
READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

R. Bakyaraj,

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Chalapathi Institute of
Engineering & Technology,
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.

Abstract:

The postcolonial has been described as an act of rereading and an approach that offers us different perspectives on issues related to colonialism. As a critical concept, it recovers resistance of various kinds and attempts to explain the presence of the silenced voice in any dominant discourse and makes it possible to tease out various readings of a textual narrative. Postcolonial criticism draws attention to issues of cultural difference in literary texts and focuses on issues of gender, class and caste. It illustrates that the strategies of marginalization are used even in other power structures and the dominant even in the postcolonial context make the strategic use of stereotypes in order to control and subjugate the other in terms of gender, class and caste. In this context, it is possible to read in the novels of Shashi Deshpande "strategies of representation as empowerment" (Sebastian 125), in which she makes attempts to rewrite the traditional stereotypes of the Indian woman. This paper shows of how, the novels of Shashi Deshpande can be read in the postcolonial context, by considering her as a postcolonial writer. This part of the paper is an endeavor to indicate all these.

Introduction

Born in 1938, in the small town of Dharwad, Shashi Deshpande is the daughter of the late Adya Rangachar Sriranga, the famous Kannada playwright. She was educated in Bombay and Bangalore, and acquired an M.A in English from the Mysore University. Besides the novels and short stories, Deshpande has also published several children's books in English and written in the screenplay for the Hindi feature film *Drishti*. She began writing rather late in life, at her father's insistence. In 1969, inspired by a visit to England, she wrote and published an account of her English experiences. Since then, her short stories have been appearing regularly in popular magazines. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published in 1980, followed by *If I Die Today* in 1982. *Roots and Shadows* and *Come up and Be Dead* were published in 1983. While *Roots and Shadows* won the Thirumathi Rangammal prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83, *That Long Silence* published by the Virago feminist Press in 1988 fetched her, the Sahitya Akademi award for 1990. Her last published novel so far, *A Matter of Time* appeared in 1996. Her short stories have been collected and published in four volumes: *The Legacy and Other Stories* (1978), *It was Dark and Other Stories* (1986) and *The Miracle and Other Stories* (1986).

Discussion

Shashi Deshpande has been a steadily productive writer. Her fiction has won her acclaim and the respect of her peers. Her plots are deftly presented and the characters are very well delineated. The situations she portrays and the characters that she breathes life into are familiar ones. Her familiarity with the Indian ethos and culture finds reflection in all her novels. The social upheavals and the disillusionments of modern times are aptly presented in her novels. For her English language is not a hindrance in depicting the nuances of the Indian culture. Rather there is a harmonious blending of English language and Indian culture in her novels.

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

Before we proceed to analyze Deshpande as a postcolonial writer, let us state that post colonialism lacks a coherent definition and vitality. It contains within it both historical and geographical notions. Most of the societies of the world have been invaded at the sometime or the other. But societies which emerge phoenix- states: like after such invasions generally make references to their pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial stages. As **Sebastian** writes:

To conquer, to subjugate, to occupy and to dominate another being are inherent characteristics of human being. Man is also acquisitive by nature and acquires things at the cost of fellow human beings. The colonizer and the colonized have evolved survival strategies. (96)

Any discussion of postcolonial literature is usually formulated against such issues as identity, hybridity, cultural differences and conflict. In these senses Shashi Deshpande disclaims being a postcolonial writer but her novels do things that postcolonial texts do. Her novels are located in post-independent India, an India that the present reader can identify with. While reading the works of Shashi Deshpande, one realizes that Deshpande defies categorization. She is modern in her fictional techniques. But at times she appears unconcerned with the contemporary moment as subject, so that with minor dislocations, her stories could just as well have taken place in the 1950's and 1960's. In novel after novel she knits her stories around the tangled lives of parents, children, grand-children, aunts and uncles and everything else that illumines domesticity. In her novels she explores togetherness and separation, presence and absence, recurrence and reunion, in fact everything that is related to the psychodynamics and relationships.

Locating the postcolonial approach Diana Brydon writes:

We colonized form a community, with a common heritage of oppression and a common cause of working toward positive social change. To recognize what we hold in common is not to underestimate our differences, but to provide us with a context for understanding them more clearly. (19)

If one could appropriate the same logic to understand the gender issue in a broad sense, Shashi Deshpande's work may be seen as a search for an authentic feminine discourse in which the community of women with a 'common heritage of oppression' are trying to understand themselves and also work toward a positive social change. Although Shashi Deshpande has been wary of the label 'feminist', many feminist critics turn to her work in order to develop discussions in feminist criticism. Her novels, featuring female protagonists, reconstruct aspects of women's experience and attempt to give voice to 'muted' ideologies, registering resistance. It is also true that she is not drawn to any explicit postcolonial issues like nationalism, imperialism, hybridity etc., but on her own admission what she has been doing in her novels is "charting the inner landscapes of women" (Sebastian 143) where she provides her women characters a context to understand themselves. Shashi Deshpande consistently explores the nature of the female world and outlook, and "reconstructs the lost or suppressed records of female experience. She identifies femaleness as thematic and traces the subtle shifts of focus in feminine goals and aspirations" (Barry 122). Her attempt to echo the loneliness of the gendered subaltern and give voice to the silenced voices constitutes part of the decolonizing feminist project. Here it may be observed that Stephen Slemon's location of "resistance as the important

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

mode of writing in the postcolonial literature” (126) opens up another avenue of reading Shashi Deshpande’s work in the postcolonial context. She constructs fictional narratives of women’s specificity in terms of Indian social context, representing different facets of the female psyche trapped within physical and psychological spaces and yet foregrounds its attempts to transcend its boundaries. In the words of **Chatterjee** these narratives function as modes of:

Women’s experience underlining its resistance, subverting and undermining the traditional hierarchies in a subtle manner, and at the same time, open up a space where the marginal can come into being and retain its difference” (78)

Shashi Deshpande’s novels have a universal appeal. They cut across the barriers of culture and time. But they cannot be categorized as realist fiction. Most of her protagonists are similar (class, gender, location, education). She seems to be reinserting a particular representation. This is highlighted by the use of verbal constructs that are typical of postcolonial literature, “the center and the periphery, the dominant and the marginalized, the oppressor and the oppressed, the attempt at decolonizing and the desire to return to a glorious past (Bhabha 879).

Shashi Deshpande’s women characters do not quite seem to fit into the traditional established accepted societal mode. There is in them a kind of compromise which enables them to endure a not always pleasant world. In her novels the protagonist is usually an educated middle class married woman and a mother. Her mother figures are not the ones that can be venerated and idealized. In novel after novel Deshpande explores the fragile human relationships, their jealousies and rivalries, yet there is a bond which defies definition.

In some of Deshpande’s novels, families are ambivalent entities. Savitribai in- *Small Remedies* and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* are at times unable to communicate with their families. The novels *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* show that marriage can either nurture or thwart the development of an individual. The women must make adjustments in their lives. They must grapple with problems involving the challenges of accommodating the needs of their selves to the needs of their families and communities. The women must make compromises in this world and choose what to lose. The notions of the good-bad-good feelings pervade the various relationships in nearly all the novels of Shashi Deshpande.

In the early novels of Shashi Deshpande a certain common situation recurs which as she herself highlights illustrating from *Roots and Shadows* “Yes, they came together, the house and the woman. Indu had found her roots, her back-ground. But she hadn’t let her roots fetter her. She had broken free” (7). The protagonist passes through the ‘rites of passage’, as it were, to know herself. This quest for self-knowledge sets her apart from the ‘claustrophobic world of women’. Even as she constructs subversive ideologies, Deshpande recognizes, as Lola Chatterji quotes:

But often to be free is to be lonely...but there is always the beacon light of love. And love leads to the certainty of marriage. But marriage invariably takes you back to the world of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, self-abnegation. To love another and to retain yourself intact, is that

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

possible? To assert yourself and not to be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate? (147)

In this narrative of resistance a fictional manifesto of the later novels seems to take shape. The later novels like *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time* diversify from the self-realization theme to widen the scope to include the community of women with a common heritage of oppression and a whole host of complex issues.

The Binding Vine projects the two central issues of female bonding and resistance to patriarchal ideology. The pain of the death of her baby-daughter, Anusha, seems to motivate Urmila, the central character, to reach out to other women around her who have their own tales of suffering to tell. In suffering, a fellowship is forged, not only with the living but also the mute and the dead. Urmila is drawn to Shakutai and her young daughter, Kalpana who is brutally raped and Mira, her own dead mother-in-law who suffered rape in marriage, in sympathy, sharing their sorrow. Feminine solidarity or female bonding runs as a strong undercurrent in the novel. As Usha Tambe writes, it “Celebrates women’s coming together with other women as friends and shares of life instead of as rivals for approval by men” (687). It is also a story of mothers and daughters where Urmila grieves for her baby-daughter who is dead and Shakutai for Kalpana who is dying. There are other pairs of mothers and daughters like Urmila and her mother Inni, Vanna and her mother Akka, Vanna and her young daughters, and each of these relationships, in spite of its difference, reinforces the idea of the *The Binding Vine*. In the feeling of sorrow and sympathy, a sense of identity is struck. Urmila remembers Mira’s cry of despair and says,

How clear it comes to me across the years, her cry of rage and anguish, why does this have to happen to me? Why did it have to happen to my daughter? Shakutai asked me- why? (*The Binding Vine* 76)

Here more than the need to find answers, it is the need to identify oneself with other women which stand out. The feminine consciousness in the novel recognizes the difference between a woman’s vision and a man’s vision. Urmila, watching a Hindi movie, comments that the,

Heroine singing a song as she gets ready to meet a lover, smiles at her reflection while she draws a Kaajal-lined finger across her eyelids. It seemed too narcissistic, the woman’s admiration of herself... this was how a man saw a woman. A man’s Vision. (*The Binding Vine* 879)

Another interesting instance of this is where Venu, the well-known writer advises Mira, “Why do you need to write poetry? It is not enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men” (*The Binding Vine* 126). Recognition of the difference works as a mode of resistance.

If *The Binding Vine* is a story that is built on the ironies around the issue of rape, *A Matter of Time* deals with the dilemma of wife-desertion. The liberal humanist approach of Deshpande even as it tries to subvert and undermine mechanisms of patriarchy, it also explores the issue of consolidation of the female identity in the larger context of modern society and ponders over the realities of common human existence. As in *The Binding Vine*, female bonding and resistance are central issues in *A Matter of Time* too. But at the same time, it goes a step further to create

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

a metaphysical perspective without playing down gender issues and thus it extends the horizon of the narrative structure.

The novel underlines wife-desertion as yet another dimension of betrayal and cruelty and Gopal's desertion of Sumi and their three daughters, Aru, Charu, and Seema suddenly, results in a 'swift dismemberment' of the family leaving despair-filled hearts behind. It is like a death in the family, a death without a body. In Sumi, the deserted wife, there is no outward distress but there is a silence about her that is like a cry of despair. Sumi's apparent stoicism throws others into confusion and they treat her like an invalid. Besides "Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and disgrace" (*A Matter of Time* 134). The irony of it is that disgrace clings not so much to the man who walks out on his family but to the wife who is deserted. The impact of the shock of this event is traced mainly in two characters who assume the central position in the novel, that is, Sumi and her eighteen year old daughter, Aru, 'Charting their inner spaces'. Their reactions are at a different level as one is mature and the other stands at the beginning of the journey of her life. In *A Matter of Time*, for the first time, there is an attempt to understand the male psychology and Gopal who deserts his wife and children is not condemned without hearing. Although Sumi reasons out that it is the metaphysical question of the ultimate truth of human life and the persistent human search for meaning in existence is Gopal's reason, yet she questions "...What about us, the girls and me? We are here because of his actions: how does this fit in?" (*A Matter of Time* 27). But she will not coerce him into coming back to her and here she exhibits her self-dignity. On the contrary, she explores ways of coming to terms with the painful reality and going on with life. She tries to get a job and learns to ride a scooter and above all, discovers the writing talent within her and produces a play for her school children. Whereas Aru is filled with a great anger and resentment against her father and thinks he should not be allowed to go scot-free and explores possibilities of bringing legal action against him.

In her earlier as well as later novels, it is not the aim of Shashi Deshpande to merely document female resistance to patriarchal ideologies, but also to focus on the strategies and readjustments her female protagonists undertake in order to forge an identity of their own. Her women characters struggle to learn to become 'one's own refuge' and value the fellowships of other women. She recreates sensitively the female world through modes of women's experience and links it to the larger world of human existence and by doing so she gives it the mainstream position. She refuses to isolate women's experience even as her fiction consciously creates feminine sensibility and specificity and is at times even successful in creating a language of her own. *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time* extended the limits of the novel form to foreground aspects of women's experience in the Indian context hitherto unexplored and create values and power that demand recognition.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Sarita (Saru) is married to Manohar (Manu) who becomes violent when he realizes that his career has not taken off. His wife has risen professionally and begins to occupy the centrist position because she is financially more secure and can fend for the family. But Manu (symbolically the Hindu law giver) finds it difficult to occupy a peripheral position. But the dominant position that Saru occupies due to her caste (She is a Brahmin) and money power becomes redundant due to her being a woman. The novel opens with a one and a

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

half a page of description of her vital rape in bed by her husband who must prove that in hierarchy of power structures, she will forever be powerless.

In Shashi Deshpande's marginal women characters one can read post colonial 'differences'. One can use Edward Said's concept of the binary 'here' and 'there', centre/ex-centric in such representations. In his book *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha asserts that Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. Culture is transnational because it is rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement... such as migration to other countries, economics and political displacement (refugees). The transnational dimensions of cultural transformation-migration, Diasporas, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural transformation a complex form of signification... the great though unsettling advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of the tradition. (172)

In *Small Remedies* Shashi Deshpande explores the lives of two women Savitribai Indorkar and Leela. Savitribai, a reputed singer marries her accompanist Ghulam Saab, a muslim. Leela who is a passionate believes in communism, devotes her life to the party and works for the welfare of the factory workers of Bombay. Fifty years after, Madhu who is Leela's niece comes to Bhavanipur to write Savitribai's biography. Madhu has lost her only son Aditya and she has yet to recover from this loss. While analyzing Savitribai's life and the lives of those around her Madhu try to find a way out of her grief.

In the novel *That Long Silence* Jaya's world seems to fall apart when her husband Mohan has been asked to leave his job due to alleged business malpractice. Mohan's confession and his clinging to her and following her movements with his eyes makes Jaya realize that she would have to wait until he is rid of the allegations. Right from her childhood Jaya has been asked to wait,

Wait until you get married...wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for children to be born...and above and beyond this there, had been for me that other waiting...waiting fearfully for disaster, for a catastrophe...with Mohan's confession, I was actually relieved. Here it was at last- my disaster. No more waiting, no more apprehension, no more fears. (*That Long Silence* 30)

While Mohan pours out his grief, Jaya remains silent, "The truth was that I did not know what to say, how to react" (*That Long Silence* 34). Between the said and unsaid lies a depth of meaning. Jaya's silence speaks volumes. As she tries to grapple with the changed scenario, Jaya attempts to remove, the long silence from her life. She seeks solace from the Sanskrit words

Yathechhari thatha kurus...do as you desire...with this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confess humanness on Arjuna. I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire. (192)

As Jaya receives Mohan's telegram as pointing out as all well Jaya notes

I will have to erase the silence between us...we don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope.

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know, now it is this: life has always to be made possible. (193)

Conclusion:

In Deshpande's novel grief gives way to shock, to anger but ultimately Deshpande asserts that it is love and sympathetic understanding that enables us to grapple with life's problems. In the context of Shashi Deshpande however, post colonialism cannot be used in a reductionist manner only typifying 'subaltern', 'hybridity', 'nation and narration'. A post colonial reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels makes us realize that heterogeneity is implicitly basic to post colonialism. This paper places Shashi Deshpande and thus a Third World Woman's texts in a non-conformist groove, thus reading her differently. She defies monolithic conventions even of post-coloniality as she does the Euro-American criteria about women. Her subjects at times remain ambivalent, not coherent although sharing other registral affinities- they are both victims and agents, agents of change who bring about a change in the stereo typed image of womanhood. Even in similarity her characters are different from the Euro-centric norms. They do not feel shy to uphold their difference. Deshpande not only deals with the topic of women as marginalized figures, but also implicitly examines the concept of authenticity and audience in fiction written by women. Thus Deshpande, in her novels, has created for us an "imaginative female historiography" (Palkar 23), which attempts to fill in the gaps found in Third World/Indian/Postcolonial women's social and cultural history.

References**Primary Sources**

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1980. Print.
3. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992. Print.
4. Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1983. Print.
5. Deshpande, Shashi. *A Matter of Time*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.
6. Deshpande, Shashi. *Small Remedies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

Secondary Sources

1. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. Print.
2. Bhabha, Homi. *The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Location of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, P.168. Print.
3. Diana, Brydon. "Commonwealth or Common Poverty: The New Literatures in English and New Discourse in Marginality", *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-colonial Writing*, Ed. Slemon and Helen Tiffin, Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989. Print.
4. Lola, Chatterji. *Woman Image Text*. New Delhi: Trianka, 1986. Print.
5. Palkar, Sarala. "Of Mothers and Daughters, of Great Divide," in Viney Kripal Ed. *The Postmodern Indian English Novel*. Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1996. Print.
6. Sebastian, Mrinalini, *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments*. New Delhi:

READING SHASHI DESHPANDE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

7. Prestige Books, 2000. Print.
8. Stephen, Slemon. Quoted by Mrinalini Sebastian, P.128.
9. Tambe, Usha. "Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist and a Novelist," in Sarang and Bharucha (Ed) Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1994. Print.