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**Reality and essentiality of women in Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On* and  
Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar***

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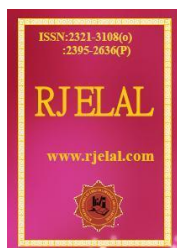
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**Abstract**

This study is primarily based on the selected novels of Pulitzer Prize winning, Afro-American writer, Alice Walker and winner of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, the well-established Indian English writer, Shashi Deshpande. The condition of women in both the cultures, Indian as well as Afro-American is found to be the similar in terms of their anguish and their subsequent empowerment. Indian women - treated as subalterns since ages - are shown to speak out in protest and ultimately overcome their stereotyped position and suffering which is inflicted more in psychological terms.

**Introduction**

The philosophy of Existentialism found its significance during World War II when Europe was in a state of utter chaos and destruction. It is essentially associated with the condition of man, his act of living, his state of being free and the directions he takes to use his freedom. Existentialism asserts that man's freedom is hampered by the limitations imposed on him and so the negative aspects of his existence like anxiety, pain, death, etc., are

seen as the features of man's reality. It focuses on the individual entity's quest of meaning in life amidst nothingness. Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, are mainly credited for their works and writings about Existentialism.

As Existentialism is a very broad term which deals with different concepts of many philosophers, this proposed study would primarily be based on the Existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, who has given the

movement its definitive expression. Sartre was an active participant in the French Resistance Movement in World War II. He served in the French army and also remained a captive in Germany for a certain period of time. At this time of crisis, he started questioning the meaning and reality of his existence. This study would deal with some of the important features of Sartrean Existentialism like existence precedes essence, existential humanism, man as a subject rather than an object, freedom of choice, authenticity, quest for identity and meaning, guilt, alienation, death, anxiety, despair, etc.

In his philosophical essays, novels, short stories and plays, Sartre investigates the psychological problems of life and diagnoses that Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. His version of Existentialism is set out in popular form in his essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). In this essay he claims his famous dictum, 'Existence precedes essence', which shatters the traditional belief that man has predefined essence. Hence, he believes that people must decide for themselves the meaning of existence. Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* asserts:

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (3)

According to Sartre, man in despair considers himself to be a victim of external conditions, but when he comes to understand that the trouble is within, he intensifies his predicaments. The realization of one's own indefinite situation in the world creates anguish. Sartre considers anguish to be the outcome of man's uncertainty. Sartre also gives importance to the concept of anxiety. He expresses his idea of anxiety when he writes, "In anxiety I

apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 40). Anxiety is linked with threat to the basic, fundamental values of an individual and it often involves uncertainty and feeling of insecurity. Alienation emerges as natural consequences of the existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms and it is a universal feature of the human condition. Alienation is the feeling that one is a stranger in one's own life, a stranger in the world. Sartre believed that individuals live in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other people, and from their own selves.

Both India and Africa have undergone the similar experience of Colonialism, and Neo-colonialism which have resulted in common social, political and economic problems; therefore, it becomes imperative to discuss the backgrounds against which these two writers evolved. In the Indian society, a girl is infused with the ideas of self-abnegation, of the need to accept the lower status through the mythical stories of Sita, Savithri and Gandhari. Following these models, she is taught to be shy and gentle as a person, faithful as a wife and selfless and thoughtful as a mother. At every stage of her life, the Indian woman is dependent for her survival upon her father, her husband, and her sons. It is believed that the position of women in India was degraded with the foreign invasions, like that of the Mughals. The purdah system ordained by them prevented women from participating in public affairs. They were victims of social evils like sati, female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy and dowry. Shanta Krishnaswamy, aptly remarks about the true status of Indian woman who "...as a child, is sold off to strangers for a bride price when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family or who, as a widow in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be

acclaimed as 'Sati Savithri', as an immortal" (qtd. in Sree 9).

The Afro-American woman, like the Indian woman has been subjugated but their subjugation has been different from that of the Indian women in a certain way. They are considered to be the dual victims of racism and sexism. This 'double jeopardy' has created a complex painful and dehumanizing reality in which they have struggled for freedom and selfhood. Black women have always been suppressed. During slavery they were workers first, women second and always black and these three identities locked them into positions of vulnerability. They faced violence at the hands of their white masters not only in the form of hard labour and whipping lashes but also became victims of sexual abuse. These women were often raped by their white masters, their children were sold away and they were beaten by their male counterparts. Thus, they were robbed of their respect, dignity and identity. Harihar Kulkarni writes in this context:

The brutal treatment that the black women received during slavery invariably left profound scars on their psyche. Their physical bondage ultimately turned into a psychological bondage causing mutation and mutilations of their world. The external forces operating at the socioeconomic levels came to bear an unmistakable relationship to the internal fears, worries, anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and frustration. The poisonous fangs of slavery manifested themselves in innumerable ways and finally determined the behavioral pattern of black women. (Kulkarni 59)

The condition of women in both the cultures, Indian as well as Afro-American is found to be the same in terms of their anguish and their subsequent empowerment. Indian women - treated as subalterns since ages - are shown to speak out in protest and ultimately

overcome their stereotyped position and suffering which is inflicted more in psychological terms. On the contrary, the Afro-American women go through as much physical and psychological pain for they are the victims of both patriarchal and racial discrimination. They suffer from double marginalization and they continue their journey from despair to hope. Both the Indian as well as the Afro-American women fight against injustice like brave warriors and ultimately emerge victorious, thereby, becoming the queens of their own destiny.

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"Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers...like men she also enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal!" - Ernestine Louise Rose (qtd. in Sree 1)

Although women's contribution to the growth and development of human civilization has always been great, it has never been fully recognized historically. The most enduring enemies of a woman's dignity and security are cultural forces aimed at preserving male dominance and female subjugation—often defended in the name of tradition. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies. Simon de Beauvoir rightly pointed out that, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature—which is described as feminine" (267).

### Shashi Deshpande's and Alice Walker's Women

Born in 1938, Shashi Deshpande, is one of the well-known female writers of Indian English Fiction. She began writing at the age of thirty and has four volumes of short stories, four children's books, seven novels, and a collection of critical articles to her credit. The fact that her father, Adya Rangacharya, was an eminent literary writer of Sanskrit and Kannada languages helped her become a writer herself as she was introduced to the habit of reading and free thinking at a very young age. She states that there were three things in her early life that have shaped her as a writer- the fact "that her father was a writer, that she was educated exclusively in English and that she was born a female" (*Of Concerns, Of Anxieties* 107). Deshpande, a writer of depth and insight, in almost all her novels narrates the story of educated middle class women who are victims of exploitation, discrimination, oppression, negligence, and even rape. In almost all her novels, the protagonists move from innocence to experience. She suggests through each of her novels, certain ways which can help women achieve emancipation within the prevailing sociocultural scenario.

*Moving On* (2004) is in many ways, a departure from Deshpande's earlier novels. Here she ventures even deeper into the territory of the mind, dismantling our notions about the relationships within families. The novel symbolizes the inner struggle of the protagonist, Manjari, an educated young widow, who lives in close association with society brushing aside all its narrow conventions. Manjari, as the survivor, is the new woman, who redefines freedom and also relationships; an affectionate daughter, a loving sister, a caring mother and a good friend. Manjari challenges the essentialist notion of female identity as male fabrication and leaves the door open for social and cultural change.

Alice Walker, the prolific protest writer who worked as a social worker, lecturer, and

took part in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi was born in 1944 to Minnie Lou Grant and Willie Lee Walker, share croppers, and grew up in a small town of Eatonton, Georgia. She herself confesses that it was her mother's artistry that made a huge impact on her mind. Since her childhood she had not just witnessed but had also experienced discrimination in the form of racism and sexism. She felt the existence of gender bias at a very young age when she was accidentally blinded in one eye by her brother and her parents did not give her timely medical aid. It was because of the scar that she started living in isolation and turned to reading and writing poetry.

Walker continued to explore writing in all of its forms. In 1973, she published a set of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*; the poetry collection, *Revolutionary Petunias*; and her first children's book, *Langston Hughes: American Poet*. However, Walker's career as a writer took flight with the publication of her third novel, *The Color Purple*, in 1982. In almost all her novels, Walker depicts the life of oppressed black women who try to overcome the hardships through love and bonding, and strength of will. Barbara Christian opines, —Walker's work contributes to, and perhaps represents the epitome of, a rapidly – developing theme in Afro-American women's writing: that of female self-development and self-definition (19).

In *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Walker goes a step forward to redefine sexual domination issues, puts down completely the roots of male superiority by creating a past with women in dominant roles which was later to be reversed. The novel deals with conflicts in a unique manner that provides new insights which have universal appeal. Through Lissie's character, Walker highlights that discords amongst races and sexes can be dispensed with not by revenge, anger and hatred, but by an affirmation of positive attributes and appreciation of each other.



Both the novelists, Shashi Deshpande and Alice Walker belong to different nationalities. They have expressed the experiences regarding enclosures in their own socio-political, and cultural context. They deal with the realities of exploitation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination. Through their female characters, they graphically delineate the traumatic impact of the enclosures on the lives of the women that lead to the birth of their existential agony. The writers delve into the resolutions adopted by their women protagonists to create their own spaces, while inhabiting enclosures, and progress towards emancipation and freedom of self.

### Conclusion

Although women's contribution to the growth and development of human civilization has always been great, it has never been fully recognized historically. The most enduring enemies of a woman's dignity and security are cultural forces aimed at preserving male dominance and female subjugation—often defended in the name of tradition. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies. All the conflicts that stand as constraints and hinder the growth of a woman, and which have negative and destructive consequences on a woman's personality, will be termed as 'enclosures' in this proposed study. These enclosures manifest the existential agony and accentuate the existential dilemma of a woman. A woman passes through various stages of existential temperaments in order to finally realize that it is only by her own efforts that she can overcome her existential agony. In a male dominated society, submissiveness, sacrifice and tolerance are the attributes that a woman is expected to possess. In the words of Mary Ann Fergusson, "...in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, and as sex object their roles in relationship to men!" (4-5) Women are oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in the matter of sharing opportunities for fulfilment of their lives. They are even subjected to assault,

rape, verbal abuse, mutilation, etc. This is the predicament of women all over the world.

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