

SEXUAL POLITICS AND RAPE IN THE SELECTED WORKS
OF SHASHI DESHPANDE: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE.

By

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the requirements for the degree of
Master in Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material, which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

Since the early revolutionary period of the first wave of feminist movement in India in 1850, women have come a long way with the feminist liberation movements continuously striving to bring in reformation in various fields—social, economic, political, etc. to ensure equality for women. However, despite all the reforms and changes brought in by these movements, women are still subjected to constant threat of oppression and assault not just in public places, but also at their homes and workplaces. Oppression, not just in the form of physical torture and molestation, but also in the form of ‘mental rape’ is an issue that has been left unspoken for decades due to fear of ignominy and stigmatization. In order to bring these ‘unspoken’ issues in focus, Shashi Deshpande has made earnest attempts to articulate the aspirations of these oppressed women through her writings. The works of Deshpande are reflective of the condition of contemporary Indian women—their struggle for identity and recognition in a society dictated by a male-dominated structure of patriarchy. This paper attempts to examine the two novels *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence* authored by Shashi Deshpande from the feminist perspective, and investigate the issues concerning sexual politics, women’s oppression and violence through an application of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theories. In addition, the paper will investigate the concept of ‘sexual politics’ and ‘rape’ by scrutinizing the underlying factors including the historical, religious, socio-cultural and legal elements that have been instrumental in the construction and shaping of ‘sexuality’ in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: *liberation, rape, patriarchy, identity, sexual politics, oppression.*

Chapter 1

Introduction

Since the early revolutionary period of the emergence of the feminist movement in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, many feminist theorists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges etc.,¹ have come forward to provide an appropriate definition for the recurrent term “feminism”. At the most primary level, the term “feminism” can be defined as a socio-economic and political movement that emerged in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demanding legal, voting and property ownership rights for women. Later many women activists and writers like Simone De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Fuller² etc., put forth the concerns for women’s status in family and society, and the need for women’s recognition. In Indian context, while the women’s movement can be traced back to the pre-independence era, ‘feminism’ as a women’s liberation movement is only a recent phenomenon. From voicing against the marginalization of women to protesting for the need for women’s recognition and acceptance in the public sphere, many feminist writers and activists including Pandita Ramabai, Rokeya Sakhawat, Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, and more recently Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, etc., have made attempts to help these “oppressed” women seek identity through their writings. Furthermore, in the recent times, women writers like Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Reena Dube and Geetanjali Gangoli have also raised their voices against sex selective abortions³, insisting on the need to criminalize sex determination tests to protect unborn

¹ Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

De Gouges, O. *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizen*, 1791.

² Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. London: Lowe and Brydon, 1953. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

Fuller, Margaret, and Donna Dickenson. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Other Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.

³ Bhatnagar, Rashmi and Reena Dube. *Female Infanticide in India: A Feminist Cultural History*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Gangoli, Geetanjali. *Indian Feminisms – Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007

female children. Inarguably, the position of women in India has undergone drastic changes over the years with more female candidates now pursuing higher education in diverse fields including medicine, engineering, pharmacy, marketing, architecture, etc. According to a report issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) “out of 169.75 lakh students enrolled in higher education in 2010-11, almost 70.49 lakh were women as compared to just about 47.08 lakh women enrolled in 2006-07” (Nath, 46). According to another report from MHRD published in 2005, there has been a sharp increase in the number of female candidates enrolling in Science and Engineering faculties in different Indian universities. The number of women enrolling in Science has increased “with 60 women to 100 men (37.5% women of a total of 160 students) in 2000-2001”. On the other hand, in Engineering the number has increased to “30 women to every 100 men (23% women of a total of 130 students)” (Goel, 49). Furthermore, new amendments⁴ have been constantly made in the constitution encouraging women to actively participate in decision-making process and engage in political activism. However, despite the longstanding and fervid women’s movement, the vestige of patriarchy continues to remain entrenched within the modern Indian society, and directly influences the manner in which women, especially those belonging to the lower-class strata, are subjugated and exploited based on their sexuality. These practices of sexual objectification of women are correlated with the ancient tradition of keeping women under male hegemony, and as manifested in some of the derogatory verses, are deeply rooted into the sacred texts of *Manusmriti*,⁵ which states, “Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 190). Therefore, the present paper is aimed at examining the man-woman relationship in the

⁴ “Geeta Mukharjee introduced the Constitution (Amendment) bill, 1985 (insertion of new article 326 A) for election to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies by the system of pro- portional represent” (Devi, 414). The Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008 was passed in “the Parliament of India which proposed to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India, the Lok Sabha, and in all state legislative assemblies for women” (Ravinder, 70)

⁵The Manusmṛti (Sanskrit: मनुस्मृति), is translated as the “Laws of Manu” and is traditionally considered as the most authoritative legal text among the many theological texts (Dharmaśāstras) of Hinduism. (“Manusmriti”)

light of “sexual politics”—the power that operates within a man-woman relationship, and which is often used by one group to dominate over the other, thereby paving way to oppression.

The term “feminism” for Shashi Deshpande, however, means much more than just rebelling against these discriminations in the Indian society. Although Deshpande strongly supports the concerns raised by her contemporary feminists, she takes a more humanistic approach to deal with these issues. When the works of Deshpande are read from the feminist perspective, it is found that she stringently attacks the parochial male-chauvinistic society where women are denied access to the means to voice against the oppression and misogyny perpetrated by the very guardians who are supposed to be their “sheltering tree” (Deshpande, 32). Deshpande identifies as misogynistic those inherited ideologies that are passed from generation to generation, and have been misused to exclude women from mainstream socio-economic space. On the other hand, when her works are examined through the “eyes” of a woman writer attempting to seek recognition for other women of her times, it is discovered that Deshpande’s writings not only “contribute to a strong belief in women’s capabilities, but also point to a direction in feminism often submerged by the emphasis on the injustices women suffer” (Sarker, 223). The feminist tradition with its fervent emphasis on ‘fairness’ and ‘unfairness’ has quite surprisingly neglected one of the foremost questions of today concerning the current position of women in India: Has the feminist movement fulfilled its objective of gender equality? If yes, then at what cost? Have women really achieved equality or has the equality been granted by men to ‘helpless’ women who cannot even stand up for themselves? In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir states, “the women’s effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received” (Beauvoir, 19).

While drawing the contours of the situations of women in contemporary context and the individual struggles they undergo, Deshpande pleads her readers to take some time to understand the nature of human relationships—the relationships one shares with others, “with society, and with the world” at large not only from the stand point of ‘men and women’, but also from the perspective of human beings (Sarker, 224). Deshpande’s novels are beautifully embroidered tapestries where she skillfully weaves the threads that bind her characters to one another as they meet, empathize with each other, and ultimately merge into an integrated consciousness from which comes self-realization and higher awareness. This paper is going to be divided into three broad sections of which the first section will take a historical perspective into different factors including historical, cultural, religious and legal elements that have been instrumental in the construction, shaping and dissemination of socio-cultural identity of women in contemporary India. The second section of this paper will aim at demonstrating how these hegemonic ideologies, in a more fixated form, could have possibly contributed to the formulation of popular stereotypes and paved way to oppression. Finally, the third section will concentrate on answering some vital questions concerning women’s right to their bodies, desires and dreams through a close reading of *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande. Works of literature have always served the purpose of a blueprint to understand and explore human civilization, and the problems associated with it. In this way, literature is a powerful cultural artefact that is instrumental in understanding society and the world at large. Therefore, by analyzing the works of Shashi Deshpande through the historical, socio-economic and legal lenses, this paper aims at creating a bridge to explore the women’s question in the writings of Deshpande, and contextualizing it with the socio-economic, legal, and historical realities of the contemporary India. As this paper is going to focus on patriarchal dominance in India, it will apply a number of methodologies relevant to the approach utilized in each of the sections including Marxist, Feminist and Post-colonial feminist theories. Through the close examination of the works of Deshpande, this

paper aims at demonstrating how sexual politics, rape, violence and sexual objectification are correlated with the exclusionary function of expanding social control through the reinforcement of dominance and hegemony.

1.1 Research Questions

Some of the important questions that this paper will address are—what are the underlying factors behind gender discrimination, sexual oppression and violence in the contemporary Indian society? How do these practices affect the lives of women? What is the social function or purpose behind sexual politics? Is it a strategy on the part of patriarchy to cope with social anxiety? Or is it a tool used to expand socio-economic control? Has it always been there? If not, then at what historical point did these hegemonic ideologies come into practice? How do women in Shashi Deshpande's novels respond to this dominance? What are the compelling factors that lead women to observe silence and go on enduring abuse even after the introduction of new legal provisions under the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) that give women the right to file divorce on basis of cruelty under section – 13(1) (ia)? Are these societal pressures alone that force women to remain silent and endure oppression? Or do women willingly conform to oppression?

1.2 Thesis Statement

This paper demonstrates the underlying factors that have contributed to the shaping and dissemination of socio-economic identity of women in contemporary Indian society, and contextualizes them with the issues concerning sexual politics, rape, and violence in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* and *That Long Silence*.

1.3 Shashi Deshpande as a Twentieth Century Women Writer.

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 at Dharwad in Karnataka to the famous Kannada dramatist, Sriranga. She was still young when India had attained independence in 1947,

during which the country had witnessed a major political and historical change. Deshpande lived in an age of productive and fertile awakening, and proved herself to be a brilliant and constant star, which illuminates the literary scene even today. She was born and brought up in an Indian upper-middle class family and received her education from a convent-styled British school. Later, she went ahead to pursue her degree in economics and political science at Bombay University, and a second degree in law from a university in Bangalore. In 1962, she married Dharendra H. Deshpande and settled down in Bombay (now Mumbai) with her husband and two sons. In Mumbai (1969-1970), she furthered her studies in journalism and completed her post-graduation in the same field with commendable results.

Writing to Deshpande did not come as a spontaneous response to the situations around her, but rather it was the consequence of her intellectual awakening, and her cravings for a creative outlet where she could pour out her heart. Deshpande's career as a writer began with the publication of her first collection of short stories, *The Legacy* in 1972, which gave her life a new direction as a twentieth century woman writer. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* was published in 1986, making her a popular institution among her readers. Set against the backdrop of the nineteenth century India, the book addressed some of the vital issues surrounding women of that time including marital rape, women's status in the family and domestic violence. After this there was no turning back for Deshpande. Books followed one after the other: *Roots and Shadows* was published in the year 1983, which was followed by *That Long Silence* (1988), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015) and her other leading works. Most of the novels of Deshpande have a grim feature to them as they "deal with issues that are often buried in women's silences with unprecedented candour" (Desai, 2). The chief thematic concerns of Deshpande's works are the struggles of women who are caught in the cobweb of loveless marriage, unhappy childhood memories, gender inequality and oppression.

In *Legacies of Strength Afterword*, Sonita Sarker discerns that the works of Deshpande as a twentieth century Indian woman writer highlights a number of cultural and historical elements associated with the literary tradition of that era. Firstly, Sarker states that Deshpande's works reflect on the "multiethnic and multilingual cultures" of India that "generated vibrant literary traditions" (Sarker, 210). Secondly, in the Indian context, English as a medium of writing had become quite popular during the twentieth century among the educated Indians, which was an "effect of nearly two centuries of British Colonialism". The third element that Sarker points out is concerned with the writing and publishing of books during the twentieth century India that was restricted within the domain of the elite class, and therefore, placed authors like Deshpande "in relation to a limited readership" (Sarker, 210-211). Deshpande belonged to a period when women's writings were still reviewed separately from the works done by male writers, and even frowned upon as being inferior to that of writings by men. Therefore, as a result of this indifference, the names of many women writers were blotted out within the literary tradition, and gradually erased off human memory (Woolf, 75-89).

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

In order to investigate the research questions mentioned in section 1.1, the paper will provide an examination of a number of primary and secondary texts including books, journals, scholarly essays and sacred texts using a qualitative content analysis method. In the subsequent sections, the paper will methodically synchronize the accumulated information to investigate the issues surrounding sexual politics, rape, and female oppression as depicted in the selected works of Shashi Deshpande.

2.1 Feminist Literary Criticisms

Feminist literary criticism discerns that literature plays an essential role in shaping, constructing and reflecting cultural ideologies and stereotypes. Therefore, feminist literary critics explore and investigate the impact of patriarchy on works of literature by scrutinizing the historical, political, psychological, sociological and economic forces embodied in literature. While challenging the conventional approach to reading a text, feminist literary criticisms take into account the experiences of individual woman that “emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men.” (Blain, Grundy and Clements, 46), and the combined participation of women in gender studies. The feminist literary critics often adopt the following methods to study the position of women: Firstly, they attempt to provide recognition to female characters in works of literature, thereby challenging the conventional manner in which women’s issues are approached and addressed in literary writings. They suggest that the negative and reductive portrayal of women by male writers have contributed to gender stereotypes and ‘otherization’ of women prevailing in contemporary society. In *Sexual Politics*, for instance, Kate Millett argues that there is a political aspect to the concept of ‘sex’, which has remained neglected within academia. According to Millett, patriarchy plays a significant role in sexual relations

between men and women and in the construction of the very concepts of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. Millet states:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between “masculine” and “feminine” subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences to the female—and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. (Millet, 42)

Millet argues that patriarchy seeks to maintain and extend social control through sexual politics by keeping women under male hegemony. Education is an important institution used to create these distinctions: while male students are encouraged to join STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines as these have better career scope in terms of higher economic earnings, compared to the Liberal Arts programs like Humanities, Arts, Home Science, etc. The present encouragement of women’s “artistic interest” in Liberal Arts is a justification and extension of the archaic notion of considering young women as marriage materials whose ultimate goal in life is to prepare themselves for the “marriage market” (Millet, 43). Furthermore, Millet suggests that in order to understand literature from an impartial and unprejudiced perspective, all the factors including socio-cultural and historical contexts needs to be taken into account. Therefore, Millet opposes ahistoricism, a tendency seen in many modern critics of examining works of literature without carefully analyzing their historical contexts. Millet argues that literary texts cannot be read and understood in isolation, as they are not distinct from their social and historical reality. She criticizes writers including D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, for discussing and viewing the matter of ‘sex’ from a biased male viewpoint. Secondly, Feminist literary critics have demanded for a reevaluation of classical literature to determine the recognition of

women's writing in the canons of world literature. The fact that writers including Mary Anne Evans (George Eliot) and Charlotte Bronte (Currer Bell) had to adopt masculine pseudonyms to get their experiences heard is reflective of the criticisms and negligence the tradition of women writing had been subjected to as a consequence of the imposed inferior position women have held in a male-centric society.

2.2 Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism is a form of feminism that emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the mainstream feminist theorists in the Western countries, criticizing feminism for universalizing the term "women", and discussing the issues of women while taking into account only the experiences of the White women in the developed countries. As a literary approach, Postcolonial theory sought to examine how the remnant of the colonial past continues to influence the thoughts and lives of people of the former colonized nations. Therefore, as an extension of Postcolonialism, Postcolonial feminism suggests that the present day socio-economic and political oppression is correlated with the British Colonialism, the long-lasting effects of which has immensely affected the lives of women of colour in Third World countries. The theory argues that non-Western women have been misrepresented in the subtly politicized framework of mainstream feminism. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticized the "proposals for planetary feminism" and rejected the idea that all women share "a universal experience of oppression from which arises a shared goodwill towards all other women" (Bulbeck, 10). Mohanty asserts that the use of the word "women" is problematic, as it tends to create an "ahistorical, universal unity" among women across the world:

...based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socio-economic political groups within particular local contexts, this move limits the definition of the female

subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. (Mohanty, 344)

The two literary theories—Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Feminism have been criticized and contested by many scholars and researchers, arguing that these so-called theories have resulted in the formation of a new strategy to colonize the minds of the people of the “ex-colonies” through mass media, capitalism and globalization. In *Africological Reconceptualization of the Epistemological Crises in Postcolonial Studies*, Abu Sayeed Mohammad Noman argues that with the heavy dominance of Western theorists within academia, Post-colonialism “has now become a wing of neo-colonialism”. Although, Postcolonial theories had initially challenged the “colonial myths about the alleged inferiority of the colonized people”, in the recent years it has been turned into a mere “platform from which the West sees and talks about the former “Others.”” (Noman, 15). The above arguments presented by Noman enable us to understand how Postcolonial feminism is also politicized within this westernized framework of academia. In *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World*, Chilla Bulbeck states that the Western theorists’ invested interest in studying “the stereotypes of 'other' women” is correlated with the “white western women's constructions of themselves” (Bulbeck, 1) Therefore, postcolonial feminism paves way to the formation of new ideologies that it seeks to deconstruct. Postcolonial feminism has also been subjected to extensive debates, many scholars criticizing it for dismantling the larger and collective feminist groups, and creating miniature groups to address the issues of women belonging to diverse racial and ethnic background. Mainstream feminists views Postcolonial feminism as a threat to the overall feminist goal of promoting universal sisterhood (Bulbeck, 8).

2.3 Marxist Criticism

The Marxist Criticism is an approach to literature that was developed during the twentieth century based on the theories of socialism proposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. According to Marxism, “the forces of production, the way goods and services are produced, will, in a capitalist society inevitably generate conflict between social classes, which created by the way economics resources are used and who profits from” (Benn, 85). According to the Marxist Criticism, works of literature are reflective of materialism and class struggle, and can play a significant role in bringing changes in society. The Marxist Criticism served as a guiding principle for many literary works all across the world and greatly influenced many famous writers and theoreticians like Simone De Beauvoir, Richard Wright, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc. Marxism, as a perspective or ideology, has been the central of most socio-cultural and political debates ever since its emergence in the twentieth century. Marxism in the Indian context, particularly, centered on the issues concerning caste and class-based discriminations, which led to the emergence of the rebellious Dalit movement. In *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, concerning the emergence of Marxism as a body of thought in India, Gail Omvedt states, “The indifference to caste becomes a central lacuna, at a time when Marxism was penetrating India as a powerful ideology” (Omvedt, 177). The Dalit movement demanded for the transformation of the basic structures of the Indian social system, which was found based on the caste system, and at the same time contested Hindu nationalism.

The Marxist feminism, as an extension of Marxism sought to take into account the problems of the women who are suffering as a consequence of capitalism and the individual ownership of private property. Marxist feminists argued that without a radical restructuring of the capitalist economies women’s liberation cannot be fully accomplished. In the later sections, this paper will apply the Marxist feminist framework to analyze forms of systematic gender inequalities, which paved way to oppression and marginalization of women in India.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This section will look into the works of some of the important theorists and writers whose research has greatly contributed to the shaping of my thesis. In order to examine the concept of feminism and the women's question, the paper will look into the works of Kimberle Crenshaw, Partha Chatterjee, Shashi Deshpande, Simone De Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Judith Butler.

3.1 Feminist tradition in India.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines feminism as “the belief that women should have the same economic, social, and political rights as men” (Cambridge Dictionary, 1999). The emergence of the feminist tradition in India can be traced back to the women's movement that had started during the period of colonization, and was heavily influenced by Western feminism. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw have suggested that the adherence to the conventional, white, classist, western models of feminism for examining the issues of the Third World countries is facile due to multiplicity of identities and varied experiences of women. In *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Crenshaw states:

Focusing on two dimensions of male violence against women—battering and rape—I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism... Women of color are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds. When reform efforts undertaken on behalf of women neglect this fact, women of color are less likely to have their needs met than women who are racially privileged.
(Crenshaw, 1243-1250)

Crenshaw's intersectionality can be employed to examine the issues of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries' women in India whose problems were much more complex in that besides class-based discrimination, they had an additional challenge of battling caste-based discrimination. Furthermore, the adoption of the Western, classist model of feminism could not be adhered by South Eastern feminists due to some other obvious differences. Due to the differences in the "historical and cultural specificities" of India, it had to set its feminist "agendas and strategies" different from that of the West. In the Indian context, women activists had to adopt a refined model of the Western feminism realizing that "the subject of women's emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman" (Fathima, 27). In order for women to liberate and seek economic recognition, they had to empower themselves "to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices" that make them susceptible to the control of patriarchy (Fathima, 27).

3.1.1 Revolutionary Women's Movements during Pre-Independence India.

During the nineteenth century, India had witnessed the emergence of various revolutionary movements that demanded equal rights for women. These movements were mostly led by male activists, and rebelled against the restrictive and non-progressive nature of the various customs and religious laws prevailing in society, shackled in which women had to undergo oppression and discrimination.⁶ While the radical group of reformists protested against these inhumane norms and customs as they violated the notion of 'equality' and 'liberty', the revivalists came forward demanding for a more liberal society constituting democratized social relations, and the abolition of evil practices. The revivalists emphasized on the need to return to the Vedic tradition, which was formed based on the foundation of the Rig Vedic⁷ maxim "वसुधैवकुटुम्बकम्", which is translated as "The entire world is a family". The Vedic

⁶ Refer to *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* by Sumit Sarkar.

⁷ Rig Veda (Sanskrit: ऋग्वेद) is the oldest sacred text of Hinduism which was written down around 300 BCE. Composed in an ancient Sanskrit, the text consists of 1,028 poems along with commentaries, liturgies, etc. ("Rig Veda")

civilization with its democratized and non-discriminatory social structure advocated equality and harmony among all living beings (Pandey, 151). In *Vedic Culture and its Continuity: New Paradigm and Dimensions*, Shivaji Singh describes the Vedic Culture as:

...multilinear in its sources but unilinear in its formation. Its course is exactly analogous to that of a mighty river which is joined by several other rivers, big and small, and which flows on swelling with the rich waters of all its tributaries finally contributing to, and enriching, the ocean of human or global culture as a whole. (Shivaji, 2)

Therefore, Hindu revivalist groups including the Arya Samaj, established in the early 1870s by Dayananda Saraswati demanded for the reformation of the society from its very core using the rationalist ideas of the Vedas as its base, and return to the pristine culture of the Vedic society (Subramanian, 126). On the other hand, among some of the notable social reformers of the nineteenth century India were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who accentuated the need to liberalize strict adherence to religious scriptures, and the establishment of a more liberal democratic society where women would be able to access education and inheritance to property like men.⁸ With their modern and progressive outlook, social activists like Roy and Vidyasagar were able to see through the need for new reforms, and believed that in order for India to progress, the women of the nation need to be uplifted and empowered. They went on to challenge the orthodox, hierarchical and sexist social institutions by launching rebellious movements that were targeted to eradicate harmful practices like Sati, child marriage, polygamy, dowry, female infanticide, etc. and promote education for women, and widow remarriage. In *Women and Law: Contemporary Problems*, Lotika Sarkar states that after a period of backlash, the Britishers in collaboration with Roy had successfully abolished some of the evil practices like

⁸ Refer to M. N. Srinivas. "The Changing Position of Indian Women." *Man*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1977, pp. 221–238. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2800796.

Sati and female infanticide by passing the Regulation Act in 1829, and the “Female Infanticide (Prevention) Act in 1870” respectively (Sarkar, 3). Likewise, social reformers and activists, Mahadev Govind Ranade and Raghunath Rao laid the foundation of the Indian National Social Conference in the 1880s, an all Indian National social conference that was aimed at carrying out social reforms all across India. Ranade voiced against the purdah system (the ancient practice of keeping women behind the veil). His later works were directed towards abolishing child marriage, dowry system, the caste restrictions of traveling abroad, promoting women’s education, etc. In the later decade, women activists like Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati too advocated education for women and “women’s participation in public affairs” (Khan). Pandita Ramabai found the Mukti Mission in 1889, which undertook extensive welfare programs to provide shelter, education and health care facilities to destitute women, and young widows. Later in 1927, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), a non-governmental organization was set up by the Margaret Cousins. The organization took initiatives to raise awareness about women’s education, and actively contributed to improve the general condition of women and children in India. In addition to passing various resolutions concerning the upliftment of the status of women, the NGO strived to bring in social reforms such as the abolition of child marriage, dowry, polygamy and prohibition of divorce. In the succeeding years, the organization raised concerns about the economic upliftment of women, and women’s right to inheritance. Over the years, many women activists have raised voice against sex selective abortions, economically coerced sex, sexual violence, rape both outside and within marriage, women trafficking, forced prostitutions, etc.

3.2 Rape and Sexual Oppression in India.

Sexual oppression of women has become a major concern of contemporary Indian society. Recent studies have revealed shocking statistics in terms of the increasing percentage of rape and molestation every year. In *Sexual Violence in Private Space: Marital Rape in India*, Shikha Chhibbar points out, “In 2011, a survey in India revealed that one in five men have

forced their wives to have sex. More than two-thirds of Indian married women between 15 and 49 years old claimed to have been beaten or forced into sex by their husbands.” As per the report presented by another study, “one out of seven married women in India has been raped by her husband at least once” (Chhibbar, 1). Chhibbar notes that there are no laws that acknowledge the sexual crimes that take place within the “private space” of domesticity. Therefore, many of these crimes remain unreported. (Chhibbar, 1). The term “Rape” is defined under the Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) as a sexual offence wherein a man has nonconsensual sexual intercourse with a woman. Section 375 further states, “Penetration is sufficient to constitute the sexual intercourse necessary to the offence of rape” (Indian Penal Code)⁹. However, Section 375 includes an Exception which states, “[s]exual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under 15 years of age, is not rape” (Chhibbar, 1), thereby exempting the perpetrator, in this case the spouse, from prosecution. According to a report by the International Institute of Population Sciences, “26 per cent of women in Pune, 23 per cent in Bhubaneswar, and 16 per cent in Jaipur often have sex with their husbands against their will”; and many of these cases are directly associated with alcohol and sexual abuse (Chhibbar, 1). The current laws governing women’s privacy and safety does not consider forced penetration by the marital partner as a crime, as it is presumed that a wife would unquestionably deliver relentless consent to her husband desiring to have sexual intercourse with her, thereby shunning all other possibilities where a woman might have an objection to sharing physical intimacy with her husband to whom she is bound legally and financially. According to Chhibbar, non-consensual sex in matrimony “is a conscious process of intimidation and assertion of the superiority of men over women” (Chhibbar, 1). The Exception 2 in Section 375 of Indian Criminal Law stands in sharp contrast to the Article 14 of the Indian constitution that guarantees, “The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of

⁹ The Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860) (<http://www.legal-tools.org/doc/6a8f6b/>).

India” (Article 14 (1.1))¹⁰. This loophole in the Indian Penal Code can be seen as a strategy on the part of the state to institutionalize gender bias and discrimination, and reflects on the parochial attitude of the Indian society that still supports and entertains such gender prejudices. While the judicial bodies of many countries around the world like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, etc. have passed legal provisions to secure the safety and honour of women both outside and within the institution of marriage, many Second and Third World Countries like India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan, etc. have not yet criminalized sexual offences taking place within matrimony, thereby leaving married women exposed to and unprotected from sexual threats and assaults by their husbands. Secondly, the current laws governing the security of women outside the matrimony have also proven ineffective to control the increasing rape incidences in India. As per Section 375 of IPC, a man is said to have committed rape if he has non-consensual sex with a woman against her will, or:

...without her consent under false promise, consent by coercion, with her consent when she has unsound mind or intoxication and is unable to understand the nature and consequences of that to which she gives consent, or with or without her consent when she was under 16 years of age”
(Madan and Sinha, 83).

In such cases an attempt to rape case would be registered, and the perpetrator will be penalized with “a minimum punishment of seven years” (Madan and Sinha, 83). The IPC entails an elaborate list of rape situations and the penalty specified for it. However, despite the strong laws for the protection of women from sexual violence, the rate of rape cases has sharply increased over the years. One such heinous act committed against women was the Delhi gang rape case of 2012. The rape incident occurred on 16th December, 2012 in Delhi

¹⁰ Article 14 of Indian Constitution
<http://iitr.ac.in/internalcomplaintscommittee/annexure.pdf>

when a 23 year old woman, Jyoti Singh, a physiotherapy intern was gang raped, tortured and beaten by six men in a moving bus in which she was travelling back home with her friend, Awindra Pratap Pandey. Eleven days after the victim was raped, she had been transferred to a hospital in Singapore for emergency medical treatment but died due to “severe bleeding and cardiac arrest” (Lapsia, 2). The incident generated widespread protest both within India and abroad, resulting in the Government of India constituting “a judicial committee headed by Justice J.S. Verma to suggest amendments in criminal laws and punishment to deal firmly in sexual assault cases” which was followed by the introduction of the “Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013” (Madan and Sinha, 83)” (Madan and Sinha, 83). In addition, new changes were made to the Acts in the IPC criminalizing acid attacks, sexual harassment, voyeurism, stalking and women’s trafficking¹¹.

3.3 Women’s position in the Indian Hindu society

In section 2.3, the paper discussed some of the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century India that demanded for the eradication of harmful evil practices, and emphasized on the restoration of the Indian tradition back to an earlier phase, reviving the fundamental principles entitled in the *Vedas* from which the society allegedly strayed. These rebellious movements and uprisings shed light on the following questions: Has it always been like this for women ever since the human civilization came into existence? Has there ever been a time when men and women shared an equal place in the Indian society? If yes, then at what point did this practice of discrimination begin? In order to examine these questions, this section will discuss the position of women in India during the early Vedic period in contrast to that of the later Vedic age by examining the two important scriptures in the Vedic literature—the *Shruti* and the *Smriti*¹².

¹¹ Section 326 A of the Indian Penal Code (<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=91979>)

¹² *Shruti*, (Sanskrit: श्रुति) is “the most-revered body of sacred literature” in Hinduism, which is “considered to be the product of divine revelation. Shruti works are considered to have been heard and transmitted by earthly

3.3.1 Women in the Vedic tradition

The medieval era of the ancient Indian History is an extensive period, spanning from the age of the decline of the Gupta Empire in the sixth century to the invasion of the British colonizers in the eighteenth century. I have found Shivaji Singh's account of the historiography of the Indian Vedic civilization very useful to examine and understand the "Vedic or Vedic Harappa"¹³ (Singh, 2) tradition, which was the foundation of the ancient Indian culture. With the arrival of the Aryans, and the establishment of the Vedic culture, the Vedic literature had gained considerable prominence. The origin of the Vedic literature can be interpreted broadly in terms of the two segmented periods—firstly the early Vedic age, "between 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. when the Aryans composed hymns of the Rig Veda", and secondly the later Vedic period "between 1000 B.C. 600 B.C. when the Aryans prepared large part of their religious texts" (Roy, 161). The Vedic norms laid down in the Vedic Literature "formed the basis for the rise of a social identity that was needed to organize the society at a much larger scale needed for the birth of the earliest civilization of South Asia" (Singh, 11).

Femininity during the early Vedic period was revered with respect, as it was considered to be the source of all creation. Manifested in the sacred text of the *Vedas*, women were considered equal to and sometimes even superior to men. In *Rig Vedas*, for example, the Devi Sukta hymn declares the feminine energy "Shakti" to be the driving force of all creation in the universe, thereby explicitly emphasizing women's superior role in creation over men. In addition, the feminine power is celebrated as the most powerful force in Hindu texts like "Tripura-tapini Upanishad, Bhavrichopanishad, Guhyakalupanishad, and Devi Upanishad" where Shakti is regarded as the "creative force of Shiva, mother of the universe" (McDaniel,

sages" and is contrasted to Smriti. ("Smriti")

Smriti, (Sanskrit: स्मृति) in Hinduism is a collection of sacred texts based on the memory of ordinary folks. The Smriti texts are "elaborates, interprets, and codifies Vedic thought but, being derivative, is considered less authoritative" than the Vedas. The Smriti literature was passed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition, and as a result it had become one of the most popular texts in Hinduism. ("Smriti")

¹³ Refer to *Vedic Culture and its Continuity: New Paradigm and Dimensions* by Shivaji Singh

90). Furthermore, some scholars and researchers¹⁴ claim that in the Vedic culture, harmful social practices including Sati did not exist, and that it evolved in a later period in or around the second millennium CE as a result of the changes in the socio-political system of that period. In addition, some scholars have also argued that women in the Vedic tradition were very much part of the public space, studying and teaching scriptures, performing rituals, and actively participating in philosophical debates on the Upanishads. Moreover, manifested in the *Upanishads*, many of these religious women scholars including Gargi and Maitreyi¹⁵ were conferred with a revered and well-placed disposition in the socio-cultural space, and were acknowledged for their expert understanding of the Vedas. However, by the second millennium CE this scenario began to change when the new socio-political systems came into effect, demanding for the modification of the traditional Vedic setting.

3.3.2. Oppression and Gender discrimination in the *Manusmriti*.

In this section, the paper will attempt to closely examine the ancient sacred text of India, the *Manusmriti* since this religious scripture has been frequently contested and criticized by many activists and reformers like B.R. Ambedkar¹⁶ for its anti-humanistic treatment of the ‘dalits’ and women. In the Indian context, with Hinduism accounting for about eighty percent of the total population, it is needless to say that the oppressive practices of keeping women under male dominance and excluding them from public spaces have a direct association with the religious text of *Manusmriti* that has set ‘male’ as the superior gender by default. The *Manusmriti* (translated as the “Laws of Manu”) which is widely held as an authoritative text in Hinduism is assumed to be the written commentaries of Bhrigu Maharishi (Puthenveetil, 2)

¹⁴ Brick, David. “The Dharmaśāstric Debate on Widow-Burning.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 130, no. 2, 2010, pp. 203–223. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23044515.

Sarkar, Sumit, and Tanika Sarkar. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Print.

Shashi, Shyam Singh, 1935- *Encyclopaedia Indica : India, Pakistan, Bangladesh* (1st ed). Anmol, New Delhi, 1996.

¹⁵ Ellison, Findly. *Women, Religion, and Social Change*. Edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly), New York: State University of New York Press, 1985

¹⁶ Dhanajay Keer, Dr. *Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan Private Limited, 1990. Print.

based on the original policies and religious laws laid down by Manu, a sage who was renowned for his specialized study of the Vedas “in the knowledge (of its meaning) and in the performance (of its precepts), and known through the sacred tradition which has been handed down in regular succession” (Muller, xiii-xiv). In *History and Influence of Law Code of Manu*, Charles J. Naegele discerns that the *Manusmriti* “had not been written down when they were composed” and that the text was not “dated in the conventional sense” (J. Naegele, 7). In other words the exact date or the name of the original composer is not known, and therefore, Naegele, based on the analysis of certain historical evidences, and tracing its history in relationship to that of the *Rig Veda* and the Harappa civilization discerns that the text was written long before 1900 BC, demonstrating the probable ways in which the *Manusmriti* could have evolved. Since, the evolutionary history of the text is extensive it is beyond the scope of this project to even briefly demonstrate the complete process through which this religious text has come to attain an authoritative position in the canon of Hindu scriptures. However, I shall make an attempt to point out a few relevant points concerning the origin of this text, which would help us to understand its influence on the construction, shaping and dissemination of gender and sexuality in the ancient medieval India and contextualize it with the contemporary situations in India. In *History and Influence of Law Code of Manu*, Charles Naegele discerns that the *Manusmriti* may have been written down “during the height of the ancient Indian Indus/Harappa Civilization, in approximately 3000-2000 BC” (J. Naegele, 199). Many scholars like Patrick Olivelle¹⁷ and F. Max Muller have questioned and contested the later date modifications, insertions and corruptions within the *Manusmriti*. Given the multitude of significantly variant versions of the scripture, it can be argued that the text was exposed to manipulation, tampering and even subjective interpretations by different scholars. In *Laws of Manu*, in regards to the validity and

¹⁷ Patrick Olivelle, and Suman Olivelle. *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.

authenticity of *Manusmriti*, F. Max Muller states that the *Smritis* (English translation: recollection):

...are surrounded by clearly fictitious traditions, by mythological legends which either may have grown up spontaneously, because the real origin had been forgotten, or may have been fabricated intentionally in order to show that these works possess divine authority and, hence, have a claim to implicit obedience on the part of all Aryas (Muller, xii).

Written down by a male religious scholar over five thousand years ago, *Manusmriti* suggests that Manu, a man was the “descendant of self-existent Brahman” (Muller, 19), and in order to carry on the posterity, a woman was born. Moreover, the text asserts that Manu was the entitled law-maker who was given the power to lay down rules and regulations for humankind, thereby implicitly emphasizing men’s superiority and functionality over women. *Manusmriti* can be seen as one of the significant legal texts of the ancient Hindu society from which germinated the seed of the popular stereotypical ideas concerning gender roles—the text has authoritatively laid down norms for how men and women should act, behave and conduct themselves in public and domestic spheres. Furthermore, it has specified separate duties for men and women—while men were expected to serve their duties (based on their respective castes) and outshine in public sphere, women were expected to stay at home and perform their duties as daughters, wives and mothers, which mostly included looking after the family, cleaning and maintaining house, cooking food, etc. A woman in ancient times neither had the power to take her own decisions nor allowed to work out and earn for the family. Her movement was confined within the four-walls of domesticity, relegating her position to that of the ‘weaker’ sex who must be protected by her father during her childhood, by her husband after marriage, and her son in old age (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 190). In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler attempts to break

this sex/gender distinction, and argues that there is no sex that is not always already gender. Every human body is gendered from the beginning of its social existence, which means that there is no “natural body” and that bodies are culturally constructed. According to Butler, gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, ‘a stylized repetition of act.’ (Butler, 140). She further argues that “Masculinity” and “femininity” are actually constructed by the way the ‘performer’ plays out those terms with their own bodies. Gender itself does not create the performance; it is the performance that creates gender (Butler, 140). Indeed, being a man or a woman, an individual does not make “original choices” to act or behave in a certain manner or have some certain desires exclusive to his or her sex, rather these choices are the consequences of one’s imitation of the ‘ideal image’ and gender roles the society has set. These fixed ‘expected’ behavioural traits are instigated into the consciousness of individuals through various cultural apparatuses like religious institutions, media, schools, family, law, etc., which get internalized with time. In order to explain the concept of internalization, Butler cites Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* in which he questions “the doctrine of internalization,” the concept that subjects are formed by internalizing disciplinary structures. Foucault substitutes this with “the model of inscription”: as Butler describes it, this is the idea that “[the] law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body” (Butler, 134–135). The reason behind this is that there is no “interior” to gender; “the law” cannot be internalized, but is written on the body what Butler calls as “the corporeal stylization of gender, the fantasied and fantastic figuration of the body” (Butler, 135). Butler further adds:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity,” (Butler, 136).

Since her childhood a woman is forced to inject cultural teachings into her life—she is taught and tamed to obey the command of her husband whose position in her life is akin to that of God, and any disobedience to his orders or disrespect to his honor would deprive her from attaining *moksha* (English translation: salvation), and she would therefore be “disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin” (Manu, 5.164). On further investigation of some of the demonizing verses in *Manusmriti*, these undercurrents of sexual politics become clearer. In *The Laws of Manu*, Georg Buhler quotes a verse from the Manusmriti, which sends a warning signal to the male community about the innate deceptive nature of women, and reduces them to the stereotypes of “seductress’ and ‘brain-washer’ who need to be kept at a safe distance to ensure the spiritual growth of men. It states:

It is the nature of women to seduce men in this (world); for that reason the wise are never left unguarded in (the company of) females. For women are able to lead astray in (this) world not only a fool, but even a learned man, and (to make) him a slave of desire and anger. (Buhler, 36)

These hymns entailed in the *Manusmriti* are correlated with the hegemonic onslaught of patriarchy, and are clearly composed based on facile and unspeculative ideologies. While ideologies are essential to ensure the long-term sustenance of a system or a society (as they are instrumental in shaping the worldview of an individual, through which he/she makes sense of the world), they often result in the formation of distorted realities in the mind of one who upholds them. The late Vedic ideologies traced in the *Smritis* for instance, served the purpose of specific social functions during that time; and were initially aimed at bringing discipline and commitment in Hindu marital relationships, law and order in Hindu families, and create a sense of solidarity and cohesion among social groups. However, over the years these uncompromising and non-progressive ideologies have become deeply rooted into

human consciousness, intrinsically leading to the formation of a distorted idea of concepts like 'sexuality' and 'gender' in the human mind, which consequently resulted in the institutionalization of discrimination and inequalities in society.

3.4 Shashi Deshpande's Perspectives on Feminism

Having been exposed to the works of both her Indian as well as English contemporaries, Deshpande's mind is unclouded by narrow sexist inhibitions and mental barriers. She believes herself to be more of a humanist than a feminist, and expresses anger on being categorized as a feminist writer. Her rejection of any "sexist purpose" to her writings is evident in a number of interviews. In one such interviews with Vanamala Viswanatha, Shashi Deshpande states:

I want to reach a stage where I can write about human beings and not about women in relation to men. I don't believe in having a propagandist or sexist purpose to my writing. If it presents such perspective, it's only a coincidence.
(Vishwanatha, 237)

Deshpande also goes ahead to claim herself as a feminist in the sense that she thinks, "We need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species" (Sree, 22). These statements reflect Deshpande's humanistic concerns: As an activist trying to promote equality in society, Deshpande recognizes the intrinsic 'potential', which is innate in every human being, and finds it vexatious when a woman is inferiorized, and is ripped off her identity as a legal, distinct and independent citizen of a democratic nation. A close examination of Deshpande's writings proves that her rebel is not just against social injustices but also against the juggernaut of patriarchy that makes it difficult and at times impossible to change the ways in which women are viewed in Indian society. Shashi Deshpande was aware that a real change could be brought only when modern, educated women came forward to take initiatives to change this perception. She exemplifies this

through the creation of her revolutionary women characters like Urmila, Jaya Kulkarni and Sarita who suffer as a result of gender-based discrimination, rebel against these constraints, and ultimately develop into strong, bold and confident individuals who seek their own individuality and identity while fighting their internal conflicts and the external pressure of patriarchy.

Although a close reading of Shashi Deshpande's life depicts that she shared a striking similitude with her women characters like Urmila and Jaya, her writings seem to negate this postulation. The epigraph of *The Binding Vine*, "What was the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?", an extract from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, signifies that Deshpande considers herself to be holding a position distinct from her protagonists wherein she attempts to transcend her personal zone as a writer to create a more impersonal space from where she can paint an accurate picture of the current situations of women in contemporary India. On the other hand, Deshpande's protagonists, although may seem like the writer's alter egos, are in reality—unique and authentic women whose characters remain untainted by the writer's subjectivities throughout the narratives. The above-mentioned epigraph of viewing the 'creation' and the 'creator' separately is also indicative of the idea that a work of fiction assumes an identity distinct from its author by transgressing the temporal limits of time and space.

One of the striking features of Deshpande's works is the extensive use of allusions to make covert references to a wide range of texts, for instance, the prismatic variegation of allusions Deshpande creates with reference to the works of feminist writers like Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf "testify to the expansive network of ideas that support" her work (Sarker, 241), and reflects on the deep influence of the Western feminism on the minds of contemporary Indian feminist writers like her. However, in her interview with Vimala Viswanatha, Deshpande denies the influence of Western women writers on her writings. She

states, “I still read her (Jane Austen) regularly. But I don’t think there have been any conscious influences on my writing as such” (Vishwanatha, 10).

3.4.1 The Postcolonial Concerns in the Writings of Shashi Deshpande

When the works of Shashi Deshpande are approached and examined from the post-colonial perspective, we find that although there is no explicit addressal¹⁸ of “fundamental postcolonial subjects” like imperialism, hybridity, colonial hegemony, and “displacement and disorientation” (Noman, 79) etc. in her writings, yet a postcolonial undercurrent becomes visible on a close reading of some of her important works like *A Matter of Time* and *That Long Silence*, where she skillfully depicts an au courant image of the influences of post-colonialism on the lives of her characters. In *Legacies of Strength Afterword*, Sonita Sarker writes, “Deshpande came of age as a writer in a postcolonial India, a nation then seeking a coherent cultural and economic identity distinct from imperial English legacies of language and ideology” (Sarker, 209). For instance, in *That Long Silence*, Deshpande illustrates the impact of the fermenting residue of Colonization on the lives of her women characters seeking dual identities of native and imposed culture. The novel depicts how the people of the new independent India find themselves in a conflict to hold on to their cultural identity while not being able to discard the legacies of their colonial past altogether. In the novel, while the protagonist, Jaya is sent to a convent school by her father, her cousins receive a traditional Indianized education from a Kannada school. Despite the disapproval expressed on the part of Aiji, Jaya’s father insists on getting his children educated from an English school. His protests, “Let them learn good English...It’s going to be more useful to them than being good Brahmins” (Deshpande, 90) is reflective of the conflict encountered by the characters in *That Long Silence* as they try to assimilate to their neo-natal identity as citizens of the post-colonial India.

¹⁸ Addressal refers to the act of addressing something (such as a problem or issue). (“Addressal”)

Furthermore, Deshpande's work demonstrates how this rejection of the imperial culture by the society in the new independent India has contributed in the construction of certain gender stereotypes. Deshpande's novels illustrate the consequences of the changes that evolved as a direct response to the new nationalist ideology that had spread throughout India during the post-colonial era. Partha Chatterjee discusses these issues concerning the new socio-cultural changes, especially on Bengali women in many of his prominent works. In *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* for instance, Partha Chatterjee challenges the woman's question by showing how women coped with these socio-cultural changes. The women's question had been a central issue for some of the most controversial debates over social reform in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Chatterjee states that while the nationalistic issues were kept in the forefront of all debates, the issues of women were kept on the periphery, thereby leaving the problems unaddressed and unresolved. The Colonization led to the separation of gender roles both at home as well as in the public sphere, and it had the extra dimension of preservation of identity and selective modernity. Westernization of women was greatly criticized by the local people—the use of modern clothing, shoes, cosmetics and jewellerys and even the reading of novels, needlework and riding in open carriages were sharply condemned. Chatterjee suggests that the central idea of women in the nationalist movement was that they needed to be modernized in a western manner, but as long as it did not clash with the ideas of “traditional” gender roles (Partha, 116-135). In *The Binding Vine*, a novel portraying the condition of women during the twentieth century (almost forty-five years after independence), the remnant of the imperial past can still be traced in the Indian society. In the novel, Shakutai derides her daughter Kalpana for her invested interest in flaunting her femininity featured by “gaily painted nails and lips, brightly coloured clothes and sleek, shining hair” (Deshpande, 149), as she believes that her daughter's excessive preoccupation with her beauty would draw unwanted gaze of men who are “like dogs panting after bitches” (Deshpande, 146). Deshpande, through the portrayal of the character of

Kalpana, depicts the resistance of the 'modern woman' as she tries to break away from the traditional ties to create a new space for herself in a male-centric society.

Chapter 4

The Binding Vine: Breaking the Shackle of Fear and Shame.

The Binding Vine (1993) can be seen as a vast canvas on which Shashi Deshpande paints a satirical sketch of a misogynistic and conservative contemporary Indian society where women's bodies are used and abused by men to emphasize their gender superiority. The novel skillfully depicts the tales of three women namely Urmila, Kalpana and Mira who suffer "physically, mentally, and psychologically, because of the subjugation of patriarchal social set-up" (Nair, 32). The novel not only addresses the issues concerning marital rape and oppression but also attempts to "break the silence around it taking the responsibility to face facts, bringing injustice to public attention, and honoring women's legacies" (Sarker, 224) by deconstructing the taboos and myths surrounding gender that fetter women with the shackle of fear and shame, thereby restricting their growth as individuals. Set in the twentieth century India, the novel revolves around the life of the protagonist Urmila, and the women she encounters during the journey of her self-realization. These women, some living and some dead (in the case of Urmila's mother-in-law, Mira and her grandmother, Baijiji) coming from the diverse strata of society, form a connection with Urmila as they begin to understand and relate to each other's emotional experiences.

In the opening chapter of the *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande introduces us to her protagonist Urmila. Urmila is seen undergoing a traumatic condition as she has recently lost her infant daughter Anu. It is from this point that the novel begins to gather momentum, as Anu's death brings a tragic turn in the life of the protagonist, and she begins to question the meaning of life. Urmila's husband Kishore works in the Merchant Navy, and he is absent almost throughout the narrative; however, he plays an influential role in shaping the plot of the story. Urmila and Kishore share a distant relationship, their marital relationship being limited only to the fulfillment of marital obligations. Anu's death furthers this distance

between Urmila and Kishore, as the latter becomes withdrawn and reticent. As Urmila begins to come in terms with the trauma of her daughter's death, she encounters a number of women, who are the victims of the cruel rape culture. One of the important questions that the novel raises is concerning whether or not women should have complete rights to their bodies in terms of socio-economic agency and legal rights. *The Binding Vine* is an outright vitriolic narrative that chronicles the sufferings and trauma undergone by women depicted through the portrayal of the plight of Mira and Kalpana. In the novel, Deshpande makes an attempt to fill the unsettling void by narrating the experiences of some of these rape victims; and seeks to understand how and why certain crimes become buried in silence. In *The Binding Vine*, Mira writes in her diary:

*But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too
twist brocade tassels round her fingers
and tremble, fearing the coming
of the dark-clouded, engulfing night?*

(Deshpande, 66)

The above extract is a testimony to the abusive man-woman relationship, trapped in which women in India have had to conform to endurance of pain and sufferings for generations due to fear of shame and disapproval. When the protagonist Urmil comes across her deceased mother-in-law's letters and diaries that were long kept hidden in the trunk, she uncovers the mystery of Mira's life, a woman writer who died young without receiving any recognition for her poetry. Mira's life stands in sharp contrast to that of "Mira Bai"¹⁹ who defies and abandons her husband for the sake of the love of Krishna. The life of Mira in *The Binding Vine* exemplified the lifelong consequences of mental and physical rape that women were sentenced to during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result of the sexist violence afflicted by patriarchy. The reason for Mira's pain was the obsessive love of her domineering

¹⁹Mira Bai, (born c. 1498, Kudaki, India—died 1547, Dwarka, Gujarat), Hindu mystic and poet whose lyrical songs of devotion to the god Krishna are widely popular in northern India. ("Mira Bai")

husband, Urmi's father-in-law for whom his wife was a mere sexual object upon which he could exercise his masculinity. Mira's diaries and letters speak of the isolation, anguish and helplessness she suffered from being "cloistered in a home, living with a man she could not love, surrounded by people she had nothing in common with" (Deshpande, 127). During the nineteenth century when the Indian Penal Code was drafted, women like Mira were still not recognized as separate legal individuals, and their identities were associated with their husbands who became their guardians in every way. Therefore, despite all reforms, women's chattel status continued to remain in "their loss of name, their obligation to adopt the husband's domicile, and the general legal assumption that marriage involves an exchange of the female's domestic service and (sexual) consortium" in lieu of economic security (Millet, 24-35). Many writers like John Stuart Mill have discussed about such non-consensual relationships between man and woman in their works, often comparing such marriages to that of bonded slavery. In *The Subjection of Women*, for instance, Mill discerns that such non-consensual marriage is no better than bonded slavery wherein an enslaved person is obligated to perform her duties towards her master without questioning. The moment "she promises life-long obedience to him at the altar" she is bound to serve him "all through her life" (Mill, 17). Mira's poem reveals the societal pressure she experienced when her mother advised her to obey the command of her husband:

Don't thread paths barred to you

Obey, never utter a 'no';

Submit and your life will be

A paradise, (Deshpande, 83)

For Mira's society and even her parents, the inhumane and brutal treatments she received from her husband were matters to be kept confidential between 'husband and wife'. Every time Mira expressed a feeble resistance, her voice was silenced by her elders who advised her on the importance of adjustment and compromise in marital relationships. Whenever she tried

to discuss about her pain and problems, her rebels were met with sharp criticism from her parents who advised her to remain calm and patient, and fulfill her duties as a ‘good’ wife in order to stay happy in life. The issues faced by Mira in *The Binding Vine* signifies similar problems faced by women in the twenty-first century since there has been minimal attempts on the part of the Indian constitution to address the issues pertaining to the female victims who are being raped by their husbands. While addressing the issues concerning legal discrimination against women, John Stuart Mill states, “the legal subordination of one sex to the other” is “wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement” (Mill, 1). The statutes governing the institution of marriage in India has its roots into the sexist ideology that views women as their husband’s possession, thereby licensing men to exercise nonrestrictive force on their wives, both mentally as well as sexually. Women like Mira have no choice but to surrender to the desires and wishes of their husband. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir writes:

The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (Beauvoir, 16)

The above arguments put forth by De Beauvoir reflect on the societal notion of a woman being incomplete without a man. This reductive representation can be traced back to the ancient society of the Paleolithic era, the primary concern of which was to survive through inter-dependence. In *Distorting the Past. Gender and the Division of Labor in the European Upper Paleolithic*, Linda Owen points out that during the prehistoric times, while hunting was “thought of an activity that would be carried out by strong and able men” women had the responsibility of looking after the children, picking and gathering up fruits and a few sundries

This division of labour between men and women led to the formation of the existing notions of Man as the hunter and “the less-regarded and dependent role of ‘Woman the Gatherer’” (Owen, 91). This notion in a more fixated form could have possibly led to the contemporary stereotypical representation of women as the ‘weaker sex’ as women since the very ancient times were economically dependent on the head of their families for survival and sustenance. The social function of this stereotype is to identify feminine and masculine behavior in a society separately, and to establish the notion that women are always in need of economic security from one’s father, husband or son. Since this stereotype has passed down from generations, it has become an inseparable aspect of ‘womanhood’. However, the question that needs to be addressed here is why do these sexual stereotypes exist? One possible reason could be that these prejudices fulfill the ultimate objective of social exclusion of women. As discussed in the introductory section, these stereotypes are historical and one form or other of such attitudes lead to justification of socio-economic denial. For example, the stereotypical belief that only men can write poems deprives Mira in *The Binding Vine* from seeking a recognition as a poet. Mira, in one of her diaries, writes about her meeting with a famous poet Venu, who had deeply inspired her. When Mira gave Venu “some of her poems to read”, he chides her saying, “Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men” (Deshpande, 127). These essentialist views of Venu are reflective of the paralyzing position of women, and the harsh criticism they had to face in order to get their writings recognized. They were culturally represented as the ‘sex’ whose only objective in life was to serve their family and raise children. Stuart Hall, a Marxist Sociologist and Cultural theorist attempts to explore these cultural representations by examining how language, a significant social tool functions as a medium for the production of meanings of certain concepts in our mind. In *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall investigates the concept of representation by examining how cultures one subscribes to affect his/her

perception of representation, and how the society constructs knowledge (messages, ideas or information) in the form of certain encoded imageries through the “system of representation”. Hall further discusses Saussure’s semiotic model in the light of the concept of “binary opposition” i.e. defining the meaning of a word by relating to its opposite word, a method used to mark differences linguistically. In the system of binary opposition, in which the relation between two linguistic items is determined by juxtaposing them, one of the items in the pair carries a negative/reductive connotation, which heightens the significance of the other. In the case of a man-woman relationship, women have always held an imposed inferior position as opposed to their male counterparts, men being entitled as ‘the head of the family’, ‘the stronger/smarter one out of the two’, ‘the one born to conquer’, etc., thereby acquiring the prominent position in the binary pair. These traditionally held ideologies are commentaries on the sexual politics that pervade man-woman relationship. In *Sexual Politics*, Millet argues that the relationship between the two sexes—male and female is a political issue where one group tries to dominate the other constantly, resulting in oppression (Millet, 42). In *The Binding Vine*, women resist and challenge this orthodox patriarchal mindset of regarding women as the secondary sex, their value being assessed in relation to that of men. However, as evident from Mira’s diaries and the interactions Urmila has with her step mother-in-law Akka, Mira’s death during childbirth is indication of the helplessness of women, who failing to resist the juggernaut of patriarchy, ultimately succumbed to that force leaving their emotions locked in a trunk to erode with time. Likewise, Deshpande, through the portrayal of Kalpana, a young girl raped by her Sulu Mavshi’s husband Prabhakar, reflects on the sexual vulnerability of women who are exposed to sexual threats not just in matrimony, but also at the hands of their elderly guardians. Kalpana like most women of her age has an aspiration—she wants to marry a person of her choice. She declines the sexual advances of her lascivious Uncle, who had earlier on multiple occasions, molested her since she was a young girl. Upon being rejected by Kalpana, he brutally rapes and beats her. We

get a vivid picture of Kalpana's situation after the rape incident through Urmi's consciousness. Urmi thinks to herself:

I am thinking of the girl who has the marks of a man's hands on her arms, of his knees on her thighs, and of his teeth, oh my God, of his teeth on her lips.

(Deshpande, 89)

Urmi becomes a testifier of the tyranny of men like Prabhakar who do not hesitate to seek sexual vengeance even against their daughter-like nieces when their male ego is hurt upon being rejected, and those like her own father-in-law who go on to commit atrocities against their wives in the veil of love and marriage. Through the narrative, Deshpande questions the role of female sexuality, and innocence, and questions adherence to gender norms and conventions in comparison to a woman's dignity and honor. Therefore, in order to help these voiceless women, she empowers Urmila with the strength and courage to fight for the cause of these suffering women. Despite its bleak and dreary backdrop, the novel delineates a strong undercurrent of empathy, compassion and hope. Urmila steps in to assume the role of a mouthpiece to articulate justice for these women—she stands by Kalpana and Shakutai's family despite being advised by her sister-in-law Vanaa to avoid getting involved in this rape case. When the police officer and Dr. Bhaskar insists on recording the case as an accident instead of rape, Urmila protests to file an 'attempt to rape' case against the perpetrator to seek justice for Kalpana. Shakutai is anxious fearing the consequent negative reputation, which would expose her family to ignominy and stigmatization if the news was brought to public attention. However, Urmila, refusing to be held back by the fear of ignominy, persuades Shakutai to fight for the justice of Kalpana. With the help of a journalist Malcolm, Urmila gets Kalpana's story published in order to raise public awareness about sexual crimes. This action on the part of Urmila results in a combined consequence: while the incident generates widespread public awareness, it results in the death of Sulu, Shakutai's sister, who unable to

accept the fact that her niece was raped by her own husband, commits suicide. Furthermore, Urmila is also determined to publish the poems of her deceased mother-in-law, hoping to immortalize her works in the world of literature. However, the novel does not give a clear indication if the protagonist succeeded in getting the writings of Mira published. Nonetheless, these various encounters and experiences transform Urmila from within, in that she is no longer the aggressive, frustrated and mourning woman we meet at the beginning, but rather a strong and confident individual who takes charge of her life, and refuses to conform to social injustice.

Chapter 5

That Long Silence: Mental and Sexual Subjugation

In this section, the paper will attempt to explore the issues concerning women of the post-independence era, especially in the context of mental rape, domestic violence, repression, and questions concerning women's choice pertaining to reproduction, through a close reading of *That Long Silence* (1988) authored by Shashi Deshpande, and try to trace narrative strands that would enable us to analyze the concept of sexual politics which pervades within man-woman relationship, depicted through the psyche of the protagonist Jaya.

That Long Silence was written by Deshpande as an attempt to break through the silence of women to narrate the tragic tales of her women characters who are caught in the strictures of oppressive gender roles in the late nineteenth century. The novel is yet another masterpiece of Deshpande, which depicts the suffering of women through the eyes of her rebellious protagonist Jaya Kulkarni, an educated middle-class woman. Although the main plot of the novel revolves around the loveless marriage of Jaya, it also brings into light the suppressed images of multiple women who are subject to victimization and abuse as the direct consequence of the prevailing gender inequality in society. According to Black and MacRaid, the traditional historical narrative previously viewed women as the second sex who were subordinated by the predominantly masculine force...forcing them to either remain silent or leaving their thoughts under-represented (Black and MacRaid, 12-13). The novel is a retaliation against the tyrannical masculine force that suppresses women, leaving them feeling helpless and dependent, and against the misogynistic attitude of a tradition-bound Indian society where a female born is seen as a curse and an increased liability. Set against the backdrop of the post-independence India, the novel portrays a disturbing image of a society where a woman is essentialized as "a womb, an ovary" (De Beauvoir, 35), the *leit*

motif of her life being giving birth to male offspring who could continue the family lineage of her husband, thereby reducing her into a mere baby-manufacturing machine. Nayana, one of the characters in *That Long Silence* for instance, during a conversation with Jaya, expresses her concern for her unborn child saying, “Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who’ll only suffer because of men all her life?” (Deshpande, 28). Women like Nayana who belong to the lower-class strata of the society are well aware of the challenges and hardships associated with ‘womanhood’ and they are apprehensive about bringing their daughters to a world where they have to struggle all their lives for recognition since the moment they step out of their mother’s womb. Similarly, the plight of Jeeja and Kusum reflects on the parochial mindset of patriarchy where a woman is abandoned to suffer in silence when she becomes dysfunctional. Jeeja’s infertility leads her husband to marry another woman. The mental oppression Jeeja faces results in her silence, as she helplessly succumbs to her tragic fate. Jeeja expresses her pain to Jaya: “God didn’t give us any children- that was his misfortune as well as mine. How could I blame him for marrying again when I couldn’t give him any children? How could I blame that woman for marrying him? With whom shall I be angry?” (Deshpande, 52). It is obvious from Jeeja’s reaction that she like many lower-class women like her has grown to believe that her only purpose in life is the lifelong servitude to her husband’s family. Tara, the second wife of Jeeja’s husband on the other hand, refuses to conform to the tyranny of her husband, and curses him for her misery, “So many drunkards die...but this one won’t. He’ll torture us all to death instead” (Deshpande, 53). *That Long Silence* demonstrates that women like Tara who rebel against patriarchal oppression are doomed to meet a tragic end, as she “lacking Jeeja’s toughness and resilience, had died of TB a year after her son was born” (Deshpande, 52). Similarly, the dysfunctionality of women leads society to discard women like Kusum who are considered better dead than alive when they go crazy and become “no use to anyone” (Deshpande, 22). Avva, Mohan’s mother, is yet another victim of this patriarchal oppression. She suffered all her life due to the mental

torture and physical violence afflicted by her husband. Jaya describes her mother-in-law's photo that hung on the wall of Mohan's paternal house: "The mother looks like any other woman of her time, staring blank-faced at the world, the huge kumkum on her forehead blotting out everything in that face but the 'blessed woman who died with her husband yet living'" (Deshpande, 38). Avva was bound to an abusive relationship with her husband, the relationship which resulted in her tragic death while attempting to abort her child.

In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande skillfully depicts the two different worlds—the psychic world within Jaya and the external world to portray the ongoing dilemmas of her protagonist. The novel reflects on the position of the Indian middle-class women in the patriarchal society, and their quest for identity by delineating the new emerging feminist voices, which are trying to rebel against and resist the male chauvinistic social structures and the socio-cultural interpretations of the terms "wifehood" and "womanhood" to suppress women and confine their roles to that of dutiful wives and daughter-in-laws. Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, for instance is advised by her aunt Vanitamami, "If your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it; take up a hobby instead—cat, may be, or your sister's children" (Deshpande, 31). This statement on the part of Vanitamami reflects on the helplessness of the late nineteenth century women who are caught in unhappy marriages from which they can never free themselves due to social obligations and financial insecurities. Jaya belonged to a time when the third wave of feminism in India had already arrived, however women were still discouraged to file a divorce. In the late nineteenth century, it was unthinkable for Indian women to divorce their husbands as firstly, they were dependent on their husbands for financial support, and secondly, the idea of separation between married couple was frowned upon by the Indian Hindu society. Moreover, women like Jaya had to go through a constant struggle to choose their preferred options in life. *That Long Silence* depicts the subjection of late nineteenth century women like Jaya, who was expected to accept everything that came on her way without questioning, may it be accepting her fate as it came to her during her

childhood, may it be marrying a groom her relatives had chosen for her, or may it be accepting the same marriage as her ultimate destiny and surrendering before the wishes of her husband. Throughout the novel Jaya is seen caught in a dilemma to choose between her own free will and her aunt, Vanitamami's advice to stand by her husband no matter what he has done or how he behaves. These different voices within Jaya is reflective of the current situation of women who have "deeply internalized" this patriarchal dominance so that despite all the reforms brought in by the feminist movements in India, these women cannot visualize a separate, individual identity for themselves, and rather submit themselves to the tyrannical masculine force of patriarchy (Prasad, 532). In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir points out that the reason why a woman is viewed as the inessential is because "she herself fails to bring about the change" and gives in to the domination (De Beauvoir, 19). In *That Long Silence*, for instance, the protagonist Jaya is a convent educated middle-class woman who has greater privileges than the other women characters like Jeeja and Nayana in the novel, coming from the underprivileged strata of the society, yet she too feels oppressed under the dominance of her husband. Despite her disapproval of her husband's wrongdoings, she feels reluctant to divorce her husband, Mohan who is suspended from his work on charges of business malpractices. The protagonist justifies herself as an ideal wife by stating, "If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything" (Deshpande, 61). The allusion Deshpande creates in relation to Gandhari, the wife of King Dhritarashtra in the Indian epic Mahabharata is a commentary on the hypocrite mindset of the patriarchal society where the definition of 'ideal' wife is associated with a wife's willingness to conform to the husband's will irrespective of how wrong he may be. Jaya belonged to a period when the empowerment of the middle-class women was still not popularized. Hence, the only way a woman could ensure her survival was by getting married to a well-established government service holder and settle down in life. However, as soon as a woman was married

off, all her rights, freedom, desires and even identity were taken control of by her husband, who became her guardian in every way. Jaya is discouraged by her husband Mohan (a representative of the male-chauvinist society) whenever she takes a step forward to pursue her dream to be a successful writer. During the initial years of her marriage to Mohan, she suffers from identity crisis; and Mohan instead of helping her to assimilate and acclimatize to her neo-natal identity as an upcoming female writer, continues to profess the typically middle-class conservative, intolerant and parochial ideology of keeping the woman under male hegemony by dominating and controlling her actions and desires. When one of Jaya's stories on the mythological oppressed character Seeta is published in a magazine, Mohan expresses his resentment:

Jaya...how could you have done it?...How can I look anyone in the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this? (Deshpande, 144-145)

Not only Jaya's movement is confined within the four walls of domesticity, but she is also deprived of freedom of expression, which restricts her growth as a writer and an individual. She gives up her career as a writer as her husband did not approve of her writing. In this way, she comes to represent many middle-class Indian housewives of contemporary times who, under the suppression and dominance of patriarchal force, give up their dreams to save their "only career...marriage" (Deshpande, 144).

5.1 Jaya- A new emerging voice of modern India.

One of the most striking aspects of Deshpande's works is the way she instigates her protagonists with anxieties, frustrations, helplessness, hopelessness and trauma, while fighting with which they develop into strong and confident individuals. Caught in a loveless marriage to Mohan, Jaya feels an emotional connection with Kamat a middle-aged poet who,

unlike Mohan, inspires Jaya to write and even use her original name in her writings. Kamat brings to Jaya not just freedom of expression but also the motivation, understanding and acknowledgement that Jaya sub-consciously desired all her life, even while she was trying to find her love in Mohan in the initial days of their marriage. The various interactions Jaya has with Kamat influence the inherent Indian middle-class perception of the protagonist and mark a radical departure from the orthodox conventions. Towards the end of the novel, Jaya breaks her long silence when she shuns the image of “two bullocks yoked together” to reconstruct her identity in accordance with her new feminist consciousness. She thinks to herself, “I’ve always thought—there’s only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. But in this life itself there are so many crossroads, so many choices” (Deshpande, 191-192). Jaya realizes that as an individual she has multiple identities other than the ones she was given by marriage—Mohan’s wife and the mother of her children. As she seeks to discover her innate strength as an individual, she consequently undergoes an astonishing change, and in the process comes to share a close resemblance with Urmila in *The Binding Vine*.

Chapter 6

Limitations of the Works of Shashi Deshpande

The works of Shashi Deshpande are acrimonious narratives that depict the oppression, stigmatization and violence women face in a society heavily influenced by patriarchy. Her novels such as *The Binding Vine*, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence*, *A Matter of Time*, etc. are commentaries on the inhumane patriarchal norms that make women prone to sexual, physical and psychological vulnerabilities under male dominance. When we read Deshpande's works from the feminist lens, we are compelled to ask: Why are women always held guilty for the atrocities committed by men? Why women should always be identified in relation to men? The answers to the above questions are not simple, as they require a careful examination of the condition of the women in India in terms of their socio-economic agency, legal rights, their upbringing, etc. One of the challenges of reading Shashi Deshpande is that the author does not provide a direct and easy map to find the answers to the above questions, and, therefore one of the ways to understand these problems at grassroots level is by reading through the experiences of these oppressed women depicted through the consciousness of Deshpande's rebellious protagonists like Urmila, Jaya Kulkarni, Sarita, etc., who are the representatives of the modern, educated, middle class women of contemporary India. Having said that, the heavy dependence of Shashi Deshpande on her middle-class protagonists to narrate the tragedies of her lower class, marginalized characters adds to the limitations of her writings. Although the author carefully takes into account the pain and sufferings of both middle and lower class women in her works, only the former group of women is empowered with the agency to exercise their free will. In Deshpande's novels, as demonstrated in chapter 4 and 5, her middle-class educated women characters, while dealing with traumas, anxieties, frustrations and dilemmas, emerge from their semi-conscious state of docile and submissive daughters, wives and mothers to a state of total awareness in which they discover their personal space and identity, thereby challenging the conventional setting of patriarchy.

However, Deshpande's works fail to provide agency to the lower class women who seem to remain caught in the never-ending circle of sexual abuse, oppression and violence.

Secondly, in most of the works authored by Deshpande, her middle-class educated protagonists serve the purpose of a mouthpiece for the lower class oppressed characters, the intensity of their traumas being depicted mostly through the filter of these elite protagonists like Urmila in *The Binding Vine*. This brings in the additional challenge for the author to narrate the experiences of her marginalized female characters without letting the subjectivities of her protagonists influence the depiction. Moreover, it also puts the reliability of the narrator to question, which entails biased descriptions of events and experiences depicted through the narrator's psyche. *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *That Long Silence* are also stream of consciousness novels for instance, where significant portion of the stories are narrated using the stream of consciousness technique, which involves imaginative flashes, recollection of past memories and time shifts. Many 20th century fiction writers like Anita Desai, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, etc.,²⁰ employed the stream of consciousness technique with sometimes if not always with a combined first person narrative to confer authenticity to their plots as well as protagonists. One of the challenges involved in this technique is that it often limits a work of fiction from delving deeper into the consciousness of other supporting characters. Shashi Deshpande as a skilled storyteller was well aware of the risk involved in first person narration, and hence, adopts "a combination of the first person and the third person narrative coupled with flashback devices to lend authenticity and credibility" to her works (Sharma, 76). However, how far this depiction is unbiased is questionable since the characters in Deshpande's works belong to diverse social classes.

Thirdly, although Shashi Deshpande's stance as a humanist helps us to understand her humanitarian concerns in her writings, there are undercurrent race and caste issues, which are

²⁰Desai, Anita. *Voices in the City*. Delhi : Hind Pocket Books, 1968. Print.
Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1925. Print.
Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. London: Bodley Head, 1969. Print.

undeniably under represented. When we compare Deshpande's works with that of writers like for instance, Arundhati Roy, this limitation becomes clearer. The two authors Deshpande and Roy share a curious resemblance to one another, but given their styles of writing and their perspectives, they are very different. The two writers belong to an upper-middle class and English educated background, and most of their works deal with the issues of women. However, while Deshpande's works delve deeper into the psychic world of her protagonists to unravel the wider societal problems that are affecting the lives of her women characters, Roy's works sketch pictures of the external world to portray the effect of harmful discriminatory practices like the caste system on her suffering characters. For example, in *A God of Small Things* (1997), a semi-autobiographical novel authored by Arundhati Roy, the author vividly depicts the sufferings of the marginalized communities of India like the 'Dalits', or untouchables, and rebels against the socio-political structure of India which still supports and entertains class-based discrimination and dehumanization of the minorities. In *A God of Small Things*, Roy boldly seeks to break this dichotomy between the diverse social classes through the portrayal of the characters of Ammu and Velutha. Velutha, an untouchable who works in the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory, gets involved in a passionate relationship with Ammu, the daughter of his owner, thereby challenging the taboo of the Indian caste system. Moreover, being a political activist in real life, Roy has taken a number of measures to raise awareness about human rights, and actively protested for the rights of the 'Dalits'. On other hand, while Shashi Deshpande's works address the individual struggles of outcast women like Nayana, Jeeja, Shakutai, Kalpana, etc., she does not spill much ink on the wider socio-political issues like caste and class-based discriminations associated with the sufferings of these marginalized women of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

6.1 Conclusion

As an influential contemporary Indian writer, Shashi Deshpande has made several attempts to

give voice to the 'voiceless' who are the victims of patriarchal oppression. Deshpande's outcry for the justice of these oppressed women echoes through the desires and decisions taken by her revolutionary women characters like Urmila in *The Binding Vine* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* who rebel against patriarchal constraints to pursue their identity and freedom, and in the process become united with the wider societal networks of women by transcending the barriers of class. Manifested in Shashi Deshpande's writings, it is clear that the feminist tradition in India with the help of media and journalism has changed the scenario of the present day India, bringing in incredible changes within the country's economic, legal and political systems. However, despite these social reforms women still face sexual oppression, stigmatization, and violence due to the parochial attitude of patriarchy that continues to influence the society in a negative way. These sexual crimes and violence against women are deeply rooted into the religious texts of *Manusmriti*, which had quite dismayingly relegated women to the position of the 'weaker sex' and the 'seductress' who had to be kept under male dominance to ensure order and harmony in the medieval Indian society. These dogmatic ideologies are instrumental in keeping women under male hegemony to ensure the expansion of socio-economic control of patriarchy. The different forms of sexual crimes of the contemporary times are a direct consequence of this sexual politics, and are deeply rooted into the structure of patriarchy historically, politically, legally and psychologically. The Indian laws governing the security of women are currently inefficient to control and reduce the increasing rate of sexual crimes, especially rape taking place within private spaces, as at present there are no provisions to protect married women (above the age of fifteen years) who are vulnerable to sexual assaults by their husbands. This loophole in the Indian Penal Code is correlated with the hegemonic ideology that women are 'the private properties of their husbands' and that a married woman is obligated to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband. Given the statistics, it can be said that sexual crimes and violence still continue to affect the lives of a large number of women in India. Therefore, in order to

combat these issues, it is important to recognize the major complexities that are hindering the country from resolving these gender issues. The Indian Penal Code has already criminalized many of the sexual crimes against women; however marital rape continues to remain an unattended issue in the jurisdiction of Indian Criminal Laws. Unless measures are taken to examine women's question at the grassroots level by addressing these issues from the humanitarian perspective and deconstructing the taboos and myths surrounding sexuality, the objectives of feminism to create equal space and opportunities for women, to protect their honour and dignity, and liberate them from the shackle of fear and oppression cannot be fully accomplished.

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