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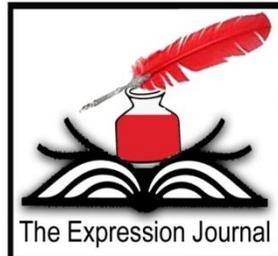
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FROM REPRESSION TO RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract

Present paper aims to analyse particularly three women characters in Shashi Deshpande's selected three novels. These characters are the true representations of modern Indian society and are sanguine and inimitable and to some extent, have egotistical temperaments. Shashi Deshpande's women characters, like other Indian female novelists, provide a gamut of Indian society and thus, range from the uneducated women to middle class working women. Some of these characters are victim of gender bias in their home and in the society also while some of them are much aware modern characters who don't succumb in front of the age-old rotten traditions and resist, though in a botchy way, against the hegemonic society and declare their equilibrium. In her initial novels, some characters have been portrayed much feeble and week. On the one hand, there are many girls and women who are excruciated by the phalocentric society and are put at the peripheral level; on the other, some educated working women attain a high status in the society due to their job and wish to live an independent and carefree life such as Devayani, Radhika and Aparna Dandekar do in Deshpande's three novels *In the Country of Deceit*, *Ships That Pass* and *Strangers to Ourselves* respectively. This paper traces the subsequent flights of independence of these three women character in Deshpande's selected three novels.

Key-Words

Repression, Resistance, Women Characters, Independence, Society, Deshpande.

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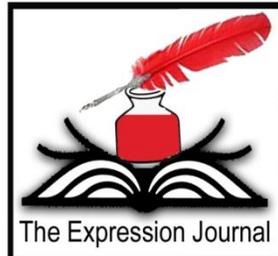
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Where there is power, there is resistance.

— (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95)

Shashi Deshpande is one of the top-notch feminist literary novelists from India who has added a new flavour through her novels in the reservoir of Indian Writing in English. Her characters are mostly middle-class women and her novels offer a wide range of variety from the different backgrounds. She has written eleven novels and two novellas till date. Since all of her novels have middle-class characters, some characters are the suppressed and oppressed while other revolt and cherish an independent status. Some of these characters live so independent lives that they don't care even for the society.

The novel *In the Country of Deceit* (2009) introduces the readers to a central female character, Devayani who is twenty-six years old. Both of her parents have died and her sister, Savi is five years older than her and presently lives her married life. Devayani is a teacher by profession who starts teaching English to some students who coincidentally come to learn English from her. She explains, "Since all they wanted was to know enough English to fill in the forms, to speak at interviews, to write official letters, I had agreed. The two students I had helped had been happy and others followed" (16-17). Another turning point comes in her life when she meets a middle-aged actress, Rani and it also brings a lot of change in her temperament. She is at the right age to marry but she does not listen to her sister and her aunt, Sindhu in this regard and thus, kicks out the societal and family pressures. Sindhu tries to tell her that she won't be able to deny the demands of the body in future. She tells her in these words:

The body is important and so are the demands of the body. I learnt this early in life.

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With my first husband, I got only the trailer and I knew there was a more interesting story to come. I wanted to know that story, I did not want to be deprived of it... you are still young, your natural desires will be with you for many more years. (ICD 42)

Initially, Devayani decides to remain a spinster throughout her life and she rejects the marriage proposal brought by her aunt, Sindhu for her but when she gets a chance to meet a middle-aged, newly joined DSP of Rajnur Ashok Chinappa through a middle-aged actress Rani she could not help falling in love with him. She even forgets that this man is already married and is a father of a nine year old girl also. She enjoys sexual relationship with Ashok Chinappa and does not care about the society what people will think about her. In this way, she enters into a deceitful decision because she comes to realize later that she has taken a wrong step. She is filled with guilt and tells, "I had entered the country of deceit. I could no longer be open and honest with people I loved; I had to deceive them" (ICD 147) but later, she snatches back the string of her relationships from him and she breaks her relationships with him.

Shashi Deshpande's next novel *Ships That Pass* (2012) is also a story of two sisters Radhika and Tara. Radhika is the chief female character who feels world-weariness and ennui in her life. She does not want to study further because of so many doubts in her mind about her career. She thinks that she will pursue her studies only after marriage because her husband may be posted at a different place. As her father is not alive, she decides to take the decisions of her life herself. She thinks, "So that was what I had to do: get married soon. Right away, in fact. An arranged marriage; I couldn't afford to sit waiting for Prince Charming to arrive. An arranged marriage seemed sensible and practical; uncertainties, all the facts laid bare" (9-10). Radhika does not feel hesitant to tell her decision of marriage to her brother and mother. Though she is a modern girl, yet she wants to get everything done through her family. She visualises dreams but she knows her limitations; she wants to marry an ordinary looking man keeping in the view of her limitations, "I myself would hate to marry a too-handsome man" (14). When her brother comes to know about her decision, he gets worried but she tells him that she has already decided everything about her marriage. She convinces her brother saying that she would not put on him much financial burden. She tells her brother, "Get cracking, Dada," I said. "Get the horoscope, the gotras or whatever is needed, and start working. I'm sure it won't take you long to line up a few suitable men. I'm ready to go through the interviews, ready to be inspected and to inspect the men." (10) Such kind of passionate fervour for a marriage can only be seen in the modern characters of Shashi Deshpande.

Radhika was thinking to have a married life like her sister, Tara who gets married with a boy of her choice. She was thinking that Tara is living a very happy married life but all of her dreams of marriage are shattered when she gets a letter from her sister's husband, Shaan that Tara is suffering from arthritis and she is not working according to his

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way. He invites Radhika at his home so that she may bring a change in their relationships. Radhika's family does not agree to send her to Tara's home but Radhika takes another bold step to go there. After the death of her sister, she gives another shock to her brother when she declares to live with a doctor, Ram Mohan who lives alone. This is the conversation between Radhika and her brother:

'You go, I'll stay,' I said.

'Where?'

'Here'

'In Ram Mohan's house? Alone with him?'

'I'm sure he will keep my virginity intact, he has no interest in me *that* way. That's what you're really worried about. Aren't you?' But now I only said, 'What's the problem, dada? Can't you trust him? Or me?'

'It's not that, I know he looks upon you like a little sister...'(110)

In this way, Radhika presents the image of a modern girl when she tells her brother that she does not care for the society because she has full right to live her life the way she wants. She tells her brother:

What do these things matter, Dada?...Who cares what people will say? Look at what we're struggling with. Akka dead, Shaan in jail and Abhi...Does it matter what people will say? (111)

Generally an unmarried girl is not allowed to live with a man before marriage but this bold decision is taken by Radhika. She decides to live according to her own plans. She rejects the boy to whom she was to marry and then decides to marry with Ram Mohan though Ram Mohan has not seen her from those eyes. She even gives a surprise to Ram Mohan when she proposes him saying that she wants to marry him. Initially, he thinks that she is kidding but later he comes to know that Radhika is serious.

'Don't you want to get married ? Ever?'

'Who would have me,' he asked lightly.

'Me. I mean, I would.'

...

'Are you serious?' he asked me.

'Yes.'

'Then stop laughing.'

...

'I'm too old for you.'

'And I'm too short for you.'

'When you are twenty-five, I'll be forty-two...'

'Oh stop this. Do these things matter? All that matters is that I want to marry you.'(124)

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Shashi Deshpande's last novel *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015) is a step ahead regarding the bold decisions of women. In this novel, the central female character is Aparna Dandekar who is a daughter of a clerk. Aparna is a woman who has not worked in kitchen with interest and that's why she faces problem in cuisine. It is generally expected from a woman to cook for the family but Aparna is a woman who has not learnt cooking even after her marriage. She wants that someone else may cook for her and others also send meals for her at times. She explains that she had not worked in the kitchen in these words:

'No, I never learnt to. My mother didn't want me to enter the kitchen. You study, she used to say. She herself was so efficient and quick, I think she didn't want me getting in her way. And once I went to the hostel, I had nothing to do with cooking and kitchen. I was too pampered' (38).

When the novel opens, she is depicted as a doctor by profession. She is a married woman but she has been separately from her husband as a divorcee for seven years. She is badly hurt from her previous marriage, that's why she does not want to get married again. A turning point comes in her life when she meets a singer Shree Hari Pandit in a music programme hosted by her boss, Dr. Bhagat. She also feels attracted to Hari when he falls in love at the first sight and wants to develop intimacy with her. He talks to her in such a way that she clearly understands that he is in love with her. She gets attracted to him and frankly discusses this matter to Madhu. The conversation between Madhu and Aparna gives a glimpse of modernization:

'I means—yes, he's attracted to me...'

'And you?'

'I...well, I'm attracted to him as well.'

'Then what's the problem, silly. Boy loves girl, girl loves boy—happy ending.'

'We're not boy and girl. That's the problem.'

'But if you love each other, why should your age—and for god's sake, don't talk as if you are fifty—be a problem?'

'I don't know Madhu, I really don't know, I'm totally confused.'(62).

One more thing is noticed in the novel that Hari falls in love with Aparna but his love is pure. He wants to marry her and he does not want to touch her before marriage. Aparna finds Hari's attitude much irritating when she comes to know that he is looking for a traditional woman as his wife. Aparna, being a modern woman, does not like it and shares her dilemma with Madhu. Madhu also presents the image of a modern woman who advises her to sleep with Hari even before marriage. The conversation follows in these words:

'Go ahead and marry him, woman.'

'He hasn't asked me.'

'Then you ask him. Or start sleeping with him.'

'He will never do that.'

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'Seduce him, then. You don't know how attractive you are...' (65).

Madhu advise Aparna to have sexual relationships so that it may bring harmony in their relationships, "I can't believe this. No wonder you're confused. Once you sleep together, everything falls into place, your relationship becomes pukka" (116). Apart from Madhu, Taimavshi also gives a free exposure of frank language and she also asks Aparna whether she is sleeping with Hari. In this way sex is considered as a natural phenomenon in the novel. Aparna is hungry for Hari's body and when she gets a chance, she enjoys sexual intimacy with Hari. Deshpande narrates their love-scene in these words:

He smoothens her hair off her face, gently, tenderly, a gesture more erotic than the kiss. This time it is she who reaches with her lips for his, she who says, 'Hold me, don't stop Hari, hold me...He bends down and tenderly kisses her breasts, her nipples. Shashi Deshpande He exclaims, an exclamation close to anguish, when she touches him. (205)

Shashi Deshpande has depicted Aparna as a character who lives her life at her own terms. She believes in having relationship without the bond of marriage as she considers marriage a burden. Her lover gets irritated and pressurizes to marry with her. He says, "Do you mean you want us to go on like this, I living in my home and you living here? And I come to you at night, sneaking in like a thief and we...How do I put it then? I don't want us to meet only for sex, I don't want to come to you only for sex" (252). But Aparna is not ready to act upon what Hari expects from her.

From all this, it can be stated that Deshpande's characters enjoy their life without considering any social pressures. Devayani enjoys premarital relationships while Aparna also wants to enjoy sex without marriage while Radhika is passionate for her marriage. Through these three female characters Shashi Deshpande narrates the gradual changes in the mentality of Indian women. Dr. Bijender Singh writes in the "Introduction" of his book *Female Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's Novels* about Deshpande's female protagonists:

Shashi Deshpande's novels depict the real life experiences of the women but she has depicted these experiences glued with imagination so that they may become distinct....Her female characters are not strong in the beginning. She depicts their transition in her novels. (Singh 36)

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