



## THE FRAGMENTATION AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

Dr. Jai Shankar Tiwari

*(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nehru Gram Bharati (Deemed To be) University, Kotwa Jamunipur Campus, Prayagraj- 221505.)*

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### ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, is one of the foremost Indian writers in English whose works have been admired both at home and abroad. As a novelist, she is deeply concerned with the subjective realities of human existence forged in the matrix of human relationship. Her novels deal with the psychic problems of life and explore the factors which lead to fragmentation of their self. Her fictional characters have the quality of real human beings. They are not mere puppets in the hands of the novelist whom she might use just to tell her stories. Though Deshpande's women characters appear passive and helpless, they courageously face the challenges and hostilities of life and show their inner strength. Her novels depict the need and struggle of the educated Indian women to fulfill herself as a human being, free from her traditional roles of a daughter, wife and mother. Entrenched in the values and customs of Indian middle class society, women characters are tormented by neurotic sufferings of day-to-day strife on the domestic front. Caught in their peculiar predicament, they reveal their fragmented Self as they fight against their own wishes and desires. In the process of delineating her fictional characters, Deshpande reveals their frustrations, strong sense of isolation, agony and despair, their reflective self-awareness and sincere effort to achieve integration of their fragmented 'self. Freud's concept of Id, ego/self and super ego form a relevant background to the understanding of the fragmented personalities of these characters.

**keywords:** Self, Identity, Isolation, agony.



In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, for example, Sarita, the protagonist in the novel, keeps searching for some motive that may provide meaning to her life and unify her fragmented self. Her traumatic childhood experiences and her problematic conjugal relations with her husband lie at the root of her disunified personality. Sana's arrival at her father's home provides her not only an escape from her sadist husband but also offers her an opportunity to reorganise her fragmented self. During her stay at the parental house, she recalls the past and comes to understand that all terrors of the dark are within her and she is her own refuge. The novelist artistically suggests the disruption in Sarita's personality through the protagonist's nightmare which keeps her in a fearful state even during waking hours. She is conscious of the growing disintegration of her mind and considers herself a puppet in the hands of a ventriloquist. Saru, as a child, is acutely aware that she is treated differently from her brother Dhruva. The mother considers unmarried Saru a liability, and keeps accusing her of Dhruva's death. This accusation, besides creating a sense of guilt, saps Saru's potential for growing into a normal human being. She has continuously been rejected by her mother.

The novel *If I Die Today* explores the eroding influence of pretences and of the fear of the unknown on human mind. The protagonist, Manju, is offered relief from her psychic tension by resolving the critical situation. But until its resolution she remains trapped and mentally torn. Her thoughts and feelings are devoid of harmony and she lacks inner completeness. The novel has been set against the background of a small community of doctors and their families. Their life at the campus is happy and peaceful till the arrival of Guru, a cousin of Dr. Ashok that disturbs it. Transformation of Guru from a certain degree of wickedness to saintliness reveals that earlier he also experienced a division of his self into different conflicting parts. While talking to Manju he agrees that a person is capable of hiding numberless secrets. He regretfully confesses that formely he also did not have the courage to reveal himself to others. After the death of Guru, a sense of fear comes over

the peaceful atmosphere of the campus. Manu, the narrator protagonist in the novel, is shocked when she discovers that Vijay, her husband is also within the ambit of suspicion. Before gun's murder, she nurses a vague fear of some impending misfortune. Marital discord makes Manju suffer. Her second pregnancy isolates her from her work and her home. Unable to integrate her roles of a wife, mother and house keeper, she is haunted by the thought that she is needed by none. As Vijay stops sharing his thoughts and feeling with her, she feels that he has been drifted apart from her and she has been left alone and helpless in her present predicament. Consequently she starts experiencing a fragmentation of her self. Tony's estrangement from his wife Cynthia gradually makes him victim of self alienation, thereby making him a dipsomaniac. Tony and Cynthia were issueless and this vacuity gradually led to conjugal disharmony. After he closes his job he grows all the more conscious of his inferiority to Cynthia. He feels frustrated not only because he is childless but also because he has lost Cynthia's love for him. His desire to go back to his parents suggests his regression to his boyhood life. The incident at the club, where inebriate Tony exposes the lack of ethical values in the doctors, assures Manju that guru was murdered by some member of the medical staff. Tony throws hints of Vinjay's involvement in Prabhakar Tambe's death. Manju is convinced of guru's murder not because of Tony's accusations but by the silent manner in which the accused met his changes. Then Tony's sudden death charges with horror, the atmosphere at the campus. But Manju's mind is continually diverted from her thoughts about herself by the swift movement of events after Tony's death. Cynthia's anger, hatred and grief for her dead husband, Tony, reveal her ambivalent attitude toward him. She abstains from sexual relation with Tony because she is incapable of being a mother. His estrangement from Cynthia is both mental and physical. The situation adversely effects his mental health and he begins to show signs of abnormality.

In that *Long Silence*, Jaya is apparently a satisfied housewife. But she has continually suppressed every aspect of her personality that did



not fit into the socially accepted image of a wife and mother. Jaya becomes a victim of reflective self-awareness when a problem suddenly crops up in her husband's professional life. The split in her personality is also suggested by her two names: Jaya and Suhasim. She is conscious of her being as Jaya who is entirely different from Suhasini. She views herself as having different beings which, though inseparable, do not relate to one another. She is Mahan's wife and mother of their children Rahul and Rati but not herself. Jaya is conscious that in the process of continually suppressing her wishes and desires she has lost her individuality and her ability of making choices in life. She follows her husband in all things without ever reacting to his plans and actions. She sees Mohan and herself as two bullocks yoked together, which cannot go in different directions as it would be painful. Kamats blatant analysis of Jaya's mind gives her the realization that she has been Suhasini all through her married life. She compares herself to a worm which in the face of danger crawls back into its hole. Mohan's lovemaking to Jaya is merely a physical act which exists in isolation. He fails to understand that sex for a woman is not a mere physical act but it involves her emotions too. It breeds in her a sense of loneliness and she becomes emotionally alienated from him. The novelist presents Kusum as an objectification of Jaya's latent fears and her fragmented personality. Kusum Urn's madness assures Jaya of her own sanity.

In *Roots and Shadows*, the protagonist Indu is a modern and educated woman. She is a victim of the conflict between her consciousness of the modern socio-cultural values and the values given to her by tradition. In *Roots and Shadows*, as in the other novels of Shashi Deshpande, Indu's escape from her present surroundings initiates the process of self-understanding. As an intelligent and educated young woman she tries to realize her freedom and asserts her individuality but her efforts bring her into conflict with the deep rooted patriarchal values of society and she becomes frustrated. Undue pressure of these opposing forces on her mind leads of fragmentation of her psyche and this split is revealed through her reflective self-awareness and her

ambivalent attitude to her husband. She has been a determined person since childhood and has always desired to be free and independent. At the age of eighteen she leaves her home revolting against her family and especially against dominating Akka whom she hates. In fact, akka occupies a prominent place among those who influenced Indu's mind in childhood and inculcated values in her. Her love of freedom and desire to be independent have been unconsciously inculcated in her by Akka's autocratic power over the other members of the family. Indu suffers from a feeling of homelessness which is an affirmation of her sense of isolation. When she marries Jayant, against the wishes of her family and Akka, she helps to put an end to her loneliness. But emotional incompatibility with Jayant causes a breach in her married life. Her emotional starvation and her drab routine intensify her loneliness. She visualizes that Jayant and she live their separate lives on different planes. She suppresses her desire to be a mother and deceives herself into believing that like marriage motherhood may also prove an illusion. Jayant is a matter-of-fact person who aims at material success in life. Being traditional in outlook, he expects Indu to be passive and submissive. In her effort to conform to Jayant's wishes, she keeps surrendering her self which creates a crisis of identity for her. Her failure to assert herself as a person produces in her a sense of frustration. Her awareness of her incompleteness suggests the split in her personality.

In the *Binding vine*, Urmi the protagonist is preoccupied with the agony of bereavement, caused by the death of her second child, Ann, which plunges Urmi into inalienable grief. She equates her grief with Ann and sticks to it fearing that losing the agony will rob her of Anu's memory. The split in her personality is suggested by the fragmentation in the personalities of Mira, Shakuntai and Sulu. The identity of Urmi's present grief impells her to review and analyse her life. She grows aware of the double image of herself and the consequent pull of opposite feelings and emotions. Thus she suffers from internal conflict and struggles to overcome her image of false superiority.



In *Come Up And Be Dead*, the protagonists are offered relief from their psychic tensions by resolving the critical situation. But as long as they are trapped in their critical situations, their minds are torn asunder. Their thoughts and feelings are devoid of harmony and they lack inner completeness. Kshama and Devayani, stand for the different parts of the human mind but taken together as one entity they stand for a fragmented personality. Kshama, the protagonist is the Head Mistress of a renowned girls public school. She tries to transform the school into a kind of institution where teachers and students may freely interact with one another. But she meets opposition at every step from her colleagues. The suicide of a girl of class 10th renders her efforts futile. Mridula's suicide and the hostile environment of the school threaten her job. Kshama maintains her poise in the presence of others but falls a victim to her nightmarish fears when (left) alone. The two cousins, Kshama and Devi, represent two different parts of the human mind. Whereas Kshama stands for rationality, Devi represents the repressed emotions. However, the novelist reveals fragmentation in Kshama's personality at various places in the novel. While talking to Mridula's mother she is embarrassed by the hysterical grief of the bereaved mother. Mridula's death fills her with unknown fears which begin to disintegrate her self. The split between her mind and intellect is caused by her desire to preserve her career and her image of the competent Head Mistress. The force of her thwarted desire produces frustration and delusion in her. She deludes herself into believing that Mridula's death and the subsequent events have nothing to do with her school. She thinks that she is surrounded by a hostile environment and is overcome by the feeling that she is becoming like her abnormal brother. Her fear of failure and disgrace lies at the back of incoherence in her thoughts and feelings. Pratap's birth was a threat to her importance in the family. Her hatred for Pratap, in the context of the present crisis in her life, and indifference to his death suggest the imbalance between her intellectual and emotional selves.

*A Matter of Time* is different from Shashi Deshpande's other novels in some respects. Superficially it also projects the middle class educated women caught in the net of problems that arise from the conflict between their views of life and the conventional values of society. This novel focuses on the predicament of a male character, Gopal. He is free from male chauvinism. His desertion of his family becomes the immediate cause of the mental which his wife, his mother-in-law and his eldest daughter, Am, experience. Sumi's sense of alienation makes her victim of unknown fears and disruptive thinking. Her sudden death leads Gopal to a new understanding of life. Description of the Big house in the novel suggests the criss-cross of emotions and neglect of Kalyani by her husband, Shripati. It also suggests the fragmentation in the personalities of its inmates. Gopal, the protagonist, is acutely conscious of the absurdity of life which frightens and isolates him from others. His proclivity to idealism shows that he cannot compromise with the pragmatic approach to life. His awareness of the meaninglessness of his life impels him to give up the life of a house-holder and set out in search of some lasting purpose. The novelist suggests the split in Gopal's self through his ambivalent attitude to his long dead father. As an adolescent he hated his father for marrying his brother's widow. But after he sees his father in his dreams, his relationship with his dead father becomes peaceful and harmonious.

Shashi Deshpande's works are always on a quest for identity. All her protagonists are searching for their place in their respective fields and even at home. Their problems differ, their circumstances differ but one thing remains common and that is their suppression, oppression, and exploitation, be it physical or emotional and their quest for finding a place for themselves.

Thus this study of the novels of Shashi Deshpande and of the scholarly articles by eminent academics make us conclude that she has successfully presented a sensitive portrayal of women's quest for identity in a giving patriarchal world. In a nut shell she seems to be giving message to the women.



You are your own refuge

There is no other refuge.

This refuge is hard to achieve.

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