

# Prominent Indian Feminist Novelist, 20th Century a comparison, Shashi Deshpande & Anita Dasai

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## Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Dasai as prominent Indian feminist novelists of the 20th century. It examines how both writers explore women's identity, autonomy, and psychological struggles within patriarchal structures. While Deshpande focuses on middle-class domestic realities and women's quest for selfhood, Dasai delves into inner consciousness and emotional alienation. Through thematic and stylistic comparison, the study highlights their distinct narrative techniques and shared commitment to portraying female experiences. Ultimately, the paper underscores their significant contribution to Indian English literature and feminist discourse by giving voice to suppressed female perspectives.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the major voices in modern Indian English fiction, and occupies a prominent position as a novelist, especially feminist novelist though she rejects this image. She emerged in the Indian fictional scenario in the late 70's. In spite of her recent, in the horizon of Indian English fiction, her contribution is significant and praiseworthy in Indian English literature. Her literary career started as a short story writer. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle-class woman who finds herself standing at the cross-roads of tradition and modernity and is caught in the dilemma of choosing either of the two. Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwar, a small town in north Karnataka, in 1938. She is the daughter of the renowned Kannada writer and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar, better known as Sriranga, a cerebral man who wrote plays of ideas.

From her father nevertheless, she must have acquired an intellectual bent of mind and a keen love for reading and scholarship which won her various academic degrees. At the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, graduated in Economics, obtained a degree in law, post-graduate degree in English literature and a diploma in journalism, at present she lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband and two sons. Deshpande was influenced by Somerest Maugham, Jane Austin, Bronte sisters, Margaret Drabble, Dorris Lessing and Erica Jang. Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer. As she says "when I read them, they stimulated me" works obviously on live

Deshpande began her literary career rather late, about what sparked it off, she told her interviewer. "My husband was a commonwealth scholar and we went to England. We were there for a year. I thought it would be a pity if I forgot all our experiences there. So, I started writing them down and gave them to my father. He gave them to 'Deccan Herald'.... which published them promptly. So, it began very accidentally. Deshpande's first collection of short stories was published in 1978, it was entitled 'The Legacy and other stories' and it captured the attention of readers and reviewers alike. It made a prestigious place for the writer and the critics as eminent as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar considered it a work of great work. Talking about the main preoccupation of the writer, as revealed in these stories, G.S. Amur, in his preface to "The Legacy and Other Stories", remarks, "Woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society to find and preserve her Identity as a wife, mother and most important of all as human being is

Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer and this appears in all her important stories.", p.31

Deshpande's reputation as a creative writer however rests on her mature and lengthy works obviously on her novels. She has been writing fiction for more than fifteen years but she shot into prominence when her 1st novel 'That Long Silence' was published in 1988 by the British feminist publishing house, Virago. It won her the 'Sahitya Akademi Award' in 1990. Besides this, it is also translated into French and Dutch. Her another novel 'Roots and Shadows' won the prestigious 'Thirumathi Rangamalai prize' in 1991 for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. Another novel 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' has been well received by Indian readers and is translated into German and Russian. Till date Shashi Deshpande has published seven novels 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' 1980, 'If I Die Today' 1982, 'Come up and Be Dead' 1983, 'The Binding Vine' 1992, and the latest is 'A Matter of Time' 1996.

In all these novels she has successfully captured the intricate emotions and the dilemma of the modern Indian, middle class, educated and financially independent women. They feel that they grow smaller everyday trapped in the myth of the wife and the mother, and refused to be taken for granted and do complain against imposed image, monotony, drabness, injustice and humiliation in their life. All these novels have the potential to establish Ms. Deshpande as one of the significant names in the galaxy of Indian women novelists over.

Her writings are characterized by a racy style of narration and a crisp language nevertheless; it always remains the language of common people. She finds it the most convenient mode of self-expression. Moreover, she did not have a choice in the matter: "I never did study Marathi or Kannada. And even more importantly, I despite all constants, haven't used these languages as working tools.", p.32 she is capable of using the English language

feliculously as it is no longer a foreign language because it is so much used in Indian as she further writes: "my English is as we use it.", p.33

Being a writer of the 70's and 80's she tends to be more contemporary, authentic and modern in her outlook about things. She has consistently sought to come to grips with the problems of Indian womanhood in the post-independence Indian scenario. As she recognizes Indian sensibility, her observation and perception of things is not superficial. She knows the mood and the pulse of Indian society and the fact that despite certain radical changes in technology, economy, politics and so on, the Indian society is largely tradition-bound in its private lives and its attitude towards women. Talking about her observation of things she herself writes.... "I am different from other Indians who write in English, my background is very firmly there, I was never educated abroad. My novels don't have any westerns, for example. They are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives. Our inner lives and outer lives and the reconciliation between them....", p.34 Therefore in her writings there is no attempt to make India look exotic for any foreign reader.

In her writing Deshpande reflects a realistic picture of contemporary middle-class Indian woman. She deals very minutely with women's issues and depicts the plight of today's educated, middle-class Indian women. Deshpande shows how the new woman is struggling hard to adjust herself in the conservative and tradition-bound society rather than to get free from it. She is trying to find and preserve a room of her own within the orbit of this society. This is a phenomenon which by so far has not been explored in detail by the other contemporary women novelists as Deshpande. Meena Sirwadkar says: "Writers appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated, earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family.", p.38 It is for the courageous and sensitive treatment of such large and significant themes that her novels are regarded

outstanding contribution in contemporary Indian English fiction.

She concentrates on the psychological and emotional turmoil's of today's educated self-aware and the character highly sensitive woman and the emotional and sexual confusion suffered by the new woman in a tradition-bound society. She presents the world, rather create a utopian world, how it looks from a woman's point of view, and in world of her short this way she possess certain serious questions regarding the lot and conditions of woman in our country.

This is the main concern of the novelist en the angels as she herself declares it "My main preoccupation has been with women and blood he and their difficult situations. In all my novels the protagonist is always a woman.... Being a woman, It was very natural for me to write about the woman. I do special awareness with which I looked at the world around in which Nevertheless, I believe this woman suffered and struggled as they did. Being a woman, I could When men use their powar appreciate their predicament better.", p.37

Thus, in her novels we find an authentic and realistic note, there is no de of feminist thought exaggeration, neither any vein glorification of the women characters. Most wery of the Indian novels that deal with women's issues, offer only a peripheral he short stories treatment of the subject or end-up glorifying the stereotype virtues of Indian wp chincters that her pr women like patience, devotion, self-sacrifice and an object acceptance of whatever is meted out to them. Such novels tend to present Indian woman as the epitome of all virtues and a demigoddess.

Deshpande's novelistic world as well as the world of her short stories is woman orientated but not only particularly protagonist inclined. To Deshpande all the men are not villains neither all women the angels' rather she depicts them as real human beings made of flesh and blood hence prey to certain weaknesses as she tells her interviewer.

"I don't believe in a simple opposition of bad-bad man and good-good woman. I don't believe the world is like that at all. Nevertheless, I believe this is one area where women are really exploited when men do use their power....in order to subjugate women.... angered her, used her stro Deshpande's novel contain so much that can be regarded as the staple Zabeled, fomiese fiction. An material of feminist thought; women's sexuality, the gender roles, man- looks to her protagon woman relationship, self-discovery and so on. Her fiction as well as the world as to world of her short stories is so clustered with inhibited, vulnerable and dependent women characters that her preoccupation becomes quite apparent as Prema Nanda Kumar writes:

"Here is a legion of Indian women who form a colourful quilt so typical of the spreads found in middle-class households.... what a varied stuffing. Women dying suddenly, women dying slowly, women dying as young mothers, women with too many children, women with no children, women who are crazy, women who are pseudo intellectuals, women who are practical, women who are psychos, brother's wives, husband's sisters, abandoned wives, widows etc.

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly a writer of feminine sensibility, if not a feminist, though Deshpande's main concern is to bring forth the real plight of the Indian women however she is reluctant to such claims that declare her to be a feminist. Though her preoccupation with women's issues sometimes leads critics towards categorization and they declare her as a 'feminist writer' however she very strongly refuses any such label though at the same time she does not refuse that she raises women's issues in her novels as she writes "It is a curious fact that serious writing by women is invariably regarded as feminist writing".

Therefore she insists that a work of literature should be judged irrespective of any such consideration whether it comes from a male author or a women writer, and despite her much apparent

preoccupation with women she does not consider that she does so because of any propaganda rather she feels that women are central characters in her novels only because by being a woman herself, she could understand them better and hence deal with issues related to them more effectively than any male write can do.

In her interview to Ashvini Sarpeshkar Tondon, she declared "I do not like to be branded this or that because life is more complex than that, my enduring concern is for human relationships. I certainly do not think my novels are man Vs woman issue at all.", p.41 She told an interviewer, "I must say that it is not consciously done, It is because the world for women is like that and I am mirroring the world."

No doubt Deshpande's novels contain so much that can be regarded as the staple material of feminist thought: women's sexuality, the gender roles,

self-discovery and so on. As Deshpande says- "I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminist has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism." And it was much later that I actually read books about it.

But to Deshpande's mind, no amount of theorizing will solve women's problems-specially in the Indian context. Elucidating her viewpoint about feminism she further remarked: "But to me feminism isn't a matter of theory: ...And there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it.", p.44

Thus, Deshpande is not a hard-core feminist. She does not agree with militant feminists who believe that being a wife, or mother is something that is unnecessarily imposed on a woman. According to her 'It's needed' she craves for "a greater sense of balance" self-confusedly, she feels trapped in the woman's world.

Deshpande's real concern is to explore the root cause of the fragmentation and dichotomy of her characters and to observe what happens in the psyche of these heroines in the process of their achieving individually and independence. At no place does Deshpande adhere herself to any particular feminist group or ideology though she does not deny to having react them and being partly influenced by feminists yet she thinks in her own way. For she chooses the path of conciliation without yielding either to absolute acceptance or to the temptations of embracing the militant or strident feminist mould. Her works mediate between these two extremes. Her introspection and psychological probe make her second to none in revealing the subconscious and unconscious psyche of her heroines and other minor characters.ed. Both the novelis Anita Desai and Deshpande's real achievement as a writer and her originality lies in the depiction of the psychic turmoils of her women.

Deshpande's heroine emerges from a conservative middle-class milieu no doubt ultimately, she seeks the way of compromise and reconciliation. Nevertheless, it should not be considered wrong on the part of the novelist because the breaking of the family would undoubtedly end in the breaking of larger social set-up and which would not be desirable to anyone.

Thus, Deshpande conveys the message by their heroines that escape or breakdown is not a way to search one's existence. But they accept life as

totality and search her existence within the orbit of family and society.

Anita Desai (1937) and Shashi Deshpande (1938), both are contemporary writer, belong to 'second generation', emerged in the Indian fictional scenario in the late 70's, 80's. Both the novelist have attracted most extensive critical attention in India as well as abroad, due to the psychological novel, complexity of form and theme, dealing with the Indian sensibility and socio-cultural ethos of India, focussing on the important question of status of women in Indian in the male-oriented and male-defined social and moral codes, subtle portrayal of the protagonists quest for self-assertion and self-actualization in the face of the rigid codes of behaviour in a conformist and status quo loving society. Infact, though the territory that Desai and Deshpande traverse is quite broad yet the literary space they occupy appears to be limited. Both the novelist, Desai and Deshpande focuses on the trial and tribulations, fears and apprehensions, joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointment, dilemmas and predicaments, perplexities and paradoxes in the physical and psychological lives of her characters in general and the protagonists in particular, to mirror the multi-dimensional reality in all its cantors. Both the novelist dealt frequently female protagonist-young and old, rich and poor, single, married or widowed, who are always in search of true love, dignity, respect and understanding but treated always as second sex or subordinate sex, defined in relation to man.

All the struggle, dilemma, and conflict lie, that all the heroine, Maya, Monisha, Bim, Jaya, Indu, Saru try to know who are they, except a obedient and submissive daughter, wife and mother. They all become alienated in the quest of this self-discovery. All the women characters strive not for better materialistic lives but for individual recognition viz., they must be treated as a human being, at emotional and intellectual level. Both the novelists wants the emancipation and liberation of the Indian women. Emancipation and liberation in these cases does not mean being free of all shackles. There are several duties that each individual of any sex has to perform, A woman has

to be a wife, a mother and fulfill her roles but it is not right to expect her to conform to certain set notions of society. It is this point that is stressed by the novelists Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. She is treated as an animal, always.

Hence being women writers, they want a glimpse of the female psyche to which the male has no access- the agony and trauma of the oppressed woman. In this way both the novelist treats with the oppressed woman in their own way, emotional, physical, intellectually or economically. And in their novels, we find the colourful picture of oppressed woman as Prema Nanda Kumar writes- "Here are a region of Indian women who form a colourful quilt so typical of the spreads found in....households.... what a varied stuffing, women dying suddenly. Women dying slowly, women dying as young mothers, women with too many children, women with no children, women who are crazy, women who are pseudo intellectuals, women who are practical, women who are psychos.... abandoned wives, widows etc.

Anita Desai's and Shashi Deshpande's heroines protest against monotony, drabness, injustice or dry and vegetable existence, which they meet in their family and in society. Their woman refused to be taken for granted and do complain against this trapped and monotony condition. Their heroines feel that they grow smaller every day, trapped in a myth of the wife and the mother they are, as Nantara Sahgal says- (The Day in Shadow) "Maybe she had been an animal, only a nice obedient, domestic one, sitting, on a cushion. Doing as she was told. And in return she had been fed and sheltered.", p.148

Marriage become for them as "two bullocks are yoked together". Thus, all the heroines try to come out from this granted image We the and struggle to know their real existence. They feel tormented and turmoil in their mind because always treated as 'pet animal' or 'show-piece' or as subordinate sex not as individual human being. Anita Desai's and Shashi Deshpande's women are not a demi-goddess or a

lifeless engine of propaganda. As Desai says- "Women both as characters and as people must be allowed their imperfections."

This remark is also applicable at Deshpande's heroines. Their heroines pass through a process of transformation which signifies for them a change from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion and from weakness to strength. Both the novelists reveal the sub-conscious and unconscious psyche of her heroines, as they are deeply involved in self-analysis and introspection. And by this process they want to become their own refuge as Saru says in "The Dark Hold No Terrors". They want, "You are your own refuge world which we there is no other refuge there is no super this refuge is hard to achieve....", p.50

In thinking the heroines of both the novelist, are individualistic, or modern but cannot separate themselves from the tradition, despite their bitterness, anger and displeasure towards (patriarchy) men, they do see a streak of goodness in them. Desai and Deshpande portray in their fiction indifferent, materialistic, worldly-wise and insensitive men, especially husbands who are unconcerned and indifferent about their wives' sentiments and desires. Due to the lack of love and understanding the heroines of both the novelist become alienated and involve in the quest of existence. The delineation of love, marriage and sex (viz. man-woman relationship) treated marvelously.

Thus, Desai and Deshpande feminism is not the strident and militant Kind of feminism but 'humanistic feminism', which protest against male domination and the marginalisation of women. Their feminism demands that women must not be treated as a second sex or subordinate sex but as an autonomous individual being, demanding love, respect and dignity from family members and society. They highlight the point that 'woman is not born but made'. Thus, their feminism is not a matter of theory but their heroines try their best to get the image of 'two halves of one species'.

They want, by their female protagonists that "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.' Thus, Desai and Deshpande feminism is not about burning bras and walking out the family orbit but to remain within the family orbit and struggle to find their identity, love, respect and understanding from family members and the society they feel that it's necessary for to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further. Then one becomes unhappy. This is what they tried to convey in their writing.

The first and foremost difference between both the novelist, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande is that Anita Desai is a first rank psychologist novelist in Indian English fiction, treat with hypersensitive women, belong to high-class family. "I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair. The introvert women are mostly from affluent families and have no cause to worry about the physical needs of Wife so they are more concerned about their emotional needs and indulge in introspection. On the other hand, Deshpande portrays average,

middle class educated, carrier woman, who is placed between two poles: Hence for them the co traditionality and modernity, family and profession culture and nature. Anita Desai portrays the truth but Deshpande portrays the reality about her protagonists (Truth is assumed but reality is faced) Anita Desai states- "Writing to me is a process of discovery the truth that is the nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies sub merged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call reality.", p.53 and her another interview she states further "Writing is my way of plunging to the depths and exploring this underling truth. All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things.", p.54

The projection of the woman world in Deshpande's novels is more authentic, credible and realistic than Desai's woman world. As Shashi Deshpande says- "My writing has to do with women as they are" as she portrays the plights and problems, trials and tribulation of the middle class, educated, carrier woman. Thus, Deshpande believes in presenting life as it is not as it should be. Anita Desai's and Shashi Deshpande's heroines are dire need of love but love become myth for them. As Saru's experience compel her to deny the existence of love. She says- "Love....there was no such thing.... only a need which both (man and woman) fought against, futility, the very futility turning into the thing they called 'love'.", p.55

Thus, in the search for true love, with proper understanding, emotions and careful looking, the heroines of Deshpande's take recourse to extra-marital affair on the rebound or otherwise. As Jaya gratefully acknowledges while pondering over her relationship with Kamath. "With man I had not been a woman, I had been just myself", 56. Thus Deshpande's woman towards establishing extra-marital relationship is not the sense of adventure or any hollow western liberated life style, rather it is an attempt to fulfil her inner desires for love and communication. On the other hand, to Desai women such a thought is anathema. Despite their frustration they remain loyal to their husbands and seek no extra-marital relationship to fulfil her inner desire for love and communication.

Desai's women characters are stronger than Deshpande. Desai's heroines are much individualistic and temperamental to compromise with the harsh mechanical existence. From the beginning till end, they did not accept life as totality. Protest is predominant in her heroines. As Sita says in 'where shall we go this summer'- "There is no sense of contentment at all, it is rebellion right through the last moment." The heroines of both the novelists go through self-examination, self-analysis and introspection but the final step is quite different. The final step in

Desai's novels is a sort of personal exile, solitary existence or suicide as Monisha says in 'voices in the city'.... There is nothing I can give myself to, .... The family here and there, and their surroundings, tell me such a life cannot be lived.... a life dedicated to nothing.... that this husk is a protection from death. Ah yes, yes! then it is a choice between death and mean existence and that surely is not a difficult choice"<sup>61</sup> because the hyper sensitive protagonists of Desai's are unable to accommodate herself within the prevalent social system, due to their individualistic and temperamental nature. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, insane or neurotic. As Sita in 'Where we shall go this summer?' Ultimately, though she makes a very drab and heartless compromise to return to Bombay, ambivalence still appears to inform her mind and attitude. "All was bright, all was blurred, all was in a whirl. Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around muddling and confusing leading nowhere.", p.62 Thus Desai's fictional world is not bathed in the clear light of day, but in the murk of despair. On the other hand, Deshpande's heroines after self-examination, self-analysis and introspection ready to accept life as it is. At The final most import last, they take life as a totality as- "The whole world is made up of interdependent parts.... all things are connected", p.63. Indu recalls old conclusion the way he deems f uncle's words with nostalgia and finally concludes that "freedom has to be relative....", p.64 if I was at last negating the idea of non-existence Indu says "I felt as watching life itself....endless, limitless formless and full of grace.", p.65 and at last Saru accept the mistake at her level and says: "...If I have been a puppet, it is because I made myself one. Thus, Deshpande's heroines at last become safe and accept life in totality or a positive and mature attitude towards life. Hence Deshpande has tried to convey to the society that the need of time, in this transitional phase, is not a total revolt but a gradual change in the society for which everyone has to put some effort to bridge the gap between the old and the new generation.

The final most important difference between both the novelist is that Deshpande's novels are open-ended and the reader is free to supply the conclusion the way he deems fit as Deshpande believes in literary writing. "One does not pose a problem and present a solution. It's not math's, but the vision of humanity and value-based fabric of life...., p.67. On the other hand, Desai's novels have no open ended but a packed solution or 5 attitude of the writer towards the life. She gives no chance to reader to over think on the problem but for her literature become a math's with packed answers. Thus, there is lack of the vision of humanity and value-based fabric of life on the other hand it is very much present in Deshpande's novels.

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