

## STANDING AT THE CROSS-ROADS: SHASHI DESHPANDE'S HEROINES

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### **Abstract:**

*Shashi Deshpande's novels represent the modern Indian women trying to redefine their roles and rediscovering their social positions and social relationships. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life characterized by joint family, rigid caste system, patriarchal domination to name a few. However, no matter how modern they try to be in their ways of thinking, yet they cling to their past bringing into forefront their tendency to negotiate with modernity. This study aims at analyzing negotiation with modernity on the part of Shashi Deshpande's protagonists through a close analysis of her novels Small Remedies, Roots and Shadows, The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence, A Matter of Time, Moving On and The Binding Vine. Shashi Deshpande has taken on herself the vocation to record the unique struggle of her women characters to document their heightened sensitivity in their agonized perception of their new social roles in times of a historical rupture within the traditional ethos. Their social, individual and functional roles have been explained by having recourse to the philosophical speculations of Bourdieu and Habermas.*

**Keywords:** philosophical speculations, traditional ethos, negotiation.

Modern society is the creation of human beings, the experience of which heralds a sense of freedom and endless possibilities for a brighter future. This new idea of freedom brought in with modernity involves time consciousness. The time span upholding rational thinking and secular approach is unique to modernity. Time here means a duration which is ever changing and looks towards the future than the past. The individual of this modern society considers himself/herself not only as a creator of this society but also as a person with a vision for the future. Unlike traditional society bound by rigidity and static structures, modernity symbolizes flexibility in social relations. Rejection of tradition; importance and emphasis on individualism are unique traits of modernity. Modernity lies in discovering oneself; defining identity, not following a dictate.

Women have been under subjugation of authority in the form of man, community and religion from time immemorial. These forms of authority consider themselves moral watchdogs of women, trying to keep a control of their lives as well. Women have always been denied individual identity; their actions, their thoughts are all dictated upon by society. They have no choice but to submit, to accept. Shashi Deshpande's novels represent the modern Indian women trying to redefine their roles and rediscovering their social positions and social relationships. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life characterized by joint family, rigid caste system, patriarchal domination to name a few. Owing to their rebellious tendency, the protagonists raise their voice against the patriarchal setup and start their journey in search of individuality. They have an inner strength that is little known of. However, no matter how modern they try to be in their ways of thinking, yet they cling to their past bringing into forefront their tendency to negotiate with modernity.

This study aims at analyzing negotiation with modernity on the part of Shashi Deshpande's protagonists through a close analysis of her novels Small Remedies, Roots and Shadows, The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence, A Matter of Time, Moving On and The Binding Vine. The term negotiation connotes a dialogue between various interlocutors over the ensemble of particular socio - cultural norms,

attitudes and practices that was prevalent in India during late 1980s to early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Shashi Deshpande has taken on herself the vocation to record the unique struggle of her women characters to document their heightened sensitivity in their agonized perception of their new social roles in times of a historical rupture within the traditional ethos. Their social, individual and functional roles have been explained by having recourse to the philosophical speculations of Bourdieu and Habermas.

Essence of modernity lies in portrayal of women and men in Shashi Deshpande's novels. Her novels depict a psychological journey into the minds of urban middle - class educated Indian women standing at the cross - roads of tradition. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists present a contradictory picture of being in 'ennui' yet lively; trying to assert their freedom while holding on to their past. This particular aspect of her novels show how the protagonists want to come out of their shell bound by traditional norms and custom but they cannot completely let go off their past. They are negotiating with their lives at every point while trying to assert themselves yet taking care of the social structure. Shashi Deshpande's women are strong characters who can take care of themselves. They do not want any support from men to lead their lives. In the words of Urmi of *The Binding Vine* (1998)

"Or do they think it's a sign of a breakdown? Yes, that's right, that's what they are afraid of, that's why they all watch me so carefully, so anxiously. That's why they want Kishore to be here - to pick up the bits and pieces. And put them together again? .... What's broken can't be mended. But I'm not broken. I'm not going to break." (BV 19)

While negotiating with modernity, Deshpande's characters reveal a close affinity with existentialist view of life. Deshpande borrows Kierkegaard's words to understand one's position, "Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards." (MT 98)

Shashi Deshpande shows how Sumi accepts her fate and moves ahead with her life confidently; however she has the desire to question Gopal. She questions tradition and the role of men in society but does not ignore her social responsibility.

"... if I meet Gopal I will ask him one question, just one, the question no one has thought of. What is it, Gopal, I will ask him, that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on his family and all that he owns? Because, and I remember this so clearly, it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How then can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give me an answer to this?" (MT 27)

Indian modernism can be interpreted solely in terms of her fundamentals, fundamentals which predominantly have a social bias. Unlike the presuppositions of Western feminism, where focus is on individualism, Indian feminist notion emphasizes on the collective self rather than the individual self. Modernism in Indian perspective can be considered significant only if social norms, traditions, dogmas and beliefs are affected and transformed. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, daughters are found to rebel against their mother.

According to Shalmalee Palekar,

"The conflict between mother and daughter is presented by the author as a conflict between tradition and modernity, a clash between freedom and dependence, of the assertion of selfhood and the need for love in relationships." (Palekar 2005:60)

The protagonists of the novels of Shashi Deshpande clamor for change but within the accepted social structure. The protagonists do not want to tread into the path of reinterpreting their roles. Their only desire is to lead a life of dignity and self-respect within their anchorage in married lives. Like, Jaya in *That Long Silence* is symbolic of sacrifice motivated by her desire to establish her dignity and identity approved by a patriarchal social set up. Jaya negotiates with modernity by accepting her role as an apparently satisfied housewife. She gives up her writing career and her feelings for Kamat. In a way she suppresses her individuality in spite of not being happy in her marriage.

scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage (TLS 144).

Jaya's words explain her condition of being trapped in an unhappy marriage yet not having the courage to come out of it. Urban middle class women are typically represented by Jaya who is not ignorant of liberal Western ideas, yet she cannot escape from the claws of chauvinist notions. These notions are dictated to her as having social and cultural sanction by those around her. Inspire of her efforts to portray herself as a perfect woman and mother she finds herself lonely and estranged.

In the words of Habermas,

"In their cooperative interactions each must ascribe rationality to the other, at least provisionally. In certain circumstances, it may turn out that such a presupposition was unwarranted. Contrary to expectation, it might happen that the other person cannot account for her actions and utterances and that we cannot see how she could justify her behavior. ... This supposition states that a subject who is acting intentionally is capable, in the right circumstances, of providing a more or less plausible reason for why she did or did not behave or express herself this way rather than some other way. Unintelligible, odd, bizarre, or enigmatic expressions prompt follow - up questions because they implicitly contradict an unavoidable presupposition of communication and therefore trigger puzzled or irritated reactions." (BNR: 36)

Instances of such examples are widespread in Shashi Deshpande's novels. In fact it is interaction at the individual level but within the social framework which make her novels stand apart. Such examples can be drawn from interaction between various characters in *Roots and Shadows*. When Akka took care of her paralyzed husband it marked her adherence to social norms and her moral obligation to marriage. However, her reluctance to let him meet his mistress asserted her sense of individuality and self - esteem. Her remark, "Listen to me. It's my turn now. I have listened to you long enough." (RS 71) shows her level of interaction with her husband. On the other hand, Sunanda's sole motive to please Akka, representative of patriarchy in the family, was for material benefit. Adopting herself to her circumstances and environment, she became "cunning, greedy, devious and unscrupulous." (RS 32)

The kind of individual interaction within social network in Shashi Deshpande's novels is reflective also of Bourdieu's habitus which "links the social and the individual because the experiences may be unique in their particular contents, but are shared in terms of their structure with other of the same social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, nationality, region and so forth." (Maton 2012: 53)

Shashi Deshpande's novels emphasize Habermas's remark that conventional norms functioned uncontestedly and with ease in a traditional society. The "post conventional" social order has led to a gradual loss of unquestioned authority of customs and traditions. They can play the motivating role only when they are considered legitimate. Being a staunch supporter of caste system, Akka disapproved of Indu's inter - caste marriage. However, in spite of this disapproval she left all her wealth for Indu. She showed her faith and confidence in Indu regarding matters of wealth and property. This action of Akka is representative of her 'modernist perspective' in spite of her rigid religious bias.

Habermas finds the question of individual choices as restricted by the reality of our social tendency of holding one another responsible, taking each other to be worthy of appreciation or reprimand, and believing in other's capability of justifying their actions. All action according to Habermas, is teleological in the sense that it is goal oriented. However, depending on what the goal is and how an actor believes it to be attainable, different action types emerge.

Therefore, from Habermas's point of view, "The basic aspiration is a desire to be recognized for who one is; not for some rational, idealized version of who one ought to be, and certainly not for being what others want one to be." (Anderson 2012: 106)

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande portrays Mukta as an educated woman whose knowledge and experience have given her a sane view of human relations. She does not think it scandalous

on the part of a married woman to attend a lonely man who is already dead or about to die. That is why she rebukes Jaya for leaving Kamat alone at the final moment. Mukta's action emphasizes Habermas's point of view.

Bourdieu's idea of habitus also points out a similar viewpoint when it refers to one's notion of being free, yet being ruled by assumptions about other's conduct, behavior and attitude while taking everyday decisions.

As Bourdieu states, "all of my thinking started from this point: how can behavior be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" (1994d: 65)

"We are faced at any moment with a variety of possible forks in that path, or choices of actions and beliefs. This range of choices depends on our current context (the position we occupy in a particular social field), but at the same time which of these choices are visible to us and which we do not see as possible are the result of our past journey, for our experiences have helped shape our vision. Which choices we choose to make, therefore, depends on the range of options visible to us, and on our dispositions (habitus), the embodied experiences of our journey. Our choices will then in turn shape our future possibilities, for any choice involves foregoing alternatives and sets us on a particular path that further shapes our understanding of ourselves and of the world." (Maton 2012: 52-53)

Bourdieu's Habitus concentrates on human actions, feelings, thoughts, emotions and their existence. It focuses on our past, how it influences our present and consequently affects our future. Shashi Deshpande's representation of Mira in *Binding Vine* highlights how past experiences play a part in shaping one's present and one's future. Mira, a victim of marital rape, develops an intense dislike for sex. She writes poems but her bitterness for love stops her from writing poems on love. Before her marriage, her poems dealt with topics like the road builders, singers, etc. and after marriage those expressed her feelings aroused by the traumatic experiences of her own life. Mira's transformation is reflective of Bourdieu's habitus which aims to transform one's way of seeing the world. In *Dark Holds No Terrors* Sarita's mother's childhood experience of being treated as unwanted affected her personality and developed in her preference for a male child and bitterness for her daughter Sarita. Sarita's maternal grandmother, deserted by her husband, had to bring up her two daughters at her parental home. Sarita's mother was one of them. She grew into a silent and docile woman with "eyes joyless arid, the expression one of indifference." (DHNT 143) Her childhood feelings of insecurity and unwantedness have affected her personality and motivated her to seek power and cling to it. On the other hand Sarita's experience of being rejected by her mother in a way influences her decisions in future and leads her to negotiate with modernity in spite of her modern outlook.

Habitus is the link not only between past, present and future, but also between the social and the individual. Bourdieu further stresses the importance of one's idea about one's history, and how that idea plays a major role in shaping our future choices actions.

Shashi Deshpande reiterates Bourdieu's ideas when she says, "The truth, perhaps, is that whatever we do, we are always giving the past a place in our lives." (MT 100)

The present day lifestyle with its endless demands leaves modern man entangled in an anxious state of mind. A never ending choice is always at his fingertip leading him towards an alienated position. Habermas links autonomy to the development of social structures. He believes "Personal autonomy initially has its value and function in the context of navigating choices, the more complex a society becomes and the more choices individuals must face, the richer and more developed their autonomy has to be in order to be able to fulfill that function successfully."

Bourdieu defines habitus as a property of social agents that comprises a "structured and structuring structure" (1994d: 170). It is "structured by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is "structuring" in that one's habitus helps to shape one's

present and future practices. It is a "structure" in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned. This "structure" comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (1990c: 53). (Maton 2008: 51)

Bourdieu argues that in order to understand interaction between people or to explain social phenomenon, it is insufficient to look at what is said, or what happened. It is necessary to examine the social space in which interactions, transactions and events occurred, (Bourdieu 2005: 148)

Actions are termed traditional when their ends and means are fixed by customs and social norms. Being habitual it is taken for granted. In his four fold classification of social action, the last one is traditional action which is fixed by customs and traditions. Such action is habitual in nature. The typical problem of Deshpande's protagonists remains the inner conflict between surrendering attitude to tradition and rebellion against social set up. Habermas rightly pointed out that for most people the moral life primarily concerns judgments of right and wrong either prospectively or retrospectively. (P 129)

Indu, the heroine of *Roots and Shadows* (1992) left her home at the age of eighteen to get married according to her choice. This action represented her as a harbinger of new generation who reviews everything with reason and new vision. She explains the ideals of detachment and liberation and tries to achieve them. However, unfortunately enough she fails. Inspire of Jayant, her husband, failing to live up to her expectation and betraying her hopes for harmony, peace and happiness she fails in her attempts of liberation. Inability to enfranchise the traditional background in which she is reared forces Indu to negotiate with her modern outlook to the extent that she starts believing that she cannot be complete without her husband.

"Now I dress the way I want. As I please.' As I please? No, that's not true. When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When I undress, I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him? And I can't blame him.... It's the way I want it to be." (RS 49)

As Habermas puts it the basic (modern) aspiration at issue here is a desire to be recognized for one who is; not for some national, idealized version of who one ought to be, and certainly not for being what others want one to be. (p 106)

Shashi Deshpande's novels record strivings for adjustments for three or four generations. Change is inevitable in any society. New rulers with new set of rules and regulations have come. More and more educational institutions have come into being. Increasing rate of literacy and education are enlightening women too. Industrialization has caused concentration of a lot of people into urban centres while the pressure of rising population as well as the land reforms (even if limited ones) are stirring to rural life. Unemployment has appeared as a big problem and the competition for jobs. People living under these conditions are trying somehow to make life possible for themselves.

Modern Indian women of the new era felt the need of changing the patriarchal structure at last and as a result they refused to be within the sheltered cage any more. They attempt to redefine their relationship with tradition while reevaluating their roles within the family gradually realizing that "new bonds replace old, that's all." (RS 14) This interrogating the traditional social set up has given a new dimension to modernity. The problem of being a female has always been highlighted by Shashi Deshpande in her novels. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* brings out the pain of being a 'female':

"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. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. 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." (RS 158)

All of Deshpande's characters are rebel in this sense. They are born to fight - both with the society at large and within the family in particular. Also they redefine their own roles in the society. The long

nurtured role of daughter, wife or mother is not accepted at its face value by them; rather they add new meaning to the lives of new women.

The advent of modernity in the recent past has witnessed a complete change in the traditional pattern of parent child relationship. Indian society has some specific problems in this sphere and naturally some unwanted incidents occur due to generation gap. The novels of Shashi Deshpande accord due importance to this aspect.

Shashi Deshpande's women challenge their victimization and look for a new balance of power between the two sexes; however their concept of liberty is not borrowed from the West. They prefer to conform to their filial demands to ensure domestic harmony. They advocate compromise over revolt to avoid discord in their family relationship. Modernity, in terms of their new position in the society has been highlighted by Shashi Deshpande. Shashi Deshpande is in the quest of creating a 'new woman' out of her protagonists who belong to different culture, religious and linguistic backgrounds. The novelist is against the patriarchal establishment which cripples the innate creativity of women.

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