

## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN SHASHI DESHPANDES NOVELS

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### ABSTRACT

*A technique is the means by which the novelist chooses to tell his or her story. The novel is a living thing. It grows, leaves its impact on us and inspires the readers to ponder over it. When a novelist imagines a story and works out its plot and characters, he or she starts the process of composing the subject. Experience, discovery, use of language all come together to bring for the work of art.*

*Shashi Deshpande, talking about various aspects of writing says that at the moment of writing a writer has to stop out of the room, stands at a distance, a little away from her own humanity and sees the world from this vantage point. Deshpande is selective about her technique. Her books, therefore, are finished works of art. They are free from strain, the story runs smoothly and the form and content do not smother each other. So the purpose of a novel or story is to communicate the underlying dramatic structure or message of the writer.*

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### INTRODUCTION

In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Deshpande shifts the narrative from the first person to third person in every alternative chapter. The double narrative helps to lend great authenticity to the portrayal of the mental trauma Sarita undergoes. In an interview she tells how she hit upon the idea of using double narrative.

The present is in the third person and the past in the first person. I was doing it, throughout in the first. But that's often a perspective. I use in short stories – I wanted to be more objective. So, then I did it in the third. But it wouldn't work at all, yet I really need not distance myself from the narrative in the present, otherwise, it was going to be where she uses this method. And the minute I came across her novel I thought let me admit it freely. Oh god, this is how I am going to do my novel.

Thus, Deshpande succeeds in the portrayal of Sarita's mental state with remarkable objectivity. Besides, her art lies amalgamating the past with the present seamlessly through dreams, nightmares flashback, reminiscences and the simple third-person narration.

*The Dark Holds No Terror*, Shashi Deshpande's second novel, is about Saru, the protagonist an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parent's and strained relations with her husband leading her agonizing her search for herself.

The novel opens with Saru's return to her parent's house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return her relationship with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother Dhruva.

Saru is ignored in favor of her brother Dhruva. No parental love is showered on her and she is not given any importance. Her brother's birthdays are celebrated with much fanfare and performance of religious rites, whereas her birthdays are not even acknowledged. Her mother constantly reminds her that she could not go out in the sun as it would worsen her already dark complexion. Saru recalls her conversation with her mother.

Deshpande feels that woman must venture out of the familial framework to give full expression to her individuality and identity. Shashi Deshpande's novels are the realistic depiction of anguish and conflict of the modern educated middle-class women caught between patriarchy and the tradition on the one hand and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore a way to fulfill themselves as a human-being. Shashi Deshpande's concern and sympathy are essentially for the women. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments, and frustrations. Besides traveling the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity, the author lays base the multiple levels of oppression, indenting sexual oppression.

The protagonists in Deshpande's novels are on the road to self-discovery. Usually, some domestic crisis propels them in the quest. Shashi Deshpande's novels also frequently ruminate over the condition of human alienation and the vicissitudes of time. The past resides with the present and the novels often digress into Indian myths, fables, and folk tales that show the power of tradition and the society's reluctance to change. But her novels are infused with a rich inclusiveness, which in itself enhances the possibilities of the hope.

Her novels are essentially reflective of the unenviable situation of the beleaguered contemporary Indian women, which she has depicted with great artistic finesse and astounding originality. Shashi Deshpande's commendable realistic depiction of the contemporary Indian women's situation and the prognostic solution, she puts forward her novels an imperishable importance for their efforts.

In *Roots and Shadows* (1983) Shashi Deshpande shows not the uncommon experience of a woman, Indu, the central character who journeys across a hostile masculine world, represented by her ancestral home and the inmates of the grand house. It may be said that this house is the last bastion of a social system that is fast fading. In this house, nothing is as obvious as the division of male and female worlds. In regard to the code of conduct, beliefs, customs, and role allocations woman appear to have been born into a taboo world, discriminating them against the male world in clear terms.

As a conscious woman, Indu comes out with a crusade against injustice meted out to women for centuries for "All women are reformers at heart" and she is "all out to reform Indian womanhood." (R&S 15) Truly speaking, *Roots and Shadows* is a symbolic representation of the dialectal nature of man and woman set against each other in material terms for a power struggle. "Roots" stands for tradition and "Shadows" signifies the marginal culture. The dying tradition is soon to become shadows against a backdrop of apocalyptic change. Also, it suggests that once the root is removed life is bereft of the binding force giving way to new possibilities.

As a feminist novel, *Roots and Shadows* give expression to feminine discourse all through: this time not the fabrication of a male protagonist but the pure protean voice of a woman herself. It is the female pantheon to whom an altar is erected in this novel. The central characters are women. Compared to Akka's formidable power all males in the novel—Anant, Govind, Madhav, Vinayak, and even old uncle are languid.

To subvert the phallogocentric image of man a woman has to take extreme steps, unthinkable of a woman. In order to masquerade her sex, she wears the look of a man by putting on pants as and when she wants and her hair up to her ears only, much to the fear of children in the ancestral home. As a woman, she thinks motherhood not compulsory but optional. By rejecting womanhood she rejects the essentialist marketing of certain social standards of femininity of woman.

Indian women can be divided into these groups: 1. Those who follow the tradition as virtue 2. Those who realize what is good; but still are unable to come out 3. and those who are independent. To the first group belong the uneducated. They bank upon age-old beliefs and superstitions, and it would be hard to change them. They are foolishly sentimental and egoistic. Narmada, Kaki, Sumitra, Kamala, Sunanda, and Kalar are remarkably traditional in their manner and outlook. Akka, too, belongs to this class but without the selfishness, narrowness, powerlessness of any one of them.

In the second group none shines as brightly as Mini Educated and to some extent aware of the peculiar situation in which she is placed, she is deeply bound by tangles of her society out of which she cannot come out with her independent voice as Indu can. She lacks willpower, and too much consciousness makes her sacrifice herself and individuality. At the other extreme stands the indomitable feminist, Indu the central character in the family cannot imprison her.

One may ask why, Indu, a feminist himself, is so critical of Akka who is also a woman. The answer here is that feminism does not mean a feminine reaction against whatever is masculine in order to accept whatever comes from femininity or females. It is the theoretical position in which the law of patriarchy is upset whether that is cherished by men or women.

Women's writing without these essential conflict with the masculine-oriented notions will not sufficiently powerful, for women's writing, as Showalter points out, necessarily takes place within, rather than outside, a dominant male discourse, through acts of 'revision, appropriation, and subversion.' She further argues, "Women's literary and critical texts are both double-voiced discourses, inevitably and continually engaged with patrilineal and matrilineal sources." (Showalter 1989: 4-5)

Both positions are evident in *Roots and Shadows* Indu writes as if she were a man, but without the bow-wow style of masculine writing but characteristically in a staccato feminine way, resulting in a fluids narrative style. Although Akka is a woman, all her views are strictly in conformity with the masculine laws. Indu's non-conformist hatred of Akka is not personal but it is conventional views, superstitious and soon, shared by all simply because they were liked by Akka.

Thus, in *Roots and Shadows* we hear a woman speak - speak through her body, through her consciousness, and through her pen. This kind of exercise might be called "wish fulfillment."

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya undergoes great mental trauma because she has refused to go into hiding with her husband as an enquiry against his financial irregularities is on. Like the mythological character Gandhari, she kept her eyes shut to the husband's illegal earning at the office. Even her journalistic writings are circumscribed by her husband's likes and dislikes. Finally, she is able to evaluate her expectations of life.

After having rejected traditional role models, Deshpande's protagonists display a great strength and courage in evolving, as their own role models as per the requirement of their social milieu. Her characters go through a process of self-examination before they reach self-actualization. Thus Shashi Deshpande has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who prefer to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies, and face lie with courage and strength. Comparatively, they appear to more life, like and more akin to the educated, middle class, an urban Indian woman of

today.

Speaking of the narrative techniques in *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straightforward narration in the novel. She employs the flashback method instead to draw her readers' attention. The first chapter deals with the present, but the later chapters are more anachronic with the final chapter ending in the present. Critic Sharma Futehally writes. "It is a device which is useful either when some elements of suspense are needed for this novel chronologically charity is essential as the reader already has to cope with an abundance of characters and their complex interactions." (Sharma 77)

*That Long Silence* is very close to real life experience and achieves its credibility from the fact that the protagonist, Jaya is a well-educated person possessing a literary sensitivity corresponding with her fictional role. The Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel is about Jaya's hopes, fears, aspirations frustrations and later triumph is life. Critic V.S. Sunita Reddy observes: "The narrative with its slow unknitting of memories and unraveling of the soul is like an interior monologue quite similar to the stream of consciousness technique employed by Virginia Woolf." (Sharma 81)

Perhaps Deshpande's best work is, *That Long Silence*. The narrator Jaya, an upper-middle-class housewife with two teenage children, is forced to take stock of her life when her husband is suspected of fraud. They move into a small flat in a poorer locality of Bombay, giving up their luxurious house. The novel reveals the hollowness of modern Indian life, where success is seen as a conveniently arranged marriage to an upwardly mobile husband with the children studying in "good" schools.

Though she is a writer, Jaya has not achieved true self-expression. There is something almost suffocating about the narrowness of the narrator's life.

Jaya's irritation at such sexist rituals is palpable, it is clear that she feels strongly about the ill-treatment of the girl child in India. The only reference to India's "Glorious" past is in Jaya's comment, that in Sanskrit drama, the women did not speak-Sanskrit – they were confined to Prakrit, a less polished language, imposing a kind of silence on the theme. In spite of her English education, Jaya is like the other women in the novel, such as the half-crazed Kusum, a distant relative, or Jeeja, their poor maid-servant. They are all trapped in their own self-created silence and are incapable of breaking away from the supportive yet stifling extended family.

In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande raises the strong voice of protest against the male-dominated Indian society and against man-made rules and unfolded conventions. *That Long Silence* is a first-person narrative the story is unfolded by Jaya, ironically again symbolizing victory, while in the actual life situation she is supposed to lead traditional, passive life like; "Sita following her husband into exile, Savithri, dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails....." (TLS 11)

She refused these role models because in modern life these references are simply illusions of the past with no relevance to the present while legendary women followed their husbands willingly. Jaya is even brutal, the realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life. "Two bullocks yoked together ..... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful: and what the animal world voluntarily choose pain? (TSL12)

Jaya, the protagonist in the very early life, realizes that 'girl child' is her first problem the preferences shown to the male children is because they are permanent members of the family, and are inheritors of the family name. The novel

also interrogates the nature of the relationship between the narrator and her husband and the disposition of their married life. Their relationship is affected adversely by their incapability to understand each other.

Due to lack of communication growing, 'silence' between them/ their marital life grows unsteady and dismal. For the first time, Jaya feels a strange emotion of anger in the unjustified accusation by Mohan that he has taken the bribe for her and her children. The very idea of "being a partner in the crime and all, when she has no role to play in the whole affair is revolting." (TLS 31) But this anger transformed into a 'long silence' because for Jaya 'silence and surrender' is the real strength of an Indian Woman.

Shashi Deshpande has not portrayed Jaya as a feminist character. Jaya hovers between submission and assertion, the former rather a more dominant role in her character. But the repeated allegations and accusations of her husband compel her to react sharply. She once tells Kamat..... no women can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?..... A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. (TLS 147)

There are three distinct phases of feminism. The early phase means imitation of role models, Jaya has already crossed that limit. The first phase of imitation is followed by anger and protest, the major thrust is the depiction of this second phase in the life of Jaya. Whenever she looks back on her life, there is hardly any sense of nostalgia or yearning for the past; it is much more a feeling of suppressed anger which can burst of any time. The last phase of feminism that of articulation and assertion are only hinted at in this novel as one of the future possibilities for Jaya.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian wife. Although many women writers tried their hand at expressing this long silence that had turned the woman into non-entities, they could only provide psychological depths to their characters. They neither created unreal sentimental romances or finally succumbed to the temptation of mouthing feminist ideology. But Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real-life experience.

She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self or identity. Jaya represents half the humanity. The novel sustains its credibility from the fact that Jaya is a convent educated English speaking lady with a literary taste. It portrays the conflict raging between the narrator's split self; the writer and the housewife. About that long silence, she says.

And then I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a woman's novel nevertheless, a book about the silencing of the one half of the humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to my own. (Prasad 58)

Technically, Deshpande uses an alternating first person or third person voice to present what she calls a "double perspective" the past and present in continuous interplay and overlap. Of all her novels, it is *A Matter of Time* that most fully explores the simultaneity of past and present; thematically and structurally. Four generations of woman the heroine, Sumi, her mother, Kalyani, grandmother Manorama, and Sumi's daughter Aru-are the axis around which the author spins her story. Once Sumi returns with her daughters to her mother's house following the desertion of her husband, Gopal, these four generations of woman are more or less jointly present all the time, now physically brought together under one roof, and under Manorama's gaze as she looks down at them from her portrait.

Despite the fact that the novel's span is husband years, a quality of timelessness lingers around it, a feeling of time standing still as the character's stories unfold. Sumi remembers taking Gopal in the early days of their togetherness about her mother's and her aunt Goda's marriages, and laughing at his remark that it was never possible to disclaim the past.

As their past is unraveled through a series of events and remembrances Goda and Kalyani recounting their early lives to Aru, quarreling about relationships, holding up an incident here, an anecdote there, to the light its imprint on the present becomes agonizingly clear. Kalyani, abandoned by her husband, Shripati, cries out in disbelief when, years later, Sumi is more or less abandoned by Gopal. Although it is clear that Gopal's desertion is of a quite different order from Shripati's a woman abandoned. For Kalyani and Sumi, it can mean social stigma and avoidance at worst; barely concealed pity at best.

Mother and daughter return to Vithalro and Manorama's "Big House" –Kalyani with her two daughters, Sumi with her three and prepare to inhabit their natal home almost as if they had never left it. Just as Shripati removes himself from the scene, so too does Gopal; both are present yet absent, and neither Sumi nor Kalyani question their withdrawal. Time, it seems, has come full circle. With Sumi's untimely death there appears to be a break in the cycle, but it is only temporary and the torch passes to Aru-who bears, and uncanny resemblance to Manorama. As with Kalyani and Sumi, is it only a matter of time before Aru succumbs to its inexorable passage was it only a matter of time before Gopal saw, with blinding clarity, the utter futility, the fleeting quality of the happiness he had known with Sumi. And it is only a matter of time before they all, like Kalyani, learn to embrace their destinies.

Gopal is unusual in other respects, too. In a significant departure from her earlier novels. Deshpande invests him with the qualities usually reserved for her female protagonists: reflection and introspection. It is true that Gopal is the most fully realized of all her men. But Shripati is an insubstantial creature, a foil for the women who propel the story. But Gopal sets the story in motion, and literally speaking, it begins and ends with him. His absent presence in the book is like a magnet for his daughters, especially Aru and he is drowned back into the story in a movement almost parallel to Sumi's moving out of it. In the end, it is she who exist the frame. This is most unexpected. Moreover, with Sumi's death, it is entirely possible that Gopal will once again take up residence in the Big House-another cyclic.

The novel begins with the Big House, opening with an epigram from the Brhadarnayaka Upanishad; "Maitreyi", said Yajna Valkya, Verify I am about to go for them from this state..... (AMT 1) The reference is to the third stage of man's life according to the third quarter of his life leaves his household and enters the fourth and final stage of his life: that of renouncer. Here it refers obviously Gopal's decision, to withdraw from the responsibilities of householding, but it also alerts us to what we will soon discover? That Shripati, too, relinquished his role as a householders many years ago, thus contributing to the strange history of the Big House. Although such a departure is enjoined by the Ancients, both Gopal and his father-in-law renounced house holding much before the prescribed time and what more, before they had fulfilled their duties. And so the household reverts to the women.

The house is most powerfully evoked in *A Matter of Time*, almost as if it were another character. Deshpande describes in detail who built it and how who lived in it and what it is today. The essentially familial scope of Deshpande's novels imbues the domestic space with a greater charge that may otherwise be the case. The playing out of family tensions, rivalries and hostilities, and even happiness, takes place against a backdrop of earlier joy and sorrow so that nothing that the houses witness now is without its echo from the past. In *A Matter of Time*, this echo stretches as far back as three generations and none of its occupants has been immune to its reverberations.

The girls find their voices too; Aru through her encounter with Surekha and women's legal rights. Charu through medicine. Emotionally and otherwise, they form a self-sufficient three generational family with one major difference; it is a family of women living in their natal home. There's no one to silence them. It is the only tore in the novel that father and

daughters utter his name and both die with it one their lips. A chapter closed. We should remember, too, that the future lies with arts and that the novel ends not with Sumi's, death but with Anis life,

“Yes, Papa, You go,” she says to her father as the leaves,

“we'll be quite all right, don't wrong about us.” (AMT 246)

Shashi Deshpande's art of characterization needs special mentioning here. The protagonist Sarita, a possessed and psychotic woman, who is ready to ride roughshod over every male she associates with, for her self-assertion and her selfish ulterior gain. She is supposed to be the role model for the new woman. She inhabits a nightmarish world. Intolerant nagging mother, indifferent tactical father, sadist husband, womanizing professor, and lecherous sex-hunting colleagues – it is a world crowded with too many dark creatures full of dark desires. It is but natural that a woman like Sarita must rise above all this putting aside their dark knowledge viciously against them and declare boldly.

Deshpande's achievement lays in the depiction of her central character the introspective and inward probing Jaya. She is the representative of girls brought up in middle-class families in post-independent India, a time when most parents strove hard to provide their children with English education and exposure to Western modes of living and thinking; parents inculcated in their girls a certain duality, sometimes quite unconsciously. On the one hand, an impulsive desire to be temporary, he has no work to do.

The portrayal of Jaya as an awakened woman, thus, soon fades into that of a middle-class romantic heroine whose courage fails at the first encounter with reality. All her revolutionary ideas sag by the time the challenge presents itself. Her realizations that her own children are distanced from her besides her husband's accusation of having let him down are sufficient to shake her dreams of glory for her revolutionary ideas.

Another important aspect of the narrative of *That Long Silence* is that Jaya is heroic in her ideas and perceptions only so long as she stays on the on the subjective grounds of Churchgate. All her heroism sags when she shifts to the upper-floor flat at Dadar. Now, she reflects upon the ground-realities from some height. She is not involved in them because life has come to a standstill for her. The upper-floor existence signifies the objective state as against the subjective mode at the Churchgate. No hopes are offered if Mohan is reinstated, life will start flowing again for Jaya; if not, then she shows no sign of recovery from the shock of realization.

There is no vision offered. Jaya can be happy only as a devoted but complacent wife. Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of women – the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Unable to fully defy traditional, patriarchal norms of society, these women characters attempt to realize and preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings.

Deshpande employs withdrawal as a tool for both introspection and self-realization for Jaya. She withdraws not into a world away from the suffocating circumstances of her life. Unable to adjust to the social demands on her, she attempts a temporary psychological as well as sociological withdrawal. In the former, she probes into her inner psyche and attempts to understand her personality, her hidden strengths, and her potential. In the latter – sociological withdrawal – she acquires freedom and ensures a place for herself in both family and society. Then she is able to view her future more positively only after delving into her past, reliving past experiences and rethinking past ideas and attitudes.

To overcome this limitation, Shashi Deshpande has used a combination of the first person and the third person narrative coupled with flashback devices to lend authenticity and credibility to the novel. Deshpande's development as a

novelist necessitates a chronological study of the narrative techniques employed in her novels.

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