

The Impact of Indian Education and Upbringing on The Techniques and Language of Shashi Deshpande

Paper Submission: 12/09/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/09/2020, Date of Publication: 27/09/2020



Jay Kumar Jha
Vice-Principal,
Kendriya Vidyalaya
New Bongaigaon,
Assam, India.

Abstract

In the contemporary Indian writing in English, Shashi Deshpande is a major voice and her novels display a unique range of variety in terms of narrative techniques and language. However, despite having more than ten novels at her credit, she has not yet received the acclaimed recognition which she actually deserves. This is perhaps due to less availability of sincere criticism on Shashi Deshpande. In this context, the present study has made a comprehensive analysis of the writings of Deshpande in terms of narrative techniques and language. While doing so the efforts have been made to assess how far Shashi Deshpande has achieved artistic success in rendering of her new themes in view of the narrative modes, characterization, structures etc used by her in the novels.

The present study contradicts the popular notion that all the novels of Deshpande are somewhat similar as they are all stories about middle-class educated women and their psychological states. Instead, it tries to establish that Shashi Deshpande is an Indian English writer with her own distinct techniques and language pattern which have created a new yardstick for upcoming writers. Of course, Deshpande's concern has been the expression of the Indian middle class ethos and her simple unassuming language reflects it. The language she uses is of the kind used by an average, middle class, convent-educated individual. Her focus is on middle class people and the language used for it is also middle class English, sometimes a little incorrect by the British standard.

Keywords: Indian Education, Techniques, Shashi Deshpande.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande emerged on the Indian literary scene in 1970s. With more than ten novels, four books of children, over eighty short stories and a screenplay at her credit, she has carved out a significant place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. She has a clear perception of the contemporary social situations and has seriously tried to bring forth in her novels the various aspects of the changing Indian society, particularly those concerning women. She has excelled in projecting a realistic picture of educated, modern middle class woman who, even though financially self-dependent, has to face the problem of adjustment between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity, between idealism and pragmatism. She portrays with exceptional sensitivity, the trials and tribulations of the modern Indian women with their turmoils, convulsions, frustrations and the long unbroken silence which have been their lot for the centuries.

Obviously, various authors employ variant methods of storytelling. Hence, a narrative technique used by an author holds great significance. The most common method used by the novelists is the plain narrative or story telling wherein the writer holds an omnipresent and omniscient position. Apparently, writers who wish to lend a ring of authenticity or reality to their story employ the first person narrative. However, this method limits the writer from delving deep into the minds and motives of the other characters. To overcome this limitation, Shashi Deshpande has used a combination of the first person and the third person narrative coupled with flashback devices to lend authenticity and credibility to her novels. Seemingly, Indian English novelists who used English language depending upon their talent and skill. Shashi Deshpande also writes in this medium to give voice to women's issues. She writes:

To those of us who write in English, it is neither a foreign language nor the language of the colonizer, but the language of creativity. Whether the writing is rootless, alienated or elitist should be judged from the writing, not from the language. My writing comes out of myself, the society I live in. It is shaped, as I am, by my family, my ancestry, the place I was born in, the place I live in, the culture I am steeped in, the fact that the writing in English changes none of these things".¹

Essentially, Shashi Deshpande comes from a middle class Marathi-Cannadiga background, and was convent educated. Her father taught Sanskrit in college wrote in Kannada and had a Marathi-speaking wife. Consequently, her home was a harmonious mixture of languages. Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, ShivaramKaranth and MastiVenkateshlyengar, Bernard Shaw, Ibsen and Virginia Woolf – all these names were equally familiar to her. Whereas, at school she learnt Tennyson and Wordsworth, at home she had to chant the Amarkosa by heart. Deshpande's father, a renowned Sanskrit scholar and a famous Kannada playwright taught her Sanskrit and was, "forever, in moments of leisure, absent-mindedly and tunelessly intoning verses from Gita, from Kalidas and the songs of the saint-poets in Kannada".²

Obviously, these influences have played an important role in shaping her narrative techniques and the use of English language. Effortlessly, she also learnt to read Kannada and Marathi. However, English remains the language of her thinking. She admits:

"It was the language in which I best expressed myself. And therefore when I began to write, it was in English. There never was any question of choice. I am often asked why you write in English. I guess the question comes to me more than it does to other writers in English because my father is a known Kannada writer. I am aware that it is a loaded question, that it carries political overtones. But the answer is very simple; English is the language of my creativity".³

Initially, Shashi Deshpande was not taken very seriously, as her novels are not concerned with sentimentality and romance of character(s). She cites an incident wherein a publisher had rejected her story and further advised her to send it to a woman's magazine. She wonders:

"Why did the editor say that? It was a good story. I knew that. I was pretty confident about it. It was not a sentimental, romantic love story either the kind that would fit smugly into a woman's magazine".⁴

Ostensibly, Shashi Deshpande's writings are not for publicity, but to mirror the society as she observes it. She is least concerned about her name and fame. As a result, in spite of her writing for quite a long period, she remained unknown to many until her Sahitya Akadmi Award winning novel *That Long Silence* got published.

Effectively, the kind of language she uses is simple. She does not indulge in showy, bombastic or rhetorical English. It is so simple and straight that it never hinders the reader in any way. Deshpande's concern has been the expression of the Indian middle

class ethos and her simple unassuming language reflects it. The language she uses is of the kind used by an average, middle class, convent-educated individual. Her focus is on middle class people and the language used for it is also middle class English, sometimes a little incorrect by the British standard.

Noticeably, education and experience in foreign countries set most of the women novelists like Anita Desai, NayantaraSahgal, Ruth Prwar Jhabvala and many others, apart from the traditional Indian women. The traditional Indian women suffer, submit and adjust themselves to the circumstances. These women novelists have, in their novels portrayed this aspect of women's life without having the first-hand experience of it. However, Shashi Deshpande unlike other women writers has projected this aspect of Indian women with more sensitivity and instinctive understanding as she belongs to same category. She is born and brought up in India and her formal and informal upbringing forced her to write about India. Naturally, the projection of the Indian women's world in her novels is more authentic, credible and realistic. She knows what Indian women feel. Apparently, she has a unique place among the novelists writing in English. She declares that she is just like any other regional writer but her medium of writing happens to be English, as it is only language she knows well. She says:

"I believe that English writing in this country is a part of our literature; I consider English as one more of our 'bhashas' as Ganesh Devy calls them. I know that our writing comes out of an involvement with this society, out of our experiences here, our readership is now here, and happily our publishers are here as well. Yet I am disturbed by the recent trend in English writing which in its pursuits of role models outside, is alienating itself from its roots".⁵

Primarily, the author belongs to that group of writer of Indian writing in English who do not suffer from complexes about using English because they do not consider it a foreign language. She feels that by writing in English she belongs to small circles like the regional language writers. However, she does not become non-Indian in any way. In an interview she expressed:

"I am an Indian writer. My language just happens to be English which cannot be called a foreign language at all because it is so much used in India".⁶

Furthermore, the novelist also feels that she is different from other Indians who write in English because she was never educated abroad and so her background is firmly rooted in India. She asserts:

"My novels do not have any westerners, for example. They are first about Indian people and the complexities of our lives, our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. My English is as we use it. I don't make it easier for anyone really. If I make any changes, it's because the novel needs it, not because the reader needs it".⁷

Precisely, the author is well aware of the problems faced by the Indian writings in English. She advises them that they should work out for their own language. She expresses her happiness over the

present state of Indian writings in English and realises that it is pertinent to focus on Indian readers than western ones. She has always aimed at the Indian readers and not to the western ones. Her creative use of the language has been greatly lauded in The Times Literary Supplement:

“Deshpande eschews linguistic pyrotechnics and formal experimentation, but has sufficient command of her tradition to give the lie to the belief that the English language is capable of expressing any Indian world other than a cosmopolitan one”.⁸

Stylistically, Shashi Deshpande makes an extensive use of mythic allusions and parallels in her fiction. Even a less important early work like *Come Up and Be Dead* has a fascinating strand of mythic material. However, her most subtle and successful use of myth and folklore is to be found in her mature novels where they sustain and illuminate the narration. The use of mythic material requires the reader to do his homework in order to get the most out of Deshpande's fiction. It will follow no short cuts, as the novelist will present her material in all its depth and complexity. She creates the fictional world of her novels with total fidelity to lived and felt experience. Moreover, she has transformed a familiar world into a new in which authentic experiences of the interior landscape of Indian women is powerfully projected through devices including myths, folktales and many new narrative techniques.

Fictionally, men have always used myth as an important device to enhance the literary effect of their works. English and other European writers drew much of their mythological symbols from the Christian, pagan and classical myths. On the other hand, Indian English writers have relied much on the stories and symbols from the religious scriptures and epics like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Ramacharitamans, the Puranas, the Upanishads, and also local legends and folk-lore. Sita and Savitri are the often-used symbols from the Indian mythology.

Deshpande learnt the secrets of craftsmanship assiduously. As a seasoned writer, she has been conscious of the significance of this aspect of fiction writing. She revealed before Lakshmi Holmstrom:

“I learnt about language. Craftsmanship is so important in writing, and you only learn it by doing it”.⁹

Deshpande's writings prove that art lies in concealing art. The highly functional language with its precision is her important asset as a fiction writer. She is honestly concerned with expressing herself in English as clearly and effectively as possible. When asked whether she thinks in English while writing her fiction, she replied Carvalho:

“When I write narrative, I think in English; when I write dialogue I think in Kannada or Marathi, which are my languages”.¹⁰

At places, the dialogue in her novels reads like translation from Kannada, Marathi or Hindi, but her narrative is generally free from Indian coinages. She writes in English because she finds it most convenient mode of self-expression.

The non-linear arrangement of her novels gives them the integrative structure. Apart from this, the novelist also uses some devices of the stream-of-consciousness-technique like flashback, light of memory, interior monologue and so on, to probe into the psyche of her characters. Jaya says at the end of *That Long Silence*:

“All this I have written – it's like one of those multi – coloured patchwork quilts the kakis made for any new baby in the family”. Quoting this statement, the novelist told Lakshmi Holmstrom that this was how she viewed the novel writing: “And I think that is how we really see our lives when we look back upon them”.¹¹

Creditably enough, this kind of presentation never degenerates into a senseless collage. Deshpande does not write for foreign readers and there is no attempt in her novels at ‘window-dressing’:

“If you try to make everything easy for everyone, then, you end up belonging nowhere. So I've left it at that – characters in their locales, without providing glosses for the western readers.... Also literature can be appreciated even without understanding every work of it – one can still respond to the core of it”.¹²

Aim of the study

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent Indian women writers writing in English. She has emerged on the Indian literary scene in 1970s. She has more than ten novels, four books of children, over eighty short stories and a screenplay at her credit. However, she is not as popular as many contemporary Indian women writers writing in English such as Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy and many others. The aims of this article are to find out the impact of Indian Education and upbringing on her writing techniques, style, and language and to bring forth the uniqueness and strength of her writing.

Conclusion

Since Deshpande's focus is on Indian readers, her novels are free from surplus age. All her novels have an interesting beginning and a convincing end. The novelist neither tries to tax her readers' credulity nor does she give unexpected jolts. Most of her novels are open-ended, and the reader is free to coin the conclusion the way he deems fit. This has been done to encapsulate the reality which is certainly not unidirectional.

Conclusively, Shashi Deshpande's fictional concerns and art have made a niche for her among Indian English novelists. She has secured a permanent place among the most important Indian novelists writing in English. The transparency and spontaneity of her language make her novels highly readable. The epigraph of her novel, *In The Country of Deceit*, reads, “One of our finest writers of English. Her style is elegant, substantial, and full of the surprises of exactitude”.

References

1. Shashi Deshpande, “Language No Bar”, *The Sunday Times of India*, Ahmedabad, 23 April, 1985, p.10.
2. Shashi Deshpande, ‘Them and Us’ in Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford (eds.), *Unbecoming*

- Daughters of the Empire*, Sydney: Dangaroo press, 1993.
3. Shashi Deshpande, "The Power Within", *Creating Theory Writers on Writing* ed. Jasbir Jain, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000, p.27.
 4. Shashi Deshpande, *The Dilemma of a Woman Writer*, *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. 20, No.4, 1985, p.35.
 5. Shashi Deshpande, "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties", *Indian Literature*, Vol. XXXIX, No.5, Sept.- October 1996, p. 108.
 6. Shashi Deshpande interviewed by M. D. Riti, "There is no Looking Back for Shashi Deshpande", *Eve's Weekly*, June 18-24, 1988, p. 28.
 7. Shashi Deshpande, "Interview: Shashi Deshpande talks to Lakshmi Holmstrom", *Wasafiri*, No. 17, Spring 1993, p. 26.
 8. Mario Couto, *In Divided Times*, rev. of *That Long Silence*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 April 1983.
 9. Deshpande, n. 16, p. 22.
 10. Deshpande, n. 32, p.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. *Literature Alive*, 1/3, p. 11.