

## Exclusive Summary of UGC Minor Research Project

**Titled: Domesticity and the Female Self: A Study in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels**

***Submitted by***

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The present study is an exploration of domesticity in a proposition to scrutinize the private and personal truth of individuals and their relationships within this milieu. The study aims at to re-read the socio-cultural parameters and brings to light the intricate socio-cultural politics at play within domesticity. The genre of Indian women writings in English witness a new phase of development after independence in relation to its imaginative expansion, thematic and technical maturity. Contemporary women novelists represent the frustration of women and tend to challenge and defy the existing familial and social structures. A different kind of scheme underlines the novels of Shashi Deshpande. She is one of the most artistic contemporary women writers and writers of women's lives in English, whose novels deal with the breakdowns in communication, the silences, and the lies that marriages and families struggle with. Her novels are imbued with the position of contemporary woman's position within domesticity and society in general. In Deshpande's analysis of the widely contested site of socio-cultural life in modern, urban, post-colonial India her authorial self is often beleaguered by a deep sense of her separation as what she writes is different with mainstream writing. Writing at a time when the contemporary literary array is endowed with the network of themes like nationalism, the cultural conflict between the East and the West, multiculturalism, Diaspora Shashi Deshpande as a novelist marks a signal departure from them by engaging in a close evaluation of contemporary issues nearer

home similar to Jane Austen's "two inches of ivory". She therefore finds no models, in texts or authors in the corpus of Indian English fiction, to follow and where does she belong. Her novels generally centre on family relationship- particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the latter's dilemmas and conflicts. She deals with the problems and predicament of the man woman situation located within the fabric of the family and the pressure of living within relationships. She deals with the domestic life in a manner which reflects its complexity of in the context of Indian culture, more specifically the Hindu worldview. With this intend behind her writings she provides a reevaluation of the socio-cultural practices within domesticity to reach a significant and artistic re-elucidation of them looking for a new knowledge of human relationships, women in particular to discover what is significant to our lives today. From her first novel Shashi Deshpande has been intrigued by man woman relationships within familial and social context and through her novels provides a platform to voice her doubts with regard to the age-old institutions like family and marriage.

The concern in this study is the liberal space of the modern Indian home itself entrenched within familial relationships -not class, or nation. Her writings emerge out of middle-class women's confrontation with the specific social and cultural norms which constructs them and reproduces the domestic space as the "private" space of patriarchy, as the non-modern space of the modern nation. Each of the narratives so familiar, so reassuring, becomes linked to histories of horrific domestic violence, marital rape, the stories of women abused and hurt, all of which get woven into the very texture of "home", "domesticity", or the "private sphere". Deshpande deviates from the idealistic model of human relationships within the family to expose the excruciating and repugnant moments of family life buried under the idealistic picture of identity in familial roles. Deshpande's novels demonstrate that the familial and cultural notions which seem to render the strength and assurance to the family life themselves become the source of destabilization. The social and cultural code embedded within

domesticity which is pre-dominantly patriarchal in nature apparently expects a conventional man-woman relationship. Deshpande's protagonists' placed within the vortex of domestic crisis experience a sense of terror and foreboding and coldness flows out of the cracks and crevices in their familial relationships. The protagonists positioned within such context enable them to probe into their present situation. Their explicit and hidden responses to people and incidents, their aptitude to rethink and re-evaluate their opinions and attitudes-everything happens within the precincts of the family. A study of Deshpande's man woman relationships, women in particular would be incomplete overlooking their position in the context of the family as family remains the priority in her novels.

The present work makes an effort to assess domesticity in relation to the multiple aspects that decide its role, nature and construction to reach a perceptive of how family life and its associated responsibilities function as a cultural construct within the life of the individuals, women in particular. With this apparent insignia behind, the present study attempts to investigate various facets within domesticity in relation to Shashi Deshpande's novels for respective chapters. To embark on an exploration of domesticity in Deshpande's novels, the present work incorporates key ideas from the field of feminism and cultural studies that endowed with a broader framework for the intended study. The present study remaining within the standard methodology of research that is distinctive of the disciplines of literature incorporates the methodology of interpretative analysis of Shashi Deshpande's novels.

The Introductory Chapter makes general survey of the development of the family to arrive at an understanding of the domesticity as a construction of socio-cultural connotation. A brief discussion on socio-cultural situation of women, feminism and its impact on women writers and how their characters are influenced is done. It also gives a brief introduction of the life and works of the writer whose novels are taken for analysis. The chapter also embraces a review of literature and wind up with a brief

preview of the chapters to follow. Chapter II titled “Gender and Space: Power Equation in the Familial Relations” explores how women situated within domesticity have to experience biasness regarding gender, space and power. Situated within the given structured space women tend to internalize current socio-cultural conventions regarding gender behaviour and tries to conform to what is considered normal and expected behavior. The Indian family profoundly follows the traditional established discourses for its socio-cultural acknowledgment. The given discourses spell out a hierarchal nature of the family where the tactical positions are occupied by the male which allocate limited and restricted space to the female. The constrained space inflicted upon women deny them mobility and accessibility to all the possibilities and options in their lived lives. In its attempt to lay bare the gender discrimination that exist within familial relations regarding power exercised and their placement within the family and society at large this chapter covers three of Shahsi Deshpande’s novels *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Vine* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Situated within such familial and cultural context which is dominantly patriarchal in nature tend to provide the males with greater access to power and space than the females. The females are considered as inferior compared to the males and hence expects women to lead a life of acquiescence remaining confined within the enclosure of the domestic sphere. Deshpande through her novels reveals that this space which seeks to provide security to the females on the contrary is a gender retreat. The study reveals that the novelist deviates from the idealistic image of family life by unearthing the trauma of brutal acts of marital rape when the males in the family exhibit their sexual power to dominate the females. However, Deshpande’s women though sensitive of the prejudices but positioned within the familial context she depicts their inability to make it public for the sake of family honour. Hence, the notion of woman’s struggle for equality is deeply entrenched in the situatedness of the woman within the social and cultural paradigms of family and familial relationship. Undoubtedly, the protagonists empowered with education display a tendency to

move beyond the prescribed social and cultural space but the study reveals that the protagonists being socio-cultural constructs does not allow themselves to exhibit any drastic rebelliousness of the social system. The scrutiny of her novels appears as a voyage towards a renewed understanding of a woman within domesticity and the structure within which she is situated in. Deshpande, however, objects to this kind of limitation inflicted upon the woman and provides her protagonists other options in life apart from a career in wifedom and motherhood which has enabled them to live their lives in their own terms and towards the end they learn to face their crisis with a brave heart waiting for a resolution. Women through their negotiations and compromises of the social power structures in the course of everyday life are agents of change. Such an attempt on the part of women is the process of giving way to this change in keeping with feminist ideology. Through such resolution one can assert Deshpande as a critique of patriarchal/ Hindu ideology who objects to an unquestioning acceptance of the biased socio-cultural constructs of women but fall short of any radical feminist ideology. Her female characters despite being victim of the patriarchal ideologies, do not support the notion of leaving marriage but try to make their specific space within it and voice their doubts regarding the institutionalized discourse of power. Despite displaying resistance by her protagonists, Shashi Deshpande forecloses the possibility for any woman to overcome totalitarian society by acquiring power. The assessment of her novels yields a more accurate comprehension of the characters' situation within the family, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of our own situation in the real world and the necessity to amend such socio-cultural constructs so as to assign a more unbiased allotment of space to the female within the family. Chapter III titled "The Female Self vis-à-vis family" focuses on how women find themselves trapped within a pre-defined the social and familial roles. The chapter takes into account the following four novels of Shashi Deshpande *Roots and Shadows*, *Small Remedies*, *That Long Silence* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to explore factors related to identity within familial

arrangement. For a woman the ideal role advocated is that of a dutiful daughter, a dutiful wife and a loving mother. Domesticity with its embedded images and stereotypes exhibited in the religious scriptures remain as 'residue' that wields an overriding sway on the collective consciousness of the people. Deshpande scrutinizes the prescribed ideal roles of women within domesticity as cultural constructs that very often inclined to deny them the very right of selfhood. The chapter focuses on how situated within such asymmetrical relationships within domesticity Indian middle class women empowered with education aware of the 'emergent' avenues and struggling to liberate them from the 'dominant' cultural and socio-cultural politics to construct their identity beyond the given familial roles. The study exhibits that Deshpande's protagonists are subjects, socially constructed through discursive practices and they reveal their anxiety at the dominant dogmas that tend to delineate the parameters of women's life into strict socio-cultural roles. They articulate their doubts regarding the longstanding institutions of marriage and family recognizing them as cultural constructs that gratify its need to justify the prevailing prejudices within it. Through her novels Deshpande lays bare the socio-cultural prejudices that are at play in the construction of identity in the context of family and society at large. While dealing with the issue of female identity vis-à-vis family enlightens the reader to make an insightful analysis of the various familial practices that are authoritative and imposing in nature convey an influential stance to this vital issue. Deshpande's protagonists being educated are aware of the prevailing prejudices towards the female and also the emergent avenues that require moving beyond the given cultural roles. They do make attempts to transcend beyond the pre-defined cultural roles but such endeavor to transcend the given is not an easy proposition as the residue of the socially constructed discursive practices continued to be dominant within them. Deshpande being a writer rooted in India is aware of women's position in Indian society and its embedded rich socio-cultural does not advocate for radical feminism. The protagonists respond to the 'emergent' prospects as society develops, usually

unconsciously, out of a new set of social interactions and actively challenge the 'dominant' practices. Such effect of the 'emergent' social interactions no doubt provides space for women in other roles as they move out of the domestic enclosures and experience a wider world outside, they grow in stature and move beyond the limited confining categories of coercion. Her protagonists being aware of these changes reclaim their confidence in themselves as human beings and not gendered selves that become cultural sculpt to be engraved upon. They mature themselves as they try to understand the roles and relationships with regard to her as well as the shared experience within the family and society at large. It then becomes apparent that as her women struggles with the 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emergent' aspects of culture to carve an identity beyond the familial roles comprehend that they are unable to define identity within a distinct 'self' overlooking the significant role played in its construction by the socio-cultural dimensions within which she is situated. Deshpande critiques the socio-cultural prejudices as she advocates that women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings and hence should not be straitjacketed into roles that warp their personalities, but should have options available to them. Deshpande's protagonists being educated react to the options available to them. The reaction of her protagonists is neither like the typical western liberated woman nor an orthodox Indian one. Shashi Deshpande does not let herself get besieged by the western feminism or its militant concept of emancipation. The Conclusion chapter makes an attempt to take account of the implications drawn from the study accomplished in the preceding chapters. This chapter endeavors to make an evaluation of Deshpande's novels regarding the complexities of man-woman relationships, woman in particular situated within the Indian urban middle class family life that appear to be torn between tradition and modernity, conventions and now emerging culture. Deshpande's uniqueness is that her protagonists are not radicals but they voice their doubts to the socio-cultural prejudices that are at play within domesticity and beyond. Her protagonists from inherited patterns of thought and action in favour of

new modes arrived at independently after much thought of the various aspects of the predicament keeping also in view the kind of society she lives in. The possibility of a compromise seems to be more hopeful in Deshpande's novels. Her protagonists through their confrontation of their past's life manage to come to terms with their present situation putting an end to the deafening silence by voicing their doubts and questioning the given social codes. Such responses and reactions enhance their individuality and enable them to come from the marginal space to the centre of the family and society at large. All her novels reflect upon the protagonist attempt to liberate themselves from the inhibiting aspects of Indian socio-cultural structures to discover their true selves. However, one has to bear in mind that such an attempt to transcend the given codes is not an easy proposition for the socio-cultural forces have existed since time immemorial as they are deeply entrenched within the collective consciousness. Situated within the social and familial context which profoundly supports these socio-cultural practices, women experience disapproval when they attempt to transcend the societal and familial limitations. However, Shashi Deshpande's women emerge from a period of reflection with the decision to reach a compromise between their desires and the roles that society expects them to perform. The novels reveal how Deshpande's protagonists display progression from quiet withdrawal to discernable questioning in their moment of domestic crisis. One has to take into account that whatever maneuver they formulate, no matter how minute, it is a positive and promising step towards move beyond the specified cultural givens that deny them their right to personhood.

Shashi Deshpande's treatment of the domesticity aimed at to re-assess the pre-arranged the socio-cultural system and practices and unearthing the intricate socio-cultural politics within domesticity. Her questioning and re-reading is not proposed towards a drastic rejection of the family and the relationships within it but her engagement with these familial issues emphasize the need of the family and human relationships in the individual and social life of human beings. Each of her novels is

a voyage of discovery which enlightens the readers understanding of man-woman relationships within domesticity and the situatedness of woman within it in particular. Such an attempt facilitates the reader to discern issues which has till now been not dealt with regarding the sacred institution of the family and marriage which is to be sustained at any cost. Her unrelenting use of man-woman relationships within domesticity in her novels allow the reader to move beyond the familiar in search of a profound understanding of the domestic life, and through it the world outside.

Shashi Deshpande through her novels ascertains the necessity to comprehend the family and relationships anew which would sanction a more compassionate image of family life wherein various contemporary changes could be included. The present study emphasizes the need to analyze and reassess the familial and societal role and the subject positions of women with a view to relinquish the subtle socio-cultural politics at play within domesticity whilst retaining the beneficial aspects and it is only then human beings would be true to themselves. Deshpande herself contends that human beings are her constant source of inspiration and that she finds them fascinating. Her recurrent engagement with man woman relationships within domesticity deliberately carves out opportunities for the reader to consider other probable areas of variance and disagreement in relation to the family and marriage as culturally given entities that hold the notion of Indian-ness in miniature. We may hope that the present work shall be able to institute itself as a sufficient addition to the ever escalating significant body of literature on Shashi Deshpande while at the same time instigate and encourage explorations into the new and virgin areas within her novels.