

## **A Brief Journey through Shashi Deshpande's *If I Die Today*: A Critical Study**

**Kana Mondal**

Former student of English Department,  
Burdwan University  
&  
Assistant Teacher,  
Babuidanga Jr. High School  
Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal.

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### **Abstract:**

Shashi Deshpande, a renowned name in the galaxy of Indian English Literature, deals mainly with the predicament of the middle class, educated Indian women and their struggle to establish their identity in the traditional patriarchal society. The unique feature of Deshpande's writing is that the Indian women can relate themselves to the fictional characters and think that the novelist is speaking about their own lives. Her novels are imbued with the theme of 'Indian-ness'. One can smell Indian belief, sensibility, culture, prejudices, tradition, superstitions, male chauvinism in her novels. But along with these common themes, she tried her hand with a new genre of 'detective fiction' in her famous novel, "If I Die Today". She projected the criminal issues in this novel as the murder of two characters and the revelation of the main culprit is under the plot. This novel casts light on the criminal issues that lies within characters and the tensions of the characters, their suspicion against one another and the determination of the protagonist to resolve the mystery against all impediments. This article tries to focus on the theme of Indian-ness, culture, superstition, male-chauvinism and the genre of crime fiction.

**Keywords:** Indian-ness, male chauvinism, crime fiction, criminal psychology.

### **Indian-ness:**

'Unity in diversity' is the main feature of India. What is most surprising is that irrespective of its different languages, races, religions and castes, they carry out the same beliefs, customs and conventions. Even from ancient times, travellers, who came in India from different countries, noticed some common features among the people of India. Now what is Indian-ness? The term is rather difficult to express simply. One can say that it is an

abstract concept of sharing the same feelings, attitudes, desires, strength, weakness, tradition, ideology, cultures, beliefs, customs and convention. Indian sensibility is the other part of Indian-ness. Despite of their differences, they remain the same in that sense. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, wrote in his "Discovery of India": "The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me; it was an emotional experience which overpowered me...It was absurd, of course to think of India or any country as a kind of anthropomorphic entity. I did not do so...Yet I think with a long cultural background and a common outlook on life develops a spirit that is peculiar to it and that is impressed on all its children, however much they may differ among themselves" (qtd. in Kakar, Little India). Indian-ness also includes within its sphere the behaviour of the Indians towards their superiors and subordinates in organization and towards their elders and little ones in the family. Cultures and beliefs, that they learn from their childhood, are so deeply enrooted in their mind that they can't get rid of it totally. Besides, Indians' yearnings for the presence of their near and dear ones at the time of their disparity and their longings for joint family are unique. Indian concepts of family bonding and parents-children relationships are found nowhere in this world. The parents' affinity towards their children even when their children become adults are unparalleled. H.H Shri Swami Vishveshshwarnandaji, the Guest of Honour at the inaugural function of the 53rd All India English Teachers' Conference on Indian Sensibility held on 18th December, 2008 at Gurukul Kangri University, Haridwar, stated, "I confess that when the subject came to me I was searching left and right for a good answer, via computer and so on, but I was not satisfied. I consulted writers and highly learned people to get their opinion regarding this Indian sensibility in Indian English Literature. Though a lot of different, quite interesting answer I got, I was still not convinced to catch the right point" (qtd. in Sawant 03). He thinks that the Indian sensibility is nothing but "a treasure in the heart of the Indian people, to be more precise, it is God's gift". The Indians inherit these typical features throughout the ages. The philosophy, ideals, cultures, strength and weakness of the Indians differentiate them from the rest of the world. Shashi Deshpande stresses on this feature of Indian-ness in her novels. In "If I Die Today" she not only projected this Indian culture, beliefs, superstitions, and the male dominated society, but also makes a disparity between this eastern and western cultures through the characters of her novel. Anand, Shyam and Neeta Puri's son, preferred to say 'cookies' rather than biscuits as he was born and brought up in U.S.A. He thought U.S.A to be his homeland rather than India. On the other hand, Manju, in spite of being a college-lecturer, could not forsake her mother's belief of not having any preparation like purchasing clothes for the expected child as it is regarded as an

ill-omen in India. Dr. Kulkarni, though very much western in his outward appearance, could not forsake the Indian craving for a male child. He desperately misbehaved with his daughter only due to the fact that she was not a male but a female child. His misdemeanour towards his daughter was enough to break off her self-confidence. Again, in India, many women are beaten up by their husbands and in-laws for their inability to give birth to a male-child. Nayana, the maid of Jaya in Dadar flat in Deshpande's *"That Long Silence"* was threatened to drag out of the house by her husband if she fails to give birth to a baby-boy. So, we can see that the Indian craving for a male child is present in all the tiers of society; be it among the lower class or among the upper middle class. On the other hand, Neeta Puri, the famous radiologist, wanted to cling to the Indian concept of joint family and she desperately longed for her mother to stay with them. She wanted to settle down in India, her motherland. But her husband Shyam, the surgeon, vehemently opposed to the idea and he preferred to settle down in U.S.A. Besides, Indian males, irrespective of their social position, leave the responsibility of domestic chores wholly on their wives. They presume, as if, they are not born for these petty works. While speaking about Dr. Ashok, the surgeon, Manju rightly observed, "It has nothing to do with his being surgeon. It's the Indian male. Look at the Shahs. Dr. Shah is not a surgeon, he's an anaesthetist, but the pattern's the same, isn't it? It never ever occurs to them that they might do something for their wives. They think that they've played their role by bringing home a pay packet" (Deshpande 28). Surprisingly enough many Indian women get habituated with this traditional role of house-making. Meera, Dr. Ashok's wife was that kind of woman. She enjoyed the domestic drudgery and was ready to obey her husband. Manju rightly adjudged Ashok, the typical Indian male when Guru asked her that Ashok would serve her in the Dean's party: " 'Ashok!' I snorted. 'I wonder if he's ever served himself. Meera waits hand and foot on him'" (Deshpande 28).

### **Male-chauvinism:**

Male chauvinism is an abstract concept. It is man's feeling of being superior to woman. Oxford English Dictionary defines 'male-chauvinism' as the 'male prejudice against women; the belief that men are superior in terms of ability, intelligence, etc. The phrase 'male chauvinism' was first used in 1935 in the play "Till the Day I Die" by Clifford Odets. Adam Jukes argues that the concept of 'masculinity' is the reason of 'male-chauvinism'. It can be said a product of the society. In India, a male child is treated as a privileged one, a superior one in comparison to a female child. It won't be superfluous if we say that women induced this feeling among men. They instigate this feeling and yet, surprisingly, they become the

victim of 'male-chauvinism'. Media planner Ananya Ahuja remarked, "In India, little boys are told that they are stronger than girls. That sparks off a dominating streak in them that stays with them throughout their lives and manifests in various ways, be it teasing a woman on the road or treating the wife like a sex toy in the bed" (qtd in Ashraf, Hindustan Times). In most of the Indian families, mothers prefer their male child to female ones and treated them as superior beings. Thus, they bring forth the feeling of 'masculinity' among the male children. Their 'ego' makes them so proud that they think that women are incapable of taking the right decision. There are ample evidences of 'male-chauvinism' in Shashi Deshpande's novels. *If I Die Today* is not an exception to this trend. Most of the Indian males do not pay any heed to the longings, yearnings and the decisions of their wives. They take their wives for granted in most of the cases. Dr. Ashok thought his wife Meera would forgive him if she came to know of his extra-marital relationship. He told Manju that he couldn't forsake his wife and children for that woman with whom he flirted. He always took her for granted and didn't think that his wife could forsake him for his affair with another lady. Rather, he thought of not forsaking his wife for his sin, as if he was doing some favour to her. Again, Jayant in Deshpande's "Roots and Shadows" took the decision for his wife Indu, his wife. He thought he would decide whether she would resign from her job or not. Dr.Kulkarni mistreated his daughter as he wanted not a female but a male child. Possibly it was the reason of his indifference to his wife. On the other hand, Prem, the famous pathologist and the husband of the protagonist Manju, the college lecturer, became apathetic to his wife when his wife informed him about her pre-marital relationship with a man, named Rajiv. He remained aloof of her yearnings, longings and loneliness. Practically, before their marriage he had no relation with Manju and yet he demands her devotion to him even at that pre-marital phrase. It is, as if, sacrilegious in part of Manju to have affair with the other man even when she didn't know Prem. Manju bemoaned, "...A marriage. You start off expecting so many things. And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectation fall of" (Deshpande 26). The Indian male demand complete fidelity from their wives but they never committed to do so by themselves. They behave hypocritically. Rani, Dean's wife, had a command over all the doctors of the campus. Manju became astonished to see that even Prem could not avoid her charm. Dr.Kulkarni got engaged in an extramarital affair with Rani. Ashok, too, has an extramarital affair with a nurse called Leena in his chamber. Shyam, the surgeon, gave preference to his own will and decided to come back to U.S.A. against the wish of Neeta, his wife and the radiologist. In spite of her social position Neete was helpless here as a woman. She had no other option than to follow her husband because if she wished to give preference to her own

will, she had to break off the marriage. As an Indian woman she could not do that due to her affection to her child. This is the predicament of most of the Indian women. Most of the time they have to follow the wishes of their husbands against their own wishes. Again, the Indian male can't tolerate the superior status of their wives. Tom, Cynthia's husband, felt morbid as he was only a game teacher and his wife was a successful paediatrician. He exclaimed with grief that he could only be Cynthia's husband and nothing else. He was suffering from inferiority complex. On the other hand, Cynthia confided in Manju that she could make Tony happy if she only performed the role of a house-wife. Besides, the Indian concept of man-woman relationship is quite different from that of the western culture. Though 'live-in' relationship is quite common in western culture, most of the Indians abhor the idea of living together before marriage. That's why Meera deprecated Guru's earlier act of living with a girl and impregnating her before marriage.

### **Crime fiction:**

Crime fiction is a kind of narrative that centres round the criminal issues or murder and the revelation of the murderer or the culprit at the end through a proper investigation by a detective. There are elements of mystery and suspense in a crime fiction. In the history of English literature Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie overwhelmed the readers with their enthralling detective fictional stories. Poe's C. Auguste Dupin, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes became legend to the lovers of the detective stories. Shashi Deshpande tried her hand with this genre in this particular novel. Though it's not that kind of a detective novel as there is no investigator in the traditional sense, but the elements of crime, mystery and suspense are there in this novel. Being a lover of Agatha Christie's novels, Manju, the protagonist, was determined to unravel the mystery that hovers around the hospital campus. The story unfolds in an apparently quiet medical campus. But the story takes a u- turn with the arrival of Guru, a dying cancer patient. He tried to unmask the real men under the camouflage of gentility of the so-called reputed doctors of the campus. Once Guru said to Manju, "I can say anything and get away with it. No one dares to argue with a dying man, you know" (Deshpande 09). He had the extraordinary ability of making one intimate. In Manju's eyes Guru was a 'saint' who made a change in every one's life of the campus and purified them by exposing the evils within them. Though he was Dr. Ashok's relative he became familiar with all the doctors and their families in the campus. Even the Dean of the hospital threw a party in his honour. It is in this party that Guru mentioned the name of Prabhakar Tambe, the labour-leader, and his death in the

hospital. The irritation of the doctors began at this point. Manju noticed this thing and realized that there was some mystery in his death. The suspense of the plot began from this point but the climax was yet to reach. Manju was desperate to know the truth. But no one confided in her, not even Guru. Apart from that death mystery the scandals of the families were gradually going to reveal. The scandal of the shah's came out and Vimala, Mrs. Shah almost confined herself in her house at this revelation. Sudden death of Guru in his sleep at the night of the party in Ashok's house shocked every one of them. Later the discovery that Guru's was not a normal death, but a murder shrugged almost all of them. What was most hurting was that the murderer was one of them. Every one of the doctors had the strong motive to kill Guru. Prem said, "Plenty of people who would have wanted him dead, I mean. I myself" (Deshpande 70). Deshpande merged up successfully the external and internal weather. As the summer seemed unbearable with its scorching heat and humidity, the internal situation too became worst. Like any other detective fiction, Deshpande was also successful to project an array of suspects in this novel. Suspense and tension hang over the plot. Strong suspicion against Dr. Kulkarni and Dr. Shyam began to grow. Anand informed Manju that he noticed Mriga, Dr. Kulkarni's daughter to burn something in the garden. He guessed that possibly she fired up the evidences. Manju could no longer remain stoic. She decided to unfasten the mystery of Prabhakar Tambe's death and Prem's connection with it. She wanted Ashok to disclose that cryptic matter. But Ashok did not expose the truth. She became restless and went to Tony to know the truth. Tony did not reveal anything clearly. But generalized the hypocrisy and arrogance of the doctors. Tony's outburst in public that he knew who murdered Guru kept his life in danger. As the plot proceeds, readers become more engrossed in the mystery and suspense of the novel. The story makes them eager to know who the culprit is. But the story is so neatly knitted that it is almost improbable to guess the real culprit. Like Manju, the readers too are in search of the questions:

1. What's the matter with Prabhakar Tambe?

2. Who killed Guru?

Even Prem did not respond to Manju's enquiry about Prabhakar Tambe. Rather he was offended for trespassing into their professional lives. Similarly, none of the doctors liked Tony's intrusion into their lives like Guru; not even his wife Cynthia. Later, Tony's sudden death made them dumb. His autopsy report clearly hinted at the fact that he, too, was murdered. An ominous feeling looms over the background. The Dean of the hospital became

exasperated at Tony's murder. His sudden absence from the campus just after Tony's death made them motionless. An evil premonition hugged almost all of them. It is, as if, they were going to meet another death, the death of the Dean. The doctors and their wives were present at the Dean's house to be with Rani, Dean's wife at her crucial moment. But the sudden arrival of the Dean and his revelation that he went to meet Shethji (the management) to let him know that he wished to resign from the post of Dean, relieved them from the tension. Again, the real culprit laid behind the curtain.

But the death of Guru and then Tony almost decomposed Manju. The fact that her husband Prem also disdained Guru and Tony tortured her more. She also thought that Dr.Kulkarni might also be the murderer as she saw him near the place where Tony's dead body was found that night. Again, Neeta's behaviour and her outward appearance made her feel that her husband, Shyam might also be the culprit. Here she resembles the traditional investigator in the sense that like them, she also suspects almost every one of them. Dr. Gautam, Dr. Shah were also not out of her list of suspicion. Apparently, Dr. Vidya, the gynaecologist and the sister of the Dean seemed unaffected by the incidents. But what is most surprising is that unlike the professional detectives who investigate into a case by taking the alibi of the suspected people, Manju did nothing. Rather various characters like Vimala, Cynthia, Neeta came to her and unfolded the stories of their private lives. Although we must keep in mind the fact that Manju is a traditional educated Indian woman with her drawbacks and limitations, and she is not a professional investigator. Neither Deshpande's novel is the so-called crime fiction. However, the readers enjoy the mystery and are eager to know the main culprit. The death of Guru and Tony had a great impact on the doctors. Prem, too, could not keep himself aloof from the impact. Dr.Ram, the present Dean intended Prem to hold the post as he wanted to resign from the post. But Prem was reluctant to do that. The whole atmosphere became contaminated. The doctors wanted to leave the place. Neeta gloomily informed Manju that Shyam, her husband, was going to leave the place for U.S.A. Once Prem, the pathologist, also expressed his desire to leave the campus. The guilty feelings regarding the death of Prabhakar Tambe dejected Prem totally. He was suffering from the prick of conscience. He could no longer remain silent and he unburdened his feelings by exposing the truth to Manju. He confided in her that the death of Tambe was due to the negligence of the doctors. Dr.Kulkarni, the cardiologist and Dr. Shyam, the surgeon were involved in that case. As a pathologist, he was compelled to change the cause of death in the autopsy report of Tambe on the insistence of the Dean. The Dean was afraid of the chaos that

could happen in the campus if the truth leaked out and that's why he wished to suppress the truth. Since then they had been suffering from the guilty feelings. As the external reality quenched its thirst at the appearance of the monsoon, Manju's inner world also soothed itself by the revelation of her husband. Theirs all misunderstandings were over and they came closer to each other. After knowing the truth Manju got relief as she realized the fact that Prem was not the culprit. After the revelation, readers also came to know of the mystery regarding the death of Prabhakar Tambe. But the murderer of Guru and Tony are still unknown to them. Then the culprit came out of the shadow all of a sudden. Manju consulted Dr. Goutam during her second pregnancy as she enjoyed his levity rather than Dr. Vidya's high seriousness. But at the time of labour pain Dr. Goutam was out of reach. At this Dr. Vidya took the initiative and proposed to pick Manju and Dr. Prem up to the hospital. No one could guess her inner motives at this point. Instead of going to the hospital she wanted to kill them and she exposed the fact that she herself murdered Guru and Tony and now she wanted to kill Prem because she thought that Prem wanted to usurp the post of her brother under the pretence of denying it. Though her motive was not strong, it became evident that she was very much possessive of her brother and did not tolerate anyone to come close to her brother. She murdered Guru because Guru influenced her brother and under his influence, he decided to disclose the scandal of the hospital regarding the death of Tambe. She was afraid that this revelation could stain the honour of her brother. That's why she put an end to Guru's life. She killed Tony because Tony bragged of knowing the killer of Guru. And now it is the turn of Prem as she could not tolerate any other person as the Dean of the hospital in place of her brother. Her love and respect to her brother was huge. But there was nothing physical in that relationship. Possibly she was indebted to her brother because he helped her in becoming doctor against the wishes of their conservative family and gave her an independent life. But the survival of Prem and Manju was rather dramatic. In the conventional crime fiction, there is generally a fight-scene between the investigator and the culprit and ultimately, the culprit surrenders. Here Deshpande drifted away from the common scene. Manju, here, had nothing to do against the attack of Dr. Vidya as she was on the verge of giving birth to a baby at that time and was engrossed in her labour pain. What did the miracle was the screaming of Manju out of labour pain and the re-appearance of progenitress in Vidya as Prem reminded later, '...the final cry of a woman giving birth, suddenly brought out the trained obstetrician in her. I myself think that it was the miracle of birth, of life, that brought her back to her normal self' (D147). Here dramatically, the criminal herself regained her normal self and rescued the victims at the crucial moment and surrendered herself. Possibly she was tired of killing and



wanted to get rid of it. However, the families regained the normal atmosphere of the campus after the disclosure of the murderer. Keeping aside all the misunderstandings the couples reconciled to each other. Neeta was happy as Shyam decided to settle down in India and not in U.S.A. Vimala became more reasonable and sent out her children to play with other children. Manju named her new-born baby 'Karishma' as they thought that the baby did the miracle. However, Deshpande did not clearly mention what physical punishment Vidya would get for her offence. Rather, she laid emphasis on her mental sufferings. The cloud of mystery and suspense were over after the criminal was identified and the lives of the doctors and their families were gradually going to be normal after that.

The uniqueness of Shashi Deshpande lies in the fact that her characters suffer, misunderstand each other but ultimately, they reconciled to each other. Possibly, she keeps faith in the happy ending and inner strength of mind. Even in "If I Die Today, she perfectly blended the elements of suspense and thriller with the predicaments of Indian women, their problems and the ego of the Indian male. Thus, in this novel Shashi Deshpande intercepted from the conventional style of crime fiction only to focus on the other aspects of life- the personal lives of the Indian women, their problems, sorrows, sufferings, aspirations and yearnings. However, the readers enjoyed the thriller very much and also at the same time they become aware of Indian society and its men and women.

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