate with Naren and shared her sufferings, her conflicts with him. It's true that she became physically intimate with Naren but before that she had to go through a lot of mental conflict. Her middle-class backdrop, her morality retarded her again and again from this extra-marital relationship. She suffered from

guilty feeling and even envisaged Jayant within Naren, but later she justified herself with the idea that: "what was happening between us was complete in itself. It needed no commentary, no explanation" (Deshpande 137). She realized well that unlike Jayant who wanted to control her activity, her will, Naren wanted to expose her inner self. She found mental similitude with Naren and enjoyed the rapture of carnal pleasure: "oh, blessed, blessed hardness. An ecstasy filled my body... I could experience and show and participate in" (Deshpande 130). Thus, though she got rid of the guilty feeling apparently, the feeling laid in her subconscious still. That's why when she wanted to bathe after this sexual pleasure, Atya's innocent words looking at her smudge face: "You've made yourself dirty" (Deshpande 131), startled her: "I wondered whether the words held a double meaning for me"( Deshpande 131).However, at last, she became more mature ,shook off her guilty feelings and chose to live in her own will .It was Naren who taught her how to honour one's own will against all impediments and how to remain true to one's own self. With these resolutions she decided to return to Jayant. But before that she arranged for Mini's wedding with 'Akka's' money which she achieved through legacy. She had to go through the ordeal before choosing her duty. She couldn't decide at first what she would do? Whether she would pay for repairing the old house or she would pay for Mini's wedding. It was very difficult to take the right decision. Her nostalgic feelings, 'Kaka's' emotions, Atya and Sunanda Atya's security-all were associated with this old house and yet she boldly took the decision thinking that, "But why weep for a house, when so much more is being destroyed every day?"(Deshpande 159).

Naren's death had a great impact on her. She thought as if she had inherited Naren's simplicity. That's why She made up her mind not to compromise with Jayant anymore and to express her will firmly to him. Whether he approved it or not, she would remain true to herself and would not move away from her decision: "Now I would go back and see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty...That I was resigning from my job. That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing" (Deshpande 159-160). Thus, she came back to her own home, the home where she dwelt with Jayant, expressed her wishes clearly to Jayant and began her relationship with her husband with a new ease which was not there before. She realized that freedom was relative and each one was related to other in some way. She recalled old uncle's words: "The whole world is made up of interdependent parts. Why not you?" (Deshpande 16).

Jayant is an egoist, self-centred, hypocritical person. His male ego wanted to make him superior to his wife. He always desired total submission from the side of his wife Indu.

He didn't care a straw for Indu's will and wanted to impose his own decision on her. He even hindered Indu from writing according to her own impulses. In this aspect he resembled Mohan in Deshpande's "That Long Silence". Jayant even didn't approve Indu's intention of resigning from her job and concentrating fully on her writings. He was so self-centred that he wrote to Indu when she was in her paternal home and asked her to come back without paying any heed to the affairs of her family members.

Naren, on the other hand, was a self-assertive, self-determined figure who conducted a carefree, independent life. Most of the family members of Indu treated him as an 'outsider', a 'parasite' of their family and it hurt him much. That's why he separated himself from Indu's family. He supported Indu and gave her mental strength at the time of her dejection. He was guided by his own will. He left his good job as he didn't like that and led a life in his own way. He was compassionate enough towards the helpless and poor. He helped Vithal with books as he preferred reading. He had a great impact on Indu.

Kaka, being born and brought up in a traditional renowned middle-class joint family, wanted to preserve the dignity of the old house as much as possible. He was compassionate and sympathetic towards his family members and wanted to stay happily with all the family members in the old house. Though he was economically weak and had not enough money to renovate the old house, he couldn't tolerate the idea of selling his ancestral house which was not only a house but also a paradise to him. He tried to cling to the old glories of his family. That's why he reacted hearing Shyamrao's proposal of selling the old house to Shankarappa, the rich businessman and probably the would-be MLA of the locality: "Shyamrao...And how can you lower yourself to speak to that fellow...whose father didn't have the guts to enter our house...How dare that fellow talk of buying our house?" (Deshpande 83)

He believed in the traditional way of living, gave due respect to his elders and complied with 'Akka's' decision without any objection. Unlike other members of her family (except a few) who were hankering after 'Akka's' money and property, and who were very much offended when Akka's property went to Indu, he remained unperturbed. Though he always abided by the decision of 'Akka', he loved Indu so much that he was present in Indu's marriage registry ceremony defying 'Akka'. The burden of the family bent him down as he confessed to Indu that his sons considered him as a money plant without paying any heed to his financial condition. Indu's concern and sympathy was always with him.

Baba- Indu's father led the life of a care free man. After her mother's death, his father led the life of a vagabond giving Indu's responsibility on 'Akka'. He was very much modern and had the courage to defy 'Akka' unlike other members of his family. He supported Indu's higher education and her decision of marrying Jayant according to her own will. Even he also married a lady belonging to another caste defying 'Akka'. He didn't believe in the caste system of the conservative Hindu family and that's why he supported Indu when she married Jayant, a man belonging to another caste. He was a carefree man and didn't bother much about money. He tried to remain aloof from the family politics and never hesitated to stretch his helping hands to Kaka whenever it was possible for him.

'Akka', the head of Indu's family, was a dominating female figure. Though she was orthodox, traditional, she had concern for all the family members. But being an Indian woman, she too had to endure insult, humiliation and injuries in the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. Yet she didn't forget her responsibility and took care of her husband when he became paralyzed. She was the embodiment of the older order and bothered too much about caste and religion. She was so obsessed in that matter that even on her death-bed she refused to go to a hospital: "God knows what caste the nurses are...or the doctors. I couldn't drink a drop of water there"(Deshpande 24).She found in Indu, a suitable heir and made her the inheritor. Her whole endeavour was to keep the family intact.

Padmini, nicknamed as Mini, was the ideal woman of traditional patriarchal society as she was passive, submissive, meek and mild and never opposed to her elders. In fact, she had no sayings of her own. She never protested against the dowry system of marriage. To her what was important was the marriage and not the man to whom she would marry due to the fact that the traditional society abuses the spinsters.

'Kaki' was the representative of those types of women of a big family who worked from dawn to dusk to feed their family members and to take care of them. It's not that she never grumbled against it, but rather she wanted to get relief from the burden of this big family. She cares a foot for the preservation of the dignity of the 'old house'. Rather she wanted to shift to a small house where there would be accommodation of modern kitchen tools. Her sole concern was to get her daughter married. She participated in the family arguments and grumbled against the family members who resided elsewhere, but occasionally visited the house leaving all the responsibilities of this big house upon her husband.

'Atya' is a motherly figure who had love and affection for all the family members, especially for Indu because she regarded her as her own child. She was a childless widow to whom the 'old house' was the only security. After the demolition of the house, she came to live with Indu and Jayant.

We can also notice the evidence of gender discrimination in this novel. Indu's family too, gives priority to the education of the male children of the family rather than females. Indu herself recalled: "When his girls were in school, Madhav-kaka had never known what class they were in. But Sunil's education was so scrupulously and harshly supervised by him..." (Deshpande 140). In the patriarchal Indian society, rearing up the children is the responsibility of the female members of the family only and nothing to do with their male counterparts. That's why Indu's father remained unmoved leaving Indu's responsibilities on Akka and Atya. Even the orthodox women of this kind of family disapprove those men who want to help their female counterparts in rearing up their children as it deviates from the traditional 'Hindu male role' (Deshpande 140). This was the reason for defaming Vinayak 'kaka' and attributing his wife as 'inadequate as a wife and mother' (Deshpande 140).

### **Conclusion:**

Deshpande portrays the image of the so-called middle-class Indian society through her novels-their traditional orthodox attitude, gender discrimination, ignorance, superstitions all. Her heroines are a mixture of tradition and modernity. They have to struggle much to establish their identities in society. She depicted it very well that not only the men but also the orthodox, conservative women are responsible for the sufferings and plights of those women who are aware of their existence in society. Even sometimes the women are more ferocious than men. When we observe Deshpande's characters, we feel as if they are living beings and not merely fictitious characters and with all these characteristics Deshpande remains unique.

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