

## **A Study of Home in the Early Novels of Shashi Deshpande**

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### **Abstract**

*Roots and Shadows*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* are the three early novels of Shashi Deshpande in which she explores the inner and the private world of her characters and the changes in the public sphere that influence and transform their private world. In all Deshpande's novels, house is an integral part of the protagonist's identity. In these novels of the early phase of middle class educated women occupy the central position; who have to struggle hard to reconcile to the traditions and customs, as well as to seek their independent identity in their family and society. Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*, are middle class women who go in self-quest and in the process, free themselves from the inhibitions of the family, society and culture and also from their own psychological conflicts. Home plays a crucial role in this odyssey of the protagonists in recording their experiences and in shaping their personalities.

**Keywords-** *Home, Private, Psychological, Identity, Family*

## Introduction

In all Deshpande's novels, house is an integral part of the protagonist's identity. To quote Danielle Russell, "The imaginative value of the home, however it is defined, is an integral part of identity. One's home can function as a creative, social or political outlet. A reflection of self-worth, the home frequently functions as a text within a text; by "reading" the house we can extrapolate information about its inhabitants" (129). This is perfectly true about Deshpande's novels as she knows every nook and corner of the house depicted in the novel and its influence on her characters. In an interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom, Deshpande elaborates on this point:

For me, every novel starts with people. One character may be two. And then there is the locale. In the case of *Roots and Shadows*, there was Indu and there was the house. It was only when they came together that there was a novel. For me its essential-almost as essential as it is for movie director- to have the shape of the house clear. I know all the houses in my novels- even the flat in *That Long Silence* and Sarita's house in *The Dark*- as an architect does; all the rooms, even if I may not use them. If I have that clear, then the rest of it can happen. Because it is there that it is going to happen. (243)

House, the private sphere where people live, interact and grow occupies a significant place in Deshpande's novels. Throughout her novels, the house is a dominant setting which not only shelters her protagonists but also produces a powerful reflective impact upon its inhabitants. A comprehensive and detailed examination of the houses or flats in the novels reveals their physical, social and psychological effects on the protagonists. House is that private sphere where one grows and develops, experiences justice or injustice, feels stifled or emancipated and gets oneself prepared to step into the larger public roles. The home represents the personal activities of the protagonists, their relationships with other members of the family and also reveals their interior conflicts with others as well as with their own selves. It is a mediator between the self and the society as a meeting place.

Built by Indu's great-grand father and extended and renovated by her grandfather, the house in *Roots and Shadows* spoke of "his garish taste and love of solidity" (44) and now it looked like a

...house into an odd combination, like a good looking woman dressed in execrable bad taste. Whatever beauty it had now lay in its open country yards, capturing lights and air and bringing them into the house. And the woodwork. While the doors were massive and heavily carved, there was a generosity and imagination about the floor-length windows with their gracefully arched frames and delicate lattice work. The staircase, however, was merely functional, just wooden stairs hollowed out in the

centre by countless feet going up and down, and enclosed by dark and dingy walls.  
(44-45)

Such a detailed and clear description of the house can be given by only a master artist like Shashi Deshpande and this is all very symbolic and significant in Indu's story. The massive and heavy doors symbolize the outdated customs and traditions of the family that prevent the new and modern outer world-view from entering into their private enclosed world. Yet the good part of the house is its open courtyards which allow light and air in the house signifying that the change in the public sphere is peeping through the graceful windows of the house. The semi-dark rooms, dark and dingy walls, hollowed out staircase- they all speak about the redundant practices of patriarchy, caste, religion, dowry, widowhood etc.

In *Roots and Shadows* the demolition of the house forms the central action of the novel and its demolition symbolises the disintegration of the joint family. The demolition of the house not only paves the way for the inhabitants of the house to move in the outer public sphere but also symbolizes the crumbling of the suffocating superstitions of their private world. The house which was once the reflection of the joint family and mirrored the feelings, aspirations and conflicts of its inhabitants, its bulldozing not only represents the crumbling of joint family system but also reflects the changing family values that have emerged from the influence of the changes occurred in the public sphere. The old uncle was considered one of the pillars of the house because of his being senior in the family but in the changing scenario the family dynamics have been remodelled. Deshpande so accurately reads the pulse of the society as now age is not the yardstick by which pillars of family are nominated, money and power make one the pillar of the family and the society. When Indu is disturbed at the death of old uncle, consoling her Jayant tells Indu, "Ah yes, that happens. But then new pillars take the place of the old. You're a pillar now yourself, don't you know" (11)? Clearly the human and the home overlap. This is so because the power equation in the family has changed after Indu has inherited Akka's property. Now with newly acquired wealth she is seen as the family pillar.

Literary critics in recent times have seen home as "more than the place and pursuit of private individuals" (George 3). Eminent geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, in his study *Space and Place* depicts home "as the individual's critical center of meaning through which the individual situates him or herself in the world (54). David Seamon has observed 'home' in his celebrated work *A Geography of Life World* as "rootedness, appropriation, regeneration, at-easeness and warmth" (78). In this way home seems to be a place of nurturance and care. However, most feminist critics see home as a central place for suppression of women. Eminent feminist sociologist Fraser has commented that households are "sites of egocentric, strategic, and instrumental calculation as well as sites of usually exploitative exchanges of services, labour, cash and sex, not to mention sites frequently of coercion and violence" (37). On

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the one hand Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling see home as “a sanctuary from society into which one retreats” but at the same time they also point out that the home may be a sanctuary for men “for whom home is a refuge from work, but certainly doesn’t describe the lives of women for whom home is a workplace” (16).

Against this literary background the life of Indu and other characters can be read and understood in their private and public spheres as both are so closely inter-related. It is Indu’s return to her ancestral house that initiates her into an understanding of the dynamics of life. Ironically, the restrictions and conventions of this house had made her a rebel and in order to escape from the clutches of the choking atmosphere of this private sphere she had stepped into the public sphere and married Jayant, a man belonging to other caste, against the wishes of her elders. In the very beginning of the novel Indu mentions her frequent dream that does not need any psychoanalyst to be explained as she knows this symbolises the demolition of the ancestral house. Though dreaming it so often, she says, “Yet, there is no craving in me to go back. Even if the family were intact now, I would not want to be part of it. The end of an era...” (10).

For Indu the parental house was not the idealized nurturing heaven as has been observed by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*. Bachelard avers that, “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (5). In his view this essence comprises of elements like purity, safety and fostering as he observes that “always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle” (ibid 7) and calls house as “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word” (ibid 4). For Indu this house was not a cradle where a baby is lulled and loved but it was a site of oppression and contestation where her callous father had left her to the care of his relatives after her mother’s death. She has to fight her own battle against the stringent familial and social set-up represented by the powerful matriarch Akka and other elders in the house. She is told by her Kaka, “Women and children should know their places” (48). Although Deshpande does not endorse the conservative viewpoint of the society but she very realistically portrays the mindset of the people when otherwise affectionate Old Uncle is made to tell Indu, “For a woman, intelligence is always a burden, Indu. We like our women not to think” (33).

Deshpande presents a polyphonic view of home. What does home mean to a woman depends on various variables like age, sex, education, intelligence and power. Mini, Akka, Narmada, Sumitra Kaki, Kamla Kaki and Sunanda Atya- all are leading same kind of meaningless life without having an independent identity of their own and carrying the same kind of household chores eternally. The difference between Indu and the other women is that Indu being intelligent and educated aspires to listen to the voice of her inner psyche and struggles to carve a niche for herself independently whereas, other women accept their lot mechanically and suffer silently. Not only women even men

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like Indu's father and Naren feel suffocated in this house dominated by Akka and her rules and regulations and skip this private sphere. Old uncle and Narmada Atya are sheltered in the house because of their age and sex respectively. Akka has a sense of possession and rootedness in home due to her money power. Indu is taken back into home due to her intelligence. Deshpande advocates a free, liberal and private sphere called home where both men and women live in partnership each free to make one's own decisions and having trust in one's abilities.

Home is rootedness. Howsoever home may be suppressive Deshpande does not deny its sheltering and protective attribute. The house may be a place of physical, mental and psychological torture yet it provides security from the outer physical world. Not only in the child Indu's case but in the case of Akka and Atya after they lost their husbands, the house sheltered them. After retirement Old Uncle too, came in the family fold to live with them. After the demolition of the ancestral house Atya, "had been listless, apathetic. A childless widow, knowing she had no claim on anyone. The house had been, perhaps, her only security" (13). Sunanda Atya also took refuge in the house after her marriage whenever required, "For her too, this house was a refuge. It was her security against a life with an irresponsible husband who had long periods of joblessness. I felt sorry for her" (135). Vithal, "an orphaned student...a pauper" whom Ananat Kaka "picked off the streets and brought home" (59) also got shelter in the house if not love and food. Deshpande's existentialist concerns are depicted in the episode above.

Like *Roots and Shadows* house occupies a central place in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The novel opens with Saru returning to her parents' house after a gap of fifteen years. She had walked out of it with a view never to return. Nevertheless, she returns to seek shelter from the unbearable barbarism of her husband. Her parents' house gives her a chance to review her relationship with her husbands, her father, her mother, her children, and her dead brother, Dhruva and at the same time she observes the transformation that has taken place in her father's life and their home after her mother's death and in the society at large. The home as a physical entity was the same. Once inside home, Saru notices that "Inside here, though, there were no changes. The same seven pairs of large stone slabs leading to the front door on which she had played hopscotch as a child. . . . Nothing had changed. The same sagging easy chair, shaped to his body. . . . The pictures on the wall were unchanged too" (15-16). In terms of physical character nothing changes in Saru's parental home. Saru also notices that kitchen was same old fashioned as it had been during her mother's time, ". . . what seemed a primitive kitchen, with its Primus stove that hissed like a demon and yet took endlessly long to cook anything. The tap was in one corner, so low that you had to crouch to wash up anything, the cement floor below it cracked and black. There was no cooking platform. She had to squat on the ground to do the cooking" (46). Deshpande's graphic picture of the house is her narrative strategy to

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defamiliarize the changes that are occurring within the private and the public. The sameness of physical setting of this private sphere gives Saru an opportunity to unfold memories of her unpleasant childhood merging with Saru's bruised relationship with her husband. Deshpande skilfully handle the double narrative without marring the aesthetic impact of the novel.

Like Indu of *Roots and Shadows*, for Saru too, the private sphere of home is not a soothing heaven. Through her reminisces of her parental house Deshpande displays the predicament of a girl child who is robbed of her right of individuality and identity by another woman who is no one else but her own mother: "The institution of home has become a snatching factor in the case of a female child, while at the same time, fostering the growth of a male child" (Bhatnagar 89). Saru recalls how she was given a second rated treatment at her home, was held responsible for her brother's death and was continuously accused by her mother, "Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?" (34-35). Saru's mother rebukes her for growing up, forbids her from going out in the sun, opposes her admission in Medical College and curses her for getting married to Manohar. All these incidents reflect the changing public life juxtaposed with the unchanging home environment. While the deep-rooted hatred for her mother makes Saru's wish: "If you're a woman, I don't want to be one" (63).

Deshpande introduces an atypical home in this novel. Here is gendered home where patriarchy works through a woman while the man assumes a feminine space of silence. She also seems to project the view that in reality the private sphere of home does not necessarily cater to the idealized view of love, affection and belongingness as is attached to it by a gendered and patriarchal notion. Often it becomes a site of oppression and subjection for the women. All family households do not promise a caring and secure environment. Through Saru Shashi Deshpande explodes the public myth of love /inter caste marriages as the signifiers of social changes in the private sphere. As Saru's experience in her parental home is marked by discrimination, her life at her husband's house is a constant threat where her personality is divided into a successful doctor and a terrified wife. Deshpande also brings to the light the gendering of the spheres which have ingrained in our society that a girl child is always to be kept indoors while boys to be encouraged to move outdoors. Saru remembers that she was not allowed to go in the sun because that would make her darker and nobody would marry her, whereas Dhruva was allowed to go out because he was a boy.

Like all other Deshpande's novels home is a recurrent figure in *That Long Silence* presenting the private world of the characters and its impact on their lives and behaviour in the outer world. What is remarkable about this novel is that Deshpande has presented not one or two but multiple houses in the novel to which Jaya, the main protagonist belonged. These reflect some essential aspect of her personality. Each house comes alive through Jaya's memories and fantasies that fluctuate between the

past and the present. It is the magnificent art of Deshpande that in the very beginning of the novel she introduces most of the houses in a few lines while Jaya reminisces:

In our house in Saptagiri objects had cheerfully strayed away from their places, if they ever had any, and nobody had minded; not Appa, so unnoticing of trifling details . . . . The other two homes I knew had been just as bad. The town house in Saptagiri, where *ajji* lived with the kakas . . . was austere and bare, pared down, like *ajji*'s own life, to the essentials. . . . And Ai's home in Ambegaon, where other-*ajji*, Chandumama and Vanitamami lived was chaos with its rarely made beds . . . But then, I've seen the home in Saptagiri in which Mohan lived as a boy, the inner room with its haphazardly piled mattresses . . . (12-13)

And shortly after this, Jaya thinks about the Churchgate home; and Makrandmama's Dadar flat, where she is shown in the novel as staying with her husband. Deshpande has described all these places with the dexterity and detail of an architect, each distinct from the other, it seems as if she might have personally stayed there. The house architecturally and locationally represents a peculiar culture. Jaya had spent her childhood at the town house in Saptagiri and her parental home in Ambegaon with her Ai and Appa .... Jaya remembers how Saptagiri house was divided in two parts - "the outside sitting room" (26) for men while the women were confined to the "inner rooms" (26). There was a clear cut gendered division of space and work in *ajji*'s house. Cooking and cleaning were exclusively female jobs. Jaya remembers women "picking up the plates, clearing the mess on the floor with their hands, smearing it with circles of cowdung water while the girls, my cousins, did their job of collecting the drinking-water glasses and jugs- clean vessels which were not to be mixed with others in which food had been cooked or eaten" (80). When girls grumbled why boys couldn't do that work, the matter was blown into laughter and the girls too, accepted it smilingly.

The house served as the microcosm of the social set-up where sons were given the preferential treatment; where males were privileged to occupy the special place; only men were allowed to sit on the chairs in *Ajji*'s otherwise bare room. The system was predominantly patrilineal. A family tree had place only for men; daughters were not considered worth being sketched in it. A daughter was not considered to be fit to be given mother's jewellery what of family property. Nonetheless, her patriarchy worked through females. *Ajji* disapproved Appa's sending them to English schools saying, "No good will come of sending your children to a padre school. They'll forget all our customs" (90) but her father had instilled progressive and liberal thoughts in Jaya's mind. Jaya remembers how once he had pulled her from the circle of other "girls who had performed pujas . . . asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mothers" (136) saying: "You are not like others, Jaya, . . . You're going to be different from the others, Jaya" (136). Jaya, too, on her part

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agreed to get “the Chatfield Prize, or the Ellis Prize, go to Oxford after” her “graduation” (136). But nothing like this happened. The untimely death of her Appa, hastened her marriage to Mohan, the first eligible boy who approached them, against the wishes of her Ai. Jaya recollects in pain afterwards how her elder brother had cleverly argued in favour of Mohan so that he could get rid of his responsibility of his mother and sister. Jaya remembers, “Dada wanted me off his hands; he had wanted to be free of his responsibility for an unmarried younger sister, so that he could go ahead with his plans. After Appa’s death, the *Kakas* never let Dada forget his role as the man of the house. And so Dada had cleverly manoeuvred me into a position from which not marrying Mohan would have been childish, irresponsible and unfair to Dada” (93).

These multifarious influences moulded Jaya’s character in a very complex frame. She developed the spirit of questioning and habit of non-confirming from the very beginning. Though her father loved the classical musical of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan and encouraged her to listen to the same, she would prefer to enjoy the pulsating music of Rafi and Lata. Her father’s life inculcated in her a feeling of rebellion and a conscious quest of self-knowledge and on the other hand constant nagging and moralising on marriage and behaviour by *Ajji* and *Vanitamami* instilled in her traditional values of an obedient, submissive and adjustable wife. Marriage shatters all her romantic notions and her courage and revolutionary ideas were pushed back and she assumed the role of a middle class typical housewife. Superficially Jaya transformed into a “smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped” (16). Her true self had lapsed into dormancy and it waited for an opportune moment to surface. Deshpande presents a very complex and intense psychological case study of Jaya’s inner world whose personality was constituted of two contradictory selves - one apparent and one submerged deep under the debris of her sub-consciousness. When the repressed one found a voice in her writings, it invited the anger of the husband because they might reveal to the world the inner truths. The expressive self of Jaya looked for other ways and resorted to humorous writings which allowed her self-expression through dissemblance. The novel is a study of her the private sphere of the protagonist determines her public identity.

Although Freud’s view of woman as an incomplete man, as someone suffering from a lack does not go well in the Indian social constructs, because of the great reverence attached to a woman as a mother. Nevertheless, Indian society is governed by exaggerated sense of female morality, religion, caste, social structures and mythology. Jaya too, bound by such different pulls stifles her creativity and holds all creative pursuits in subservience to her role as a home maker. She had started her married life at the Dadar flat and after seventeen years during a crisis in their life due to the corrupt practices of her husband she returns back, in order to hide from public disgrace. In fact, Deshpande has provided her the physical space, a room of her own where she could give expression to her pent

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up emotions. As Virginia Woolf has premised woman's lack of creativity to her not having a room of her own. Placed at the familiar environment of the flat, she gives a deep insight into the subtleties of her mind and the world she belonged to in a richly evocative and unpretentious detail.

To conclude, home is an integral part of one's identity especially of women. For the harmonious development of one's personality physical environment of home plays a significant role. If provided a room of their own women can excel in the larger public sphere thus contributing to the overall development of a nation.

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