



## The Modern Paradox: Navigating Tradition and Ambition in Shashi Deshpande's Major Novels

Dr. Rajbir Singh

Associate Professor, Department of English,  
M.N.S. Government College, Bhiwani, Haryana, India

Email: [rjangra847@gmail.com](mailto:rjangra847@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

There has always been a tension between cultural expectations and female desire for self-growth, putting the Indian woman in a complex existential struggle. Shashi Deshpandey's characters exist in a state of perplexity. They are caught between the comfort of familiar traditions and the evolving need for personal freedom and growth. Experimenting with the domestic sphere, marital discord often serves as a turning point, reflecting a link between woman's societal role and her inner urges and expectations. When these characters initiate to pursue their own blood call and ambitions, they repeatedly encounter with a sense of guilt which is deep rooted in their family traditions, pursue them even in the darkness. This emotional discourse paves a way to a hard but inevitable direction towards personal growth. Her female characters undergo a different type of odyssey in which the characters try to see their faces in mirror of life. She suggests that in search of our own identity we should navigate our past also thoroughly. Her characters are in search of self-discovery, delineating harmony - both within the home and within oneself. It requires a slow and deliberate endeavor to reconcile tradition with the realities of modern life. Purpose of this research paper is to navigate tradition and ambition in the way of modern women's self-discovery for their existential struggle.

Key Words: Careerist, Marital Discord, Self Actualization, Guilt, Existential Struggle.

### INTRODUCTION

The women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande are always at the centre, and men always on the periphery. The author has presented in her novels those new Indian

women who come of the middle class, who are convent-educated, who can speak English with an ease, and who are born and brought up in megacities like Bangalore and Mumbai. Her new women like Sarita (The Dark Holds No

Terrors), Indu (Roots and Shadows), Jaya (That Long Silence), Urmila (The Binding Vine), Sumitra (A Matter of Time), Madhu (Small Remedies) and Manjari (Moving On) are seen at war with their traditional patriarchal families for their liberation from the tyranny of their mothers and grand-mothers. economic independence and individual identity. They are seen fighting with their parents against arranged marriages and for their autonomy in sex. These women are career-oriented and they are prepared to sacrifice their wifehood and motherhood for their success in their careers. They do not even hesitate to use their sex for the promotion of their careers. When they fail to balance their roles as daughters, wives, mothers and careerists, they are confronted with innumerable dilemmas, psychic fears and nightmares. The author, therefore, being an insider exposes the inner world of her women-their tensions, hysteria, neurosis, griefs and sorrows, isolation and loneliness, abnormalities and mysteries, passions and bodily hungers, perversities and deviations, pre-marital and extra-marital sex relationships. What the author highlights is that the careerism of these women disturbs their family life and disintegrates their personalities to an unhealthy excess.

### Objectives

1. To analyze the dichotomy of the domestic sphere.
2. To map the trajectory of new woman.
3. To analyze the collision of modernity and traditional values. .

### METHODOLOGY

A structural approach has been adopted by applying the Marxist- Feminism and Social Reproductive Approach examining the "double burden"- the expectation that a woman should perform productive labour and reproductive labour simultaneously.

### ANALYSIS

In their struggle for their liberation and careerism the women of Shashi Deshpande turn out to be unwanted and neglected daughters, unloving wives, and undutiful mothers, and incur the curses of their parents, cruelties of their husbands, and displeasure of their children. In their unceasing efforts to liberate themselves from the orthodoxy in religion and sex, they become

their own enemies. The dilemmas of such women have been summed up by the novelist in her story, *A Liberated Woman*:

Surely, she, an educated, earning competent woman, has no right to behave this way-to plug all her escape routes herself and act like a rat in a trap<sup>1</sup>

Sarita, Indu, Urmila, Sumitra and Manjari are anti-patriarchy because they are subjected to gender bias and discrimination in their families. Jaya and Madhu have not to struggle against the patriarchal family system because their parents die when they are in their teens. These are Sarita and Indu who are subjected to the tyranny of patriarchy to the maximum. Sarita breaks off her relations with her parents for ever after her marriage for fear of her cursing mother. She comes back to her father's house after fifteen years since her marriage when she hears from Prof. Kulkarni that her mother has passed away a month ago. So is the case with Indu who escapes from her ancestral house on account of the fear of her tyrannical Akka. She returns to her ancient roots after the death of her Akka in order to attend her funeral. Urmila has never lived in the company of her mother. She was sent to the house of her grand-father for her upbringing. Sumitra does not like to live in the big house of her parents because they are living a miserable and cursed life. She prefers to live in a rented house with her daughters. So far as Manjari is concerned, she is also against the tyranny of her parents because they have got one ethical code for themselves and another for their children.

Except Jaya, all the fictional protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are against the arranged marriages. They go in for their love marriages defeating the fond hopes and wishes of their parents. Sarita gets married to Manohar, a boy of some low caste though she herself belongs to a Brahmin family. It is on account of this that Sarita's mother cursed her and pronounced her dead for her family: Indu also gets married to Jayant flouting the wishes of her Akka and other family members. Urmila marries Kishore against the wishes of her parents. So is the case with Sumitra who is not happy with the way her parents have been living in the same house without speaking to each other for last thirty-five years. Madhu gets hooked to Som against the wishes of Joe and Leela. Manjari sacrifices not only her parents but also her-medical career for her love marriage with Shyam Ahuja.

It is only after their failure in their love marriage that these women realize the merits of an arranged marriage. If an arranged marriage fails, there is something to fall back upon. In case of the failure of a love marriage, there is nothing to hold on. A woman is left at the cross road of her life like an outcast dog never knowing the way she has to tread upon. Sarita repents over her love marriage because she has two grown up children who have not seen their grand-parents. She has no body to consult for her advice when her husband loses his manhood: There is no body with whom she can share her feelings and pain. She cannot go back to her parents for help. It is at this crucial point of her family life that she realizes the futility of love marriage which she regarded once upon a time as an escape route for her freedom from her parents. Now she hates the word love because she discovers that there is no such thing as love between a man and a woman. Now to her, marriage is a loveless trap in which she is entrapped like an animal terrified at night. She realizes that those who have gone for their arranged marriages are much happier than she. Her friends Smita, Vidya and Padma get married by parental arrangement and feel happy in their families.

Even Sarita's teacher, Prof. Kulkarni who advised her and Manu to go for love marriage goes for an arranged marriage. When Sarita goes back to her father after fifteen years of her marriage, she questions her wisdom in going for a marriage against the wishes of her parents:

If mine had been an arranged marriage, if I had left it to them to arrange my life, would he have left me like this? <sup>2</sup>

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu evolves her own code of sex ethics and strives for her sex autonomy and comes in conflict with those who hold the view that an arranged marriage is preferable to a love and inter-caste marriage and that marriages are made in heaven for procreation and continuation of next generations. Indu gets married to a boy of her own choice against the wishes of her whole family and does not return to her Akka's house far about eleven years. On her home coming, no family woman is impressed with her academic distinctions, career, success and money. To the women of her family, she is just a childless woman. Though Indu is highly critical of the arranged marriage of her cousin, Mini, yet the moot question is if Indu herself is happy with her own marriage which she had done on her own accord. The answer is that she is not. Even eleven years after her marriage she is childless for the sake of her career and fear of losing Jayant. She says:

That Jayant, son of a perfectionist mother shies away from the thought of a child of his own? That I, motherless and yet never unloved quail at the thought of being a mother for fear of being disillusioned? You think marriage is the answer. It is not and then you pin your hope on children.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Binding Vine*, Urmila marries Kishore against the wishes of her parents thinking and believing that she would have a happy family life with her husband but she fails like Sarita and Indu. In *A Matter of Time*, Sumitra marries Gopal and lives a happy family life with him for seventeen years. But all of a

sudden something happens in the family and Gopal deserts his wife and children for ever. Though Sumitra has her parents to fall back upon them yet the life of her parents is more miserable than hers.

These new Indian women are basically careerists. For the promotion of their careers they can go to any extent. They can sacrifice their wifehood and motherhood and betray their husbands. They can use even sex for their promotion. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita sacrifices her family life and her husband for the sake of her career as a lady doctor. As soon as she assumes her new role as a career woman, her family happiness which she shared with her husband and children disappears from her life. She does not hesitate in using even her feminine wiles in order to achieve certain things in her life. This is what jeopardizes her family life and turns her husband impotent because she has no time for love making with her husband. She prefers her career to sex and children.

As a career woman, Sarita is no longer happy in their shabby apartment. She wants to move to a more decent place so that she could materialize her dreams of success. It is here that she exploits Boozie to advance her career. Boozie who is an exceedingly handsome, debonair and competent doctor flirts with Sarita as a playboy and offers her enough money to establish her practice in a posh area.

She does not scruple even to tell-a-lie when she says: And Manu? I told myself that my relationship with this man couldn't, mustn'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 his mannerism and meant nothing. It had nothing to do with me and Manu.<sup>4</sup>

It was on the day of the formal opening of her consulting room that Boozie came as a guest and placed his hands on her shoulders, shook her gently and stared at her lovingly. She should have hated him for doing it publicly but she

didn't; she rather hated her husband for doing nothing with her. The snake of suspicion made its place in their life.

Sarita tells her father: I never revealed that to any one. Not even to Manu for he asked me nothing. And they began then...the silence that grew between us. Just grew and grew like Jack's bean stalk.

In *Root and Shadows*, Indu stakes her motherhood for the sake of her career and remains childless for about eleven years. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmila carves out for herself a career as lecturer in a college when she loses her baby and is seen engrossed in her grief. In *A Matter of Time*, Sumitra isolates herself from her husband after seventeen years of her marriage in order to be independent and make a career for herself. In *Small Remedies*, Madhu is also a careerist.

It is only in the novel, *Moving On* that Manjari sacrifices her career in medicine for the sake of her love marriage with Shyam and suffers lifelong. This is what Sarita tells the women careerists in the novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*:

Women's magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That's nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can even be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour. God help you, both of you.<sup>5,6</sup> They are struck between their emotions, followed by their blood call and societal responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, it is pertinent to mention that in the present social set up of our country, careerism for women is very disastrous because the balancing of their roles as daughters, wives, mothers and careerists is like a rope-dancing which only an acrobat can perform. The success of a woman as a bread-winner for her family poses new problems for her husband. There is a modern paradox which is not only domestic but

also a professional. Deshpande's protagonists navigate the double burden of fulfilling traditional familial roles while striving for career autonomy. The society does not give them liberty automatically and even at the working place they meet the same treatment. These women confront with the "ceiling glass" of both societal perception and internal guilt and the professional success is not just institutional advancement but the hard-won ability. They move towards self-definition. Ultimately, their work captures the authentic complexity of the contemporary Indian women who accepts the conventional and redefine herself.

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