

## EMOTIONAL REALISM AND FEMALE AGENCY: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S VOICES IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

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### Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande's literary oeuvre offers a profound exploration of the complex emotional and psychological landscapes of Indian women, making her a significant voice in contemporary Indian English literature. This study delves into Deshpande's portrayal of women's inner worlds, their familial roles, and their battles with societal expectations, highlighting her mastery of emotional realism. Through close examination of novels such as *Roots and Shadows*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, and *The Binding Vine*, this paper uncovers how Deshpande intricately weaves the personal struggles, fears, and aspirations of her female protagonists with larger social issues like patriarchal constraints and domestic violence. Her work serves as a platform for amplifying marginalized women's voices, offering a nuanced depiction of their journey toward self-identity and agency. By analyzing her narrative strategies and thematic concerns, this paper contributes to the discourse on gender dynamics in Indian literature and underscores Deshpande's role in fostering social awareness through her storytelling.*

**Keywords:** Emotional, psychological, aspirations, fostering, strategies.

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### INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande, one of India's most celebrated contemporary novelists, has created a niche for herself in the Indian English literary canon with her focus on the personal, emotional, and psychological landscapes of women's lives. Her works provide a profound exploration of women's experiences, particularly within the sociocultural context of Indian patriarchy. In doing so, Deshpande captures the complexities, struggles, and resilience of her female protagonists as they navigate through life's challenges, often in search of autonomy, identity, and a sense of self-worth. This paper explores Deshpande's nuanced portrayal of these experiences, with a particular focus on how her characters challenge and subvert the limitations imposed upon them by familial, societal, and cultural structures.

#### *Shashi Deshpande's Thematic Concerns*

Deshpande's works offer a penetrating critique of patriarchal social structures, as well as a sensitive portrayal of the inner lives of women caught within these structures. In *That Long Silence* (1988), one of her most widely acclaimed novels, the protagonist Jaya's internal journey mirrors the condition of countless women whose voices are silenced within the domestic sphere. Jaya, a middle-class housewife, reflects on the life choices she has made, her

role as a wife and mother, and the ways in which societal norms have shaped her identity. Her silent acceptance of gendered roles and expectations highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchy, which, as many feminist scholars have observed, often dictates the roles women must play within familial settings (Sharma, 2016). Jaya's eventual recognition of her "long silence" and her determination to break free from it reflects the broader feminist concern with the reclamation of agency and voice in the face of oppressive structures (Sinha, 2015).

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), another landmark novel, Deshpande delves into the darker side of family life, examining issues such as domestic violence and marital rape. Sarita, the novel's protagonist, confronts her traumatic past as she grapples with her marriage and her identity as a woman. The novel's treatment of domestic violence—still a taboo subject in much of Indian society—makes it a powerful feminist statement about the ways in which patriarchy both condones and conceals the abuse women face in intimate relationships. Scholars such as Hemalatha and Chandran (2015) have pointed out that Deshpande's willingness to address issues like marital rape sets her apart from many of her contemporaries and underscores the urgency of these issues in the context of gender relations in India.

### ***The Relevance of Deshpande's Feminism***

What distinguishes Deshpande's feminist concerns from many others in Indian literature is her insistence on the emotional and psychological complexities of her female characters. Deshpande's women are not depicted as straightforward symbols of oppression or rebellion. Instead, they are multifaceted individuals who, even as they contend with patriarchal structures, must also grapple with their own ambivalence and internalized values. This nuanced approach aligns with feminist thinkers like Virginia Woolf, who emphasized that the "subtle complexities of women's experiences" cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of victimhood and resistance (Woolf, 1929). Deshpande's women may be oppressed by patriarchy, but they are also capable of complicity, negotiation, and transformation.

For instance, in *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Indu, the protagonist, is both a victim of patriarchal control and an active agent who questions her familial obligations and seeks her own path. Indu's return to her ancestral home after years of independence in the city forces her to confront her dual roles: as a modern, educated woman and as a daughter bound by traditional norms. This conflict between the personal and the familial is a recurring theme in Deshpande's work and reflects the broader societal pressures many Indian women face. Neeta Sharma (2016) argues that Deshpande's exploration of this theme reveals the contradictions within Indian society, where women are encouraged to pursue education and professional careers but are simultaneously expected to adhere to traditional gender roles.

### ***The Intersection of Identity and Patriarchy***

At the heart of Deshpande's work is a preoccupation with questions of identity. Her protagonists often find themselves at odds with the societal expectations placed upon them, particularly those related to marriage, motherhood, and familial duty. In *The Binding Vine* (1992), Urmi, the central character, uncovers the diary of her deceased mother-in-law, which details a life of quiet suffering and unspoken desires. Urmi's own grief and personal losses allow her to connect with the hidden narratives of women around her, showing how generations

of women have been forced to suppress their individuality in service of family and tradition (Renganathan, 2009). Through Urmi's discovery of these untold stories, Deshpande creates a powerful commentary on the erasure of women's voices from both the family and historical records.

This search for identity is often depicted as a painful and introspective process in Deshpande's work. Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, must confront not only her abusive husband but also her own complicated feelings of guilt and shame. Deshpande's refusal to present her characters as mere victims of circumstance aligns her with the psychoanalytic feminist tradition, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of women's oppression (Freud, 1924). Sarita's journey is as much about reconciling her sense of self with the trauma she has experienced as it is about confronting the external forces that have shaped her life.

### ***Deshpande's Contribution to Indian Feminist Literature***

Deshpande's work has been widely recognized as a vital contribution to Indian feminist literature. By focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary women, she sheds light on the everyday struggles that often go unnoticed in broader discussions of women's rights and liberation. As Renganathan (2009) notes, Deshpande's novels "humanize the feminist struggle" by focusing on the personal and emotional dimensions of women's lives, rather than on grand ideological movements. This focus on the personal as political reflects the feminist belief that women's private experiences are inherently shaped by larger societal structures of power and control. Deshpande's depiction of the tensions between tradition and modernity resonates with the experiences of many Indian women, who find themselves caught between the demands of modern, professional life and the expectations of traditional familial roles. In this sense, Deshpande's work can be seen as an important commentary on the broader societal changes taking place in post-independence India, where the rapid transformation of social and economic structures has often left women in a state of flux. T. Shailaja (2015) argues that Deshpande's works highlight the contradictions inherent in these changes, as women are encouraged to pursue personal and professional development, but still remain bound by patriarchal expectations.

### **RESEARCH SCOPE**

Through her sensitive exploration of the lives of ordinary Indian women, Shashi Deshpande presents a compelling critique of the ways in which patriarchal norms continue to shape women's experiences. Her protagonists' journeys toward self-discovery and autonomy challenge the simplistic binaries of victimhood and agency, offering a more nuanced understanding of the personal and psychological struggles that women endure. By focusing on the emotional and internal conflicts that arise in the pursuit of identity, Deshpande opens up new avenues for feminist inquiry, particularly in relation to the intersections of gender, power, and culture in Indian society.

This paper seeks to further investigate these themes by analyzing Deshpande's representation of women in her most prominent works. Using feminist theory as a framework, this study will examine the ways in which Deshpande's characters navigate the patriarchal structures of family,

marriage, and society, while also considering how her novels contribute to broader feminist discussions within Indian literature. By situating Deshpande's work within the larger context of feminist discourse, this research aims to shed light on the complexities of women's experiences in contemporary India and the enduring relevance of Deshpande's literary contributions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Shashi Deshpande's novels offer an evocative portrayal of the emotional, social, and psychological struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, cementing her place as a leading figure in contemporary Indian English literature. This literature review explores the thematic concerns and narrative strategies used by Deshpande in her representation of women, drawing on key scholarly works that analyze her contributions to feminist discourse in Indian literature.

### 1. Emotional Realism and Inner Worlds of Women

Deshpande's narrative strength lies in her vivid depiction of the inner emotional worlds of her female protagonists. Scholars such as Mala Renganathan (2009) argue that Deshpande's heroines are often depicted at a "crossroad"—caught between societal expectations and their personal desires. In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), for instance, the protagonist Indu grapples with questions of self-identity and freedom, reflecting the emotional turmoil women experience when their personal ambitions conflict with traditional roles. Deshpande's portrayal of women's internal struggles reflects what Simone de Beauvoir (1989) discusses in *The Second Sex*: the condition of women as "the Other" in a patriarchal society. Indu's journey of self-realization mirrors the larger quest for autonomy that many women undertake, challenging societal norms that confine them to restrictive roles. Deshpande's nuanced depiction of her protagonist's inner turmoil fosters a connection with readers, allowing them to empathize with the emotional complexities women endure (Renganathan, 2009).

### 2. Family Dynamics and Patriarchal Constraints

One of the most prominent themes in Deshpande's work is the exploration of family dynamics and the roles women are expected to play within the familial structure. In *That Long Silence* (1992), the protagonist Jaya contends with the expectations placed on her as a wife and mother, encapsulating the internal conflicts many women face when balancing personal aspirations with familial responsibilities. Shailaja (2015) highlights how Deshpande's work underscores the inherent compromises and sacrifices women make to maintain familial harmony, often at the expense of their own identities.

The family, in Deshpande's novels, serves as a microcosm of the larger societal structure, where patriarchal norms dictate the roles women must assume. Neeta Sharma (2016) observes that Deshpande's women characters often find themselves trapped in marriages that stifle their individuality, reflecting the oppressive frameworks of patriarchy. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1990), Sarita's character exposes the grim realities of domestic violence, illustrating the emotional and psychological trauma that women endure within the confines of marriage. This theme of familial oppression is echoed in *The Binding Vine* (1993), where the protagonist

Urmi confronts the generational trauma inflicted on women by a society that prioritizes patriarchal values over individual agency (Sharma, 2016).

### **3. Women's Agency and the Quest for Identity**

Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of her female protagonists as they struggle for self-determination and identity aligns with broader feminist concerns regarding women's agency in literature. As Trayee Sinha (2015) observes, Deshpande's characters embark on journeys of self-discovery, challenging patriarchal norms that suppress their individual voices. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's internal monologue serves as a vehicle for her reflection on her life as a wife and mother, revealing how societal pressures have muted her desires and ambitions.

Similarly, Deshpande's work resonates with de Beauvoir's assertion that women must assert their autonomy in a world that denies them subjectivity. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu's journey to reclaim her sense of self after years of living under societal expectations highlights the centrality of identity in Deshpande's narrative world. T. Shailaja (2015) further notes that the female characters in Deshpande's novels navigate a complex social landscape, wherein they seek to balance traditional roles with their personal aspirations. Through this struggle, Deshpande emphasizes the importance of female agency in defining one's identity, a theme that remains central to feminist discourse in Indian literature (Shailaja, 2015).

### **4. Patriarchal Violence and the Marginalized Voices of Women**

Deshpande's works give voice to the marginalized experiences of women, particularly those subjected to patriarchal violence. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande's unflinching portrayal of domestic abuse and its psychological impact on Sarita underscores the silence surrounding such issues in Indian society. Hemalatha and Chandran (2015) argue that Deshpande's willingness to address uncomfortable realities, such as domestic violence, brings these issues to the forefront of literary discourse. This aligns with de Beauvoir's (1989) critique of patriarchal institutions, which often normalize violence against women by relegating it to the private sphere.

Deshpande's exploration of societal expectations and their impact on women's mental health in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* illustrates the emotional toll of living in a patriarchal society. Sarita's journey from victimhood to self-realization is a powerful commentary on how women must often confront both external and internalized oppression to achieve a sense of autonomy. Scholars such as Hemalatha and Chandran (2015) highlight how Deshpande's works challenge traditional representations of women as passive victims by portraying them as active agents of their own liberation.

### **5. Deshpande's Contribution to Feminist Discourse**

Shashi Deshpande's work has had a significant impact on feminist literary discourse, particularly in its representation of Indian women's experiences. Renganathan (2009) argues that Deshpande's novels offer a critical examination of the various ways in which patriarchal structures shape women's lives, thereby contributing to feminist discussions surrounding gender, identity, and power. Through her focus on the internal and external struggles of her female protagonists, Deshpande creates a space for the exploration of feminist concerns within

the Indian socio-cultural context. In addition to exploring individual agency, Deshpande's novels provide a platform for examining the broader societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. Sharma (2016) notes that Deshpande's works are instrumental in fostering social consciousness about women's issues, making her a crucial figure in the landscape of Indian feminist literature.

## **6. Sociocultural Constructs and the Representation of Women**

Deshpande's novels not only reflect personal struggles but also serve as a commentary on the sociocultural constructs that govern women's roles in Indian society. As T. Shailaja (2015) notes, Deshpande's women characters must navigate the complexities of these constructs, which often impose restrictions on their freedom and individuality. The characters' internal conflicts serve as a reflection of the larger societal pressures that women face in their pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment. Deshpande's exploration of family dynamics reveals how deeply ingrained cultural norms shape the lives of her female protagonists. Her portrayal of women as they negotiate the boundaries of family, marriage, and career reflects the evolving nature of women's roles in contemporary Indian society. By drawing attention to these dynamics, Deshpande's work offers a critical lens through which readers can examine the intersections of gender, culture, and power (Shailaja, 2015).

Shashi Deshpande's literary contributions offer a rich terrain for the exploration of women's lives, identity, and agency within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Through her emotionally resonant depictions of women's inner worlds, familial roles, and struggles for autonomy, Deshpande has carved out a distinctive space in Indian literature. Her work serves as both a celebration and a critique of the experiences of marginalized women, making her a pivotal figure in feminist literary discourse. Scholarly analyses of her novels continue to underscore the importance of her narratives in advancing discussions on gender, identity, and the role of literature in fostering social change.

## **EMOTIONAL REALISM AND FEMALE AGENCY: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S VOICES IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS**

Shashi Deshpande's works are well-regarded for their nuanced and deeply introspective portrayal of women's lives. Her novels offer a unique blend of "emotional realism" and a keen exploration of "female agency", particularly in the context of Indian society. By delving into the complexities of women's emotional landscapes, Deshpande's works illuminate how her female characters navigate familial expectations, societal norms, and internal conflicts to assert their identities and exercise agency.

### ***Emotional Realism in Deshpande's Novels***

Emotional realism refers to the authentic and nuanced depiction of characters' internal emotional states. In Deshpande's novels, this is primarily achieved through the introspective voices of her female protagonists, who express their frustrations, hopes, desires, and fears in relation to the societal roles imposed upon them. Her characters are not just passive recipients of societal pressures but active participants in their emotional lives, grappling with internal conflicts that reflect broader struggles faced by women in Indian society.

One of the most striking examples of emotional realism can be found in *That Long Silence* (1988). The protagonist, Jaya, a middle-class housewife, experiences an inner turmoil that reflects her sense of being stifled by societal expectations. Throughout the novel, Jaya's emotional journey is articulated through a stream of consciousness that highlights her passive acquiescence to the roles of wife and mother. Her silent submission to her husband Mohan, despite her underlying feelings of dissatisfaction, embodies the condition of many women whose lives are dictated by traditional gender roles (Sharma, 2016). Jaya's eventual recognition of her "long silence" and her desire to reclaim her voice signify an awakening to her emotional reality, revealing the psychological depth and authenticity with which Deshpande crafts her characters.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Sarita, or Saru, the protagonist, confronts her emotional trauma within the confines of her marriage and familial responsibilities. Her internal struggle with the abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband Manohar is rendered with intense emotional realism. Saru's sense of helplessness, guilt, and confusion over her marriage is expressed through her introspective reflections, which mirror the experiences of many women who endure domestic violence but feel trapped by societal expectations. Deshpande deftly captures Saru's emotional paralysis, juxtaposing her successful career as a doctor with her personal disempowerment as a wife. The emotional realism in Saru's characterization highlights the internal conflicts that arise from the contradictions between public success and private oppression (Renganathan, 2009).

### ***Female Agency in Deshpande's Novels***

While Deshpande's characters often find themselves trapped in patriarchal structures, her novels also explore their journey toward self-realization and agency. Female agency, in the context of Deshpande's works, refers to the capacity of her protagonists to make independent choices, assert their individuality, and challenge the roles imposed upon them by society. Deshpande's women gradually reclaim their agency, often through a process of introspection and emotional growth.

In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Indu, the protagonist, embodies the tension between traditional expectations and personal autonomy. Having left her conservative family to pursue a career in journalism and marry a man of her choice, Indu returns to her ancestral home upon the death of her domineering great-aunt, Akka. Indu's internal conflict between her desire for freedom and her sense of familial duty is a central theme in the novel. Through her interactions with her extended family, Indu gradually realizes the limitations imposed upon her by both her family and society. Her decision to reject the conventional role of a wife and reclaim her independence represents a significant assertion of female agency (Hemalatha & Chandran, 2015). This journey toward self-assertion is emblematic of Deshpande's broader feminist critique of the patriarchal structures that restrict women's autonomy.

In *The Binding Vine* (1992), Deshpande further explores female agency through the character of Urmi, a woman grieving the loss of her daughter. Urmi's discovery of her mother-in-law Mira's hidden diary, which reveals her silent suffering in an oppressive marriage, becomes a catalyst for Urmi's own search for meaning and empowerment. By bringing Mira's voice to

light, Urmi engages in an act of feminist resistance, challenging the silencing of women's stories in the domestic sphere. This reclamation of female voices and experiences underscores Deshpande's commitment to portraying women's agency as an act of resistance against patriarchal oppression (Sinha, 2015).

### ***The Intersection of Emotional Realism and Female Agency***

Deshpande's works demonstrate how emotional realism and female agency are intricately linked. The emotional struggles her characters experience are often the catalyst for their eventual assertion of agency. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's emotional journey from passive acceptance to self-awareness is what ultimately enables her to break her silence and begin to reclaim her voice. Similarly, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's recognition of her emotional trauma leads her to confront her abusive husband and make decisions that prioritize her own well-being.

This intersection is particularly evident in Deshpande's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship, a recurring theme in her novels. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's complicated relationship with her mother shapes much of her emotional life. Her mother's preference for Saru's brother over her, and the guilt Saru feels for his death, reflect deep-seated emotional wounds that continue to affect her as an adult. It is only through confronting these emotions that Saru is able to assert her independence and reclaim her sense of self. This dynamic between emotional realism and agency is a hallmark of Deshpande's feminist vision, which emphasizes the importance of emotional introspection in the process of self-empowerment.

In *Small Remedies* (2000), another significant work by Deshpande, the protagonist, Madhu, deals with the death of her son and the emotional repercussions of loss and grief. Madhu's introspective journey is marked by a quest for self-understanding, which leads her to explore the lives of other women around her, including Savitribai Indorekar, a classical singer, and Leela, a family friend. These women, who have chosen unconventional paths for themselves, embody the potential for female agency in a patriarchal society. By reflecting on their lives, Madhu gains insight into her own struggles with identity and autonomy. The emotional realism of Madhu's grief and her subsequent self-discovery underscores the transformative power of emotional introspection in Deshpande's depiction of female agency.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a rich tapestry of emotional realism and female agency, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in a patriarchal society. Her protagonists, through their emotional journeys, confront the limitations imposed upon them by family, society, and cultural norms, and gradually assert their independence and individuality. By depicting the internal struggles and psychological depth of her characters, Deshpande challenges the conventional narratives of female victimhood and highlights the complexity of women's agency. Through works such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande adds a significant voice to Indian feminist literature, offering a perspective that emphasizes the importance of emotional realism in the pursuit of agency. Her characters' journeys of self-discovery and empowerment resonate



with the experiences of countless women navigating the intersection of tradition and modernity in contemporary India.

## CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande's novels, with their rich emotional depth and introspective female characters, offer a profound critique of patriarchal norms while simultaneously celebrating the resilience and agency of women. Through her distinctive blend of "emotional realism" and exploration of "female agency", Deshpande portrays the complex and multi-layered lives of women who negotiate personal identity, societal expectations, and family roles within the broader context of Indian culture. In exploring the emotional lives of her characters, Deshpande presents an authentic and nuanced representation of women who often struggle with silence, suppression, and an acute sense of isolation. The portrayal of characters like Jaya from *That Long Silence* and Saru from *The Dark Holds No Terrors* demonstrates how deeply ingrained societal expectations can shape, distort, and challenge women's emotional and mental well-being. Emotional realism in Deshpande's works does not merely serve as a reflection of her characters' internal worlds but becomes the vehicle through which they question, challenge, and sometimes break free from the limitations imposed upon them.

The emotional journeys of these women are often tied to their ultimate assertions of agency. Deshpande's protagonists are not static figures bound by their circumstances. Instead, they engage in a process of self-realization, reclaiming their voices and identities by coming to terms with their internal conflicts. This journey, as reflected in characters such as Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Urmi in *The Binding Vine*, symbolizes the slow but inevitable emergence of female empowerment from within the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that bind them. By examining their emotions and life choices critically, these women eventually assert their independence, redefining their relationships and reclaiming control over their own destinies.

Deshpande's works are feminist in the truest sense, not because they present women as flawless or inherently rebellious but because they foreground the struggles and complexities of women's lives in a society that frequently seeks to constrain them. Her female characters do not always conform to the conventional narrative arcs of liberation or defiance; rather, they exist in a space of negotiation and compromise. Deshpande's feminism is rooted in the everyday realities of women's lives—the choices, sacrifices, and emotional burdens they carry—and in doing so, she humanizes her characters and reflects the multifaceted nature of female agency in a traditional society.

Through novels such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande has made a significant contribution to Indian feminist literature. She has given voice to the emotional intricacies and inner conflicts that shape the lives of countless women navigating between tradition and modernity. Her novels serve not only as a critique of patriarchy but also as a celebration of the quiet resilience and strength found within the emotional landscapes of her female characters.

In conclusion, Shashi Deshpande's literary oeuvre offers a powerful commentary on the lived experiences of Indian women. Her characters, marked by their emotional struggles, gradually come into their own, asserting their agency and identity within a world that often seeks to deny

them these very rights. By focusing on emotional realism and female agency, Deshpande transcends the limits of mere social commentary and creates a body of work that speaks to the universal challenges and triumphs of women's lives. Her contribution to feminist discourse lies in her ability to give voice to women's silent struggles and to depict, with great sensitivity, the myriad ways in which they negotiate, resist, and transform the worlds they inhabit.

As feminist literature continues to evolve, Deshpande's exploration of the intersection between emotional realism and female agency will remain relevant, offering a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of the complexities of women's lives in a patriarchal society. In her works, we find not only a reflection of individual struggles but also a collective narrative of resilience, resistance, and redefinition—one that resonates with women across cultural and geographical boundaries.

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