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Shashi Deshpande's Select Novels: A Study Of Marital Discord

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writings in English. Her protagonists find themselves entrapped in the roles assigned to them by society, but achieve self-identity and independence within the confines of their marriage. In the book of Murali Manohar, *Indian English Women's Fiction: A Study of Marriage, Career and Divorce* (2007), categorizes marriage in contemporary Indian women's fiction into three types: love marriage, love-cum-arranged marriage, and arranged marriage. He asserts that love marriages, ideal from the couple's perspective, often lack parental approval, while arranged marriages, favored by parents, may not meet the couple's desires but are expected to cultivate love post-marriage. Manohar ranks his preferences as love-cum-arranged marriage, love marriage, and arranged marriage. He believes that marital success depends on the couple, not the parents. Deshpande's novels explore these marriage types, showing their impact on the couple's life. In the works of Deshpande, feature protagonists seeking fulfillment outside or without marriage, embodying the 'new woman' who navigates life with courage and resilience, challenging traditional marital expectations. The present study, based on the selected novels of Deshpande deals with the complexities of man-woman relationship especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of disturbed adolescence with reference to work of Shashi Deshpande.

Keywords: contemporary women, self-identity, parental, courage and resilience

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most accomplished contemporary Indian Women Writers in English. She is considered as one of the most proficient women writers in India. She being a person of Indian origin with cultural values never gave much importance to her career. She had devoted her early years of marriage taking care of housework and nurturing the children. She has a penchant for writing whose major themes are inclined towards human feelings and emotions. Her writings are the realistic depiction of the people and the complexities of the everyday mundane life. Her primary concern is the women's struggles in the Indian society. And to elucidate the same, she keeps women center stage and delicately puts limelight on some of the thought provoking issues. Her protagonists include the middle class and married working women. And being well educated, they very well understand the social inequality prevailing in the Indian patriarchal society.

Murali Manohar, in his influential book *Indian English Women's Fiction: A Study of Marriage, Career and Divorce* (2007), examines the concept of marriage in contemporary Indian women's fiction, categorizing it into three types: "love marriage, love-cum-arranged marriage, and arranged marriage" (180)¹. He argues that from the couple's perspective, love marriage is ideal since it is mutually agreeable, though often not approved by the parents. Conversely, arranged marriage is favored by parents as it meets their approval but may not align with the couple's desires, with the expectation that love will develop after marriage. Love-cum-arranged marriage, according to Manohar, balances both the couple's and parents' approval. He ranks his preferences in the following order: love-cum-arranged marriage, love marriage, and arranged marriage. Despite an increase in love and love-cum-arranged marriages, arranged marriages still outnumber the other two combined. Manohar's preference stems from his belief that marital success rests with the couple, not the parents. Deshpande's novels explore all three marriage types and illustrate how they shape the couple's marital life.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), the protagonist Sarita (Saru) enters a love marriage with Manohar (Manu), who belongs to a lower caste and works as a lecturer. Saru's parents oppose the marriage, with her mother warning that love marriages lead to initial affection but end in constant conflict. Despite this, Saru vows never to seek her parents' help. Manu's patriarchal attitude surfaces as he changes Saru's name twice, which she accepts. The real issues arise when Manu develops an inferiority complex due to Saru's growing income and social status, leading him to retaliate through marital rape. Manu, reliant on Saru's income, prevents her from quitting her medical practice. The lack of love and her career ambitions drive Saru to an extramarital affair with her teacher, Boozie, who is gay. This affair doesn't impact her marriage or lead to divorce but further deteriorates her relationship with Manu. She perceives him as an obstacle to her dreams and ambitions. Saru temporarily escapes to her parental home but returns out of concern for her children, patients, and home, realizing, "All right, so I'm alone but so's everyone else. Human beings... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying" (220)². Determined not to be a puppet, Saru decides to uphold her marriage and career, sustaining her love marriage through adjustment.

In Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983), the protagonist, Indu, enters a love marriage with Jayant, defying her controlling family. Akka, the family head, disapproves, arguing that such marriages, involving different castes and languages, are bound to fail eventually. Consequently, the couple is not welcomed into the family post-marriage. Their marital problems arise from Jayant's patriarchal tendencies, attempting to control every aspect of Indu's life. The author metaphorically describes their marriage as akin to "a pair of bullocks yoked together," (44)³ highlighting the transactional nature of their union.

Indu, conforming to traditional expectations, initially submits to Jayant but feels trapped and discontented. She likens marriage to a cage where two animals, entangled in mutual animosity, are confined. Upon inheriting Akka's property, Indu relocates to her ancestral home, where she rekindles an old friendship with Naren, leading to an extramarital affair. Initially resistant, Indu eventually succumbs to her desires, finding solace in the relationship without feeling guilty, as she views it as fulfilling a physical need. Despite contemplating leaving Jayant, societal pressures deter her, and she returns to him, hoping for improvement and deciding not to disclose her affair. Like Saru and Manu, Indu and Jayant's marriage survives on compromise.

In *That Long Silence* (1988), Jaya has an arranged marriage with Mohan, chosen by her brother who wanted to relieve himself of the responsibility of an unmarried sister. For Jaya, marriage represented freedom from her controlling family. However, post-marriage, her dreams of liberation are shattered. Mohan, despite wanting an educated wife, opposes her career ambitions and creative pursuits. He discourages her from writing after she wins a story contest, fearing the story reflected their life. Mohan's demand for Jaya to "take up a job"⁽⁷⁹⁾⁴ when his own job is at risk highlights his convenience-driven decisions. Jaya seizes this opportunity for independence, choosing a career in creative writing and forming a close, intimate bond with her mentor, Kamat. This relationship fills the emotional void left by Mohan's disregard, leading to a growing silence and rift between them. Eventually, Jaya decides to break her silence and communicate with her husband, once again, suggesting that their marriage will endure through adjustment.

In *The Binding Vine* (1992), Deshpande depicts a love-cum-arranged marriage. Urmila marries her childhood friend, Kishore, with their families' approval. Their relationship is characterized by deep love and mutual understanding. Urmila pursues her passion for teaching and manages to balance her career and family life, "even pausing her doctoral studies to care"⁽¹¹⁴⁾⁵ for their child. Despite the emotional distance she sometimes feels from Kishore, she maintains hope for deeper connection, believing that each imperfect relationship survives on hope.

The novel also touches on Kishore's father's second marriage to Mira, driven by infatuation. Mira's marriage, marked by sexual abuse and her husband's possessive love, ends tragically with her death during childbirth. The contrasting outcomes of these marriages underscore that mutual surrender of ego and deep connection are essential for marital happiness.

A Matter of Time, published in 1996, explores the theme of love marriage. The protagonist, Sumitra, marries a professor named Gopal out of love, despite their parents' objections. Their marriage is both intercaste and interlingual. However, it deteriorates as Gopal, with his patriarchal mindset, grows weary of living with his wife and three daughters, missing the presence of a male in the family. "Unable to manage without a son"⁽¹²⁾⁶, he abandons Urmila, who returns to her family home in Bangalore. As a traditional Indian wife, Urmila does not seek divorce or maintenance from Gopal. Even her eldest daughter's insistence that she should assert her rights and seek punishment for her husband does not persuade her. Urmila faces not only marital difficulties but also family conflicts.

Small Remedies (2000) also focuses on a love marriage. The protagonist, Madhu, marries Som, and they have a son named Adit. However, Madhu harbors a secret: she was assaulted by her father's artist friend at age 15. When Som learns that Madhu was not a virgin at their marriage and that her previous sexual experience was consensual "albeit naive and ignorant"⁽¹¹²⁾⁷, he becomes suspicious of her. This estrangement affects their relationship with Adit, who begins to distance himself from them. Adit's death in a bomb blast at 17 further strains their relationship. Madhu's distress stems not from her son's death but from the communication

breakdown with her husband. To cope with her depression, she writes a biography of Savitribai, a renowned singer from Gwalior Gharana and her former neighbor.

Conclusion

Murli Manohar argues that love marriages are ideal from the couple's perspective but often lack parental approval. Conversely, arranged marriages are favored by parents but may not align with the couple's desires, with the expectation that love will develop post-marriage. Love-cum-arranged marriages balance both parties' approval. Despite an increase in love and love-cum-arranged marriages, arranged marriages still predominate. Manohar believes that marital success depends on the couple rather than the parents. Deshpande's novels explore these marriage types, illustrating their impact on the couple's life. Overall, Manohar's study reveals that love marriages often lead to emotional breakdowns or separations, arranged marriages can falter, but love-cum-arranged marriages are most successful. Deshpande's later novels depict protagonists seeking fulfillment outside or without marriage, challenging traditional marital expectations and embodying 'new women' who navigate life with courage and resilience.



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