

# Representation and Resistance: Discourse on Love, Marriage and Marital Violence in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most influential female writers of India who is popular for his novels and short stories which are noted for the pangs and plethora of problems of educated and independent married women in the patriarchally orchestrated society. All her writings are centred on the themes of love, marriage and marital rape in the marital orbit where educated male tries to dominate the space and assert his redundant patriarchal beliefs, and in this plight suffocation, subjugation and slavery of women become social reality. When the female characters become vocal and voice their rights, it hurts and humiliates the male ego and finally it leads to separation and divorce which has become a common phenomenon in this post modern society. The paper delves deep into the above mentioned issues which are the major causes of broken relationship and 'half-way house'. The present paper tries to seek how the themes of love, marriage and marital rape have been portrayed in the select novels of Shashi Deshpande. It also explores and examines the views and perspectives of the writer and how she tries to resolve such burning issues. The paper examines the novels from feminist lens and tries to suggest the ways and means so that institution of marriage and family may become stronger and stable for a better society and golden future of the coming generation.

**KEYWORDS:** *Love, Marriage, Marital Violence, Feminism, Patriarchy, Subjugation and Emancipation.*

## **Introduction**

Marriage is the highest state of friendship. If happy, it lessens our cares by dividing them, at the same time that it doubles our pleasures by mutual participation. (Samuel Richardson)

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent, prolific and proficient writers of Indian writings in English who has profound penchant for writing and her fiction has highlighted the complexity of educated man- woman relationship caught in the web of marriage, marital discord and disharmony, struggle of women in patriarchal setup and conflicting conditions which suffocate and subjugate women in the social institution called marriage. The traditional setup of our society is in such a way that women are bound to suffer silently and destined to be slaves of their male partners and other dominating male members of the family. The greatness of the writer is in the realistic representation of marital rape, marital discord and disharmony which are the hallmark of her imitable and commendable style, and like others she is not a militant kind of feminist who try to create a society without male members.

### Literature Review:

Elenore Geethamala's *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Evaluation* is a thoughtful study of how ordinary Indian women struggle with silence, duty, identity, and emotional confinement within family and society. Rather than treating the novels merely as literary texts, the book approaches them as reflections of lived experiences familiar to many middle-class Indian women. The critic explores how Deshpande's female protagonists often appear quiet and obedient on the surface, yet internally they carry deep conflicts, frustrations, desires, and unanswered questions. Through novels such as *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows*, Geethamala shows how Deshpande gives voice to women who are trapped between tradition and selfhood.

A major strength of the study lies in its sensitive reading of silence—not simply as weakness, but as a condition imposed by patriarchy, marriage, and social expectations. The book explains that Deshpande's women are not dramatic rebels; instead, they slowly question the structures around them and search for dignity, emotional freedom, and self-recognition.

In *The Fictional World of Shashi Deshpande*, Binod Kumar Roy presents a deeply engaging study of Deshpande's novels and the emotional worlds inhabited by her women characters. The book does not merely analyse plots and themes; it attempts to understand the silence, loneliness, frustrations, and quiet resistance that shape the lives of middle-class Indian women in Deshpande's fiction. Roy observes that Deshpande's women are often educated and sensitive, yet emotionally trapped within rigid social expectations. Through novels like *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and *Roots and Shadows*, he shows how marriage, family, and patriarchy slowly silence women's desires and individuality. However, these women are not portrayed as passive victims alone; they constantly struggle to understand themselves and reclaim a sense of identity.

One of the most appealing aspects of Roy's study is its psychological sensitivity. He reads Deshpande's characters as real human beings rather than theoretical feminist figures. Their pain, confusion, compromises, and moments of self-awareness feel authentic and emotionally convincing. Roy especially highlights how Deshpande turns ordinary domestic life into a powerful site of emotional conflict and self-discovery. The study also makes it clear that Deshpande's feminism is subtle and rooted in Indian reality. Her women rarely choose dramatic rebellion; instead, they question, endure, reflect, and gradually seek emotional freedom within the limits imposed upon them. Roy appreciates this realism and considers it one of the greatest strengths of Deshpande's fiction. Overall, Binod Kumar Roy's book is a thoughtful and accessible critical work that helps readers understand why Shashi Deshpande remains one of the most important voices in Indian English fiction. The study successfully captures the emotional depth, psychological realism, and quiet intensity that define her fictional world.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence: Critical Studies* edited by A. N. Dwivedi examines the powerful portrayal of the silent emotional struggles faced by Indian women within marriage and society. Through different critical essays, the book explores Jaya's inner conflict, loneliness, and gradual search for selfhood. The contributors show how Deshpande turns ordinary domestic life into a space of psychological tension and emotional suppression. Jaya's silence is interpreted not as weakness, but as the result of years of compromise, social conditioning, and patriarchal expectations. At the same time, the studies highlight her quiet resistance and growing self-awareness. The book also appreciates Deshpande's realistic style and psychological depth. Rather than presenting dramatic rebellion, her fiction portrays women slowly questioning their identities and relationships. Overall, the collection presents

Shashi Deshpande as a sensitive novelist who gives voice to the unspoken experiences of middle-class Indian women.

*The Female World in Shashi Deshpande's Novels* by Tukaram S Sawant is an extensive and intensive evaluation of the representation and resistance where the female world is deeply dominated by patriarchy that leads to suffocation and subjugation. This critical volume explores her major novels – *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time* and finds that female characters are caught in the complex web of social institution called marriage. It examines a number of salient features such as patience, tolerance, acceptance and sacrifice that Indian women possess. Despite all these virtues, they are not happy and satisfied even in the pious relationship.

### **Research Gap:**

The major research gap in the critical works of Elenore Geethamala, Binod Kumar Roy, Tukaram S Sawant and A. N. Dwivedi is that they mainly focus on conventional feminist themes such as patriarchy, marriage, silence, and women's identity. Most studies repeat similar interpretations of women's suffering and emotional conflict in middle-class domestic life. These works pay limited attention to newer perspectives such as trauma studies, affect theory, feminist narratology, mental health, emotional labour, and intersectionality. Issues of caste, class, authorship, and comparative feminist discourse are also insufficiently explored. Moreover, Deshpande's narrative techniques, use of silence, and psychological depth require more interdisciplinary and contemporary analysis.

Therefore, there is scope for a fresh study of Shashi Deshpande that moves beyond traditional feminist readings and explores the deeper emotional, cultural, and narrative dimensions of her fiction. A fresh evaluation on the issues of love, marriage and marital violence is needed so that it may bring some changes in our society.

### **Research Questions:**

- How women can get rid of the complex web of social institutions that suffocate, subjugate and silence them?
- Will the female characters ever rebel against their subjugations in the world of Shashi Deshpande?
- Why does the novelist adopt the middle path in her novels?
- Can the institution of love and marriage bring changes in the lives of women?
- Are there any alternatives to love and marriage that lead to her salvation and enlightenment?

### **Research Methodology:**

The present study follows a qualitative and analytical approach to examine themes such as love, marriage, silence, patriarchy, and women's identity in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. The research mainly focuses on selected novels like *That Long Silence*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, and *The Binding Vine*. The study uses feminist and psychological perspectives to understand the emotional struggles, relationships, and search for identity experienced by women characters. It is based on close reading and interpretation of the texts along with the support of books, research articles, journals, and critical studies related to Deshpande's fiction. The research aims to analyse how Deshpande portrays women's inner conflicts, emotional silence, love, and their struggle for self-expression within a patriarchal society. This paper also adopts theoretical framework such as feminism, psychoanalytic criticism, and cultural studies.

### **Discourse of Love:**

In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande beautifully portrays the bond of love, care, and companionship among women. The protagonist, Urmila (Urmi), develops a deep feeling of love and solidarity with other women who have suffered under patriarchal oppression. Through shared emotions and mutual understanding, these women help each other overcome grief, fear, loneliness, and confusion. The novel mainly presents the world of women and their emotional experiences. Although men are present, their roles remain limited, and their influence is mostly felt through the power they exercise over women. Many male characters are either physically absent, emotionally distant, or remembered only through memories. This allows the novel to focus more deeply on women's relationships, emotions, and inner struggles. Deshpande shows that love and emotional support among women can become a source of healing and strength. The feeling of sisterhood helps women face pain and oppression with courage and understanding. In Urmi words

We are, all of us, groping our way towards normality- Whatever that normality is after a death in the family. But the effort is obvious- the sideways furtive glances at me, the sudden flurry of talk at the treat of a silence. Vanaa and Inni are like two actors, desperately keeping the show going. They try, without seeming too obvious, to include me in their conversation; but it swells and eddies about me, leaving me untouched. (28-29).

Shashi Deshpande seems to be critical of the social notion that marriage permits a husband to fulfil his biological needs irrespective of wife's consent. She exposes the ruthless functioning of this institution which sanctions heinous crime like marital rape. Regarding this Indrani Jaisingh, a lawyer says, "It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at anytime. Thus, even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (of rape) as her consent is assumed" (qtd in Trivedi 147). Mira's silence is taken as a consent by her husband who begins the task by pretending love but ends up in forced sexual assault: "'Please', he says, 'please, I love you'. And over and over again until he has done,..." (67). All this tears her heart to the core and the very word 'love' becomes obnoxious for Mira: "Love! How I hate the word. If this is love it is a terrible thing. I have learnt to say 'no' at last, but it makes no difference, no difference at all" (67). So, it is not only a woman's silence that emboldens a husband to force himself upon her, but her firm refusal also does not carry any meaning for him. Simone de Beauvoir's observation validates this fact: "Marriage is obscene in principle in so far as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore, degrading character to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspect as bodies, not as persons" (463).

The theme of love in the works of Shashi Deshpande is realistic and deeply emotional. She presents love not as perfect romance, but as a complex human relationship shaped by care, silence, misunderstanding, loneliness, and emotional needs. In her novels, love within marriage often suffers because of lack of communication, patriarchy, and emotional distance. Characters like Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* struggle to find emotional understanding and respect in their relationships. At the same time, Deshpande also shows love as a source of strength, companionship, and healing. In *The Binding Vine*, love appears through friendship, motherhood, and the emotional bond among women. Hence, Deshpande portrays love as a deeply human experience connected with pain, care, self-discovery, and the desire for emotional connection.

### **Discourse on Marriage:**

Marriage is one of the oldest and most important institutions in human society. People often say that marriages are made in heaven and celebrated on earth because marriage is believed to be a sacred bond between two individuals. It is the coming together of two people who choose to share their lives, responsibilities, dreams, and emotions with each other. The word "marriage" comes from the Anglo-French and Latin languages, where it originally meant joining a husband and wife together. Marriage is also known as matrimony or wedlock. It is socially and legally recognized, and it establishes rights and responsibilities not only between husband and wife but also towards children and families.

According to Baber, marriage is a socially approved relationship between men and women. In most societies, marriage is seen as a lifelong partnership based on love, trust, companionship, and mutual understanding. When two people marry, they also bring together their hopes, expectations, and dreams for the future. Successful marriage requires adjustment and understanding between both partners, as Folsom points out that marriage is a continuous process of balancing dreams with reality.

Marriage is not only a physical union but also an emotional and spiritual connection between two souls. It provides support, stability, faith, and companionship, making human life more meaningful and complete. At the same time, marriage plays an important role in preserving culture, traditions, and civilization by passing them from one generation to another. Since family is considered the basic unit of society, marriage becomes the foundation on which society itself is built. Marriage is one of the central themes in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Through her stories, she explores the reasons behind conflicts and emotional struggles in married life. Her novels realistically portray the pain, misunderstandings, and silence that often exist between husbands and wives. At the same time, she also shows how couples try to continue their married life despite emotional suffering and inner turmoil.

Most of Deshpande's novels are rooted in the traditional Hindu marriage system of Indian society. Marriage appears as a constant and important aspect of her works. As critic Imtiaz Dharker points out, the importance given to marriage in Indian society is reflected in literature, and Deshpande's female characters often struggle within unhappy marriages while searching for emotional freedom and identity.

Although Deshpande presents different family relationships in her novels, the relationship between man and woman remains the main focus. Even in her novel *Shadow Play*, she beautifully describes the rituals and details of a Hindu wedding ceremony. Her novels highlight both the value of marital harmony and the emotional consequences of conflict within marriage. Through her characters and endings, Deshpande expresses her deep understanding of marriage as a complex but significant institution in human life.

Mira's husband keeps forcing his ideas and emotions on her in the name of love. He constantly repeats the word "love," but his behaviour does not make Mira feel truly cared for or understood. Instead of feeling close to her husband, she begins to feel emotionally isolated and disconnected from him. The diary entry reveals her loneliness and shows how she gradually distances herself from her husband because of the lack of genuine understanding and emotional freedom in their relationship. She voices her restlessness:

"Talk, he says to me, why don't you say something, why don't you speak to me? What shall I talk about, I ask him stupidly. 'What did you do today, where did you go, what have you been thinking about all evening?' and so he goes on, dragging my day, my whole self out of me. But I have my defences; I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings...What is it he

wants from me? I look at myself in the mirror and wonder, what is there in me? Why does it have to be me? Why can't he leave me alone?" (67).

Deshpande depicts two different pictures of Indian women at two parallel levels in the novel – the lower class women engaged in menial domestic chores to earn their living; and middle class women of some financial independence. She further divides middle class women into two categories: those who never question their marriage and submit to insult, injuries and humiliation without any complaint; and those who, refusing to become the victim of trends, raise voice against their oppression. Jaya, the protagonist, belongs to the second category of middle class women. In the beginning, she is not different from other women of her class, but towards the end, we notice a great change in her personality.

The lives of Jeeja and Nayana, who work as housemaids for Jaya, are full of pain and hardship. Their daily lives are filled with endless work, suffering, and emotional struggle. Both women are treated badly by their husbands and receive neither love nor respect in their marriages. Nayana has become emotionally numb and hopeless because of the difficult life she has lived. She wishes for a son not because she expects support from him in the future, but because she does not want her daughter to go through the same pain and suffering she has faced at the hands of her drunken husband. Her feelings reveal the deep sorrow and helplessness experienced by many women trapped in unhappy marriages. Nayana sates her feelings to Jaya:

"Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me ... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets ... and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son."(28).

Jaya realizes that despite seventeen years of married life, they have not become one, only their bodies occasionally meet, not their souls. Jaya, like Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, subdues her independent spirit to the expectations of her husband. She describes her relationship with Mohan as a mechanical and forced relationship:

"A pair of bullocks yoked together .... A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman" (p. 8).

### **Discourse on Marital Violence:**

There is a common debate in India about marital Violence and whether it should be criminalized or not. Marital rape, mental oppression and sexual subjugation have become part and parcel of the institution called marriage but most of the married women do not raise voice against it. They have normalised and internalised the suffering and suppression. There have been several cases of marital rape and there is huge pressure on central government to frame policy and provision for the punishment of the marital rapists. India has not yet criminalized it but many countries such as Canada, Austria, Brazil, Belgium, Finland etc. have already made it punishable crime. Marital rape is defined as

"In general, marital rape means a woman is forced by her husband to engage in sexual relations after marriage, where it is committed against her will and her consent is absent for such intercourse. It is said to be forceful sexual intercourse by one partner upon the other partner."( Bano, 2021)

Shashi Deshpande has presented and portrayed this grave issue in her novels such as *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *The Binding Vine*, *That Long Silence*, *Roots and Shadows*, *Small*

*Remedies and Come Up and Be Dead.* Saru the protagonist of the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is tortured and tormented brutally on the bed every night by her husband Manohar who is envious and jealous of her wife's success as a doctor. He is failure and frustrated with his own life and career, and that is why he vents out his inferiority and frustration on his wife as he couldn't compete with his wife. Saru narrates his own nightmare:

"He attacked me like an animal at night . I was sleeping and I woke up and there was this man...this man was hurting me with his hands, his teeth and his whole body." (Deshpande: 1980, 201).

Saru is forced by her husband to go for love making. Marital rape is a disagreed act of inescapable violence by husband against the wife in which there is physical as well as mental abuse. Certain men proclaim to have become the major shareholders of their wives' body forgetting that the women are equal owners of their own self and have the total freedom to restrict from the needs. Certain categories of men tend to dominate in a relationship which leads to violence when they fail. The victims suffer from panic attacks, nightmares, self-doubt and trust issues.

McKnight University Professor Jill Elaine Hasday, in her *Contest and Content: A Legal History of Marital Rape*, states that, "In defining what the right to one's own person meant, articulate feminists did not focus on gender-neutral rights to the public sphere or freedom from coercion by the state. They were concerned about married women who submitted to their husband's sexual demands as the result of force, or threats, or because they lacked palatable alternative." (1416, Vol: 1373) The protagonist Saru even though had a tendency to free from the torture she faced, was not able to do so as she was entrapped in the family duties.

The psychological pain experienced by the victims mainly comes from the breaking of trust in marriage. Love, faith, and emotional security form the foundation of a relationship, and when these are disturbed, the entire relationship begins to suffer. Feelings of betrayal, loneliness, and emotional hurt deeply affect the individual. At the end of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru begins to see life differently. She realizes that no one will come to rescue her and that she must face her problems herself. Instead of escaping from reality, she decides to understand it and live with courage. She does not choose to leave her husband; rather, she tries to deal with the emotional darkness within her life.

Through Saru's character, Shashi Deshpande portrays the reality of many married women in Indian society who continue their relationships despite emotional suffering. Her journey becomes one of self-awareness, acceptance, and inner strength.

### **Conclusion:**

In Deshpande's fiction, marriage is often portrayed not simply as a sacred institution but as a space where women experience emotional suppression, loneliness, and unequal power relations. Her female protagonists—such as Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Jaya in *That Long Silence*, and Indu in *Roots and Shadows*—undergo intense inner conflict caused by marital dissatisfaction, emotional neglect, or lack of intimacy. Though these women question social expectations and attempt to resist patriarchal control, they often end up negotiating and adjusting themselves within the traditional framework of Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande portrays women as individuals who are constantly trying to understand themselves and their place within family and society. Through the lives of mothers, wives, and daughters, she presents the emotional realities of middle-class Indian life and examines the delicate relationships between men and women. Her novels mainly explore the conflict between tradition and modernity. Characters like Jaya, Sarita, and Sumi gradually realize that

society has confined women within fixed gender roles that restrict their freedom, identity, and emotional growth. As they become aware of this inequality, they begin to question social expectations and struggle to break free from patriarchal control.

Deshpande also presents women from different generations to show the contrast between traditional acceptance and modern awareness. While older women often silently endure suffering, younger women seek self-expression, dignity, and emotional independence. Yet, their resistance is usually quiet and internal rather than openly rebellious.

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