

## Pragmatic Optimism and Self-Recognition in Shashi Deshpande's Select Novels

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### ABSTRACT

Though Shashi Deshpande's fiction is structured around oppression, psychic conflict, and patriarchal dominance, its resolution is tempered not by despair but by the measured, occasional surge of self-knowledge, sustained resilience, and circumspect, yet determined articulation of self. Against a backdrop of muted disenfranchisement, each emergent instance of self-recognition invokes a tempered covenant of hope. This durable motif, carried from novel to novel, invites sustained scrutiny, and the current examination delineates the techniques by which her cosmology enacts hope and pragmatically rehearses optimism in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), and *That Long Silence* (1988). The respective trajectories of Sarita (Saru), Jaya, and Indu witness the consecutive movement from fragmented alienation to verbal assertion, psychic renewal, and pyrrhic but reclaimed self-recognition. Interrogating these movements through the coupled optics of feminist and existential thought, the analysis adjudges hope as neither utopian the appearance of hope as neither utopian the literary eidolon nor rhetorical flourish. By embracing complexity, it is pragmatically conceived and pragmatically rehearsed—the riverine strength that permits the silent to interrupt mutism, that permits the detained to negotiate territories of contingent freedom, and that permits the muted to recombine the fragments of life's language. The paper submits her minimalist realism steadfastly alloyed to contingent, speculative hope as the calibrating centre of her oeuvre, one that chronicles psychic dispensation by delineating the variegated edges—the sensuous ecstasies, muted lacunae,

reticulated half-tones, and beleaguered tranquillities—through which the elusive, literary ambition of hope passes.

Keywords: hope; optimism; women's narratives; resilience; identity

## FULL PAPER

### Introduction

Shashi Deshpande occupies a distinctive position within Indian English literature, devoting her attention almost exclusively to the concealed recesses of women's consciousness. Characterized by a resolute allegiance to realism and sustained psychological inquiry, her narratives recount the understated yet earnest trials of the urban, educated Indian middle class. In the conduit intersected by her characters, Deshpande exposes the gravities of a patriarchal order while simultaneously enunciating women's quiet reservoirs of strength and nascent self-awareness. Plotting the arc of recurring suffering, her work simultaneously advances the compassionate calculus of endurance, the dialectics of self-discovery, and the precise choreography of daily survival. Though her fiction is constrained by the exigencies of marriage and the patent authority of class-bound men, Deshpande conspicuously safeguards her protagonists from the terminal decree of despair. Mapping the meticulous choreography by which women reckon with their disempowerment, her narratives incrementally yield corridors of expression and tentative governance. Implicit, and by extension instructive, is the horizon of moral and psychological renewal, to which the organs of emerging memory and imagination confer perpetuity and authority. These motifs of transformative expectation and latent optimism venture to convince readers of a probative citizenship interior to identity formation. Attenuating analysis to Deshpande's formative trilogy: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 1980, *Roots and Shadows* 1983, and *That Long Silence* 1988—this essay dissects the dialectic of confined mourning and deferred jubilation within which her protagonists negotiate identity, dwelling at length upon the constructive agencies, both textual and affective, that orchestrate their incremental recoveries.

The present paper examines the trajectory of female characters in Shashi Deshpande's oeuvre from states of pervasive despair towards a more assertive resilience; concurrently, it delineates the evolving surfaces on which hope and optimism are inscribed within her narratives.

### Contours of Hope in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980)

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande examines how marriage can become a site of trauma rather than protection. The female protagonist, Saru, a

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successful doctor, suffers psychological and physical abuse from her insecure husband, Manu. Her silence reflects the pressure of patriarchal expectations, where women are reduced to roles that deny individuality (Singh 1991; Dhawan 1995). Through Saru's alienation, Shashi Deshpande exposes how marriage and family often function as instruments of oppression rather than spaces of support. The novel reveals small but significant possibilities of hope. Saru's return to her parental home provides her with distance and reflection, allowing her to confront her past and reimagine her future. As Mishra observes, Deshpande's fiction "acknowledges suffering while simultaneously opening up possibilities of renewal" (2006, p. 84). Here, Saru's resolution is expressed in the decisive statement: "I must face it all—my childhood, my marriage, my fears. Only then will I know who I am" (Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* 221). This articulation of resolve marks a shift from passive endurance to active self-reflection. Within trauma, her journey suggests the beginning of a redefined identity beyond victimhood.

Hope in this novel is not portrayed as an idealistic escape but as a practical survival force. It emerges in Saru's refusal to remain fully silenced and in her movement toward choice and self-reflection. Though the novel does not present her as radically liberated, the emphasis lies on the recognition that silence and avoidance can no longer remain viable strategies. In Sarita's case, hope lies in confronting reality rather than escaping it, affirming Deshpande's belief that the process of self-knowledge itself constitutes empowerment.

#### Renewal and Selfhood in *Roots and Shadows* (1983)

Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* explores the conflict between tradition and individuality through her protagonist, Indu. In this novel, Indu illustrates how self-awareness can emerge from inner conflict and result in a newfound optimism about identity. Returning to her ancestral home after years away, Indu must face the patriarchal values that shaped her early life and still restrict her choices. The family's rigid structures symbolize the weight of tradition, where women are expected to conform without question. Indu's inner struggle reflects the broader feminist concern with negotiating inherited obligations while seeking personal autonomy (Singh 1991; Jain 1998). The novel also traces Indu's gradual movement toward freedom. Her journey is not toward external independence but toward reclaiming her voice as a writer. By questioning authority and acknowledging her own desires, she begins to resist passive conformity. As Mishra (2006) notes, Deshpande's women "break the silence of submission by redefining the meaning of selfhood within their cultural contexts" (102). Indu's independence is not a rejection of her roots but a reworking of them, where she learns to balance family duty with her own individuality. She declares: "I will write now, not what others expect, but what I need to say. Writing is my truth, and I cannot deny it any longer" (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows* 180). In this resolution, writing becomes a metaphor for authenticity, for the refusal to be silenced by marital expectations or familial demands. Kudchedkar rightly emphasizes that "for Deshpande's women, writing

becomes both metaphor and method of self-liberation, a space where silence is broken and subjectivity reclaimed” (Kudchedkar 79).

Optimism in *Roots and Shadows* emerges as reconciliation and renewal. Protagonist Indu shows that identity can be reimagined not by abandoning tradition but by reshaping it on more equal terms. Shashi Deshpande presents hope as a process that allows women to find strength within limiting structures, suggesting that renewal of selfhood is both possible and necessary. Indu’s optimism is thus not romantic or external but intellectual and creative: the assertion of her right to truth through authorship. This act repositions her from silence to expression, from compromise to authenticity, and illustrates how hope in Shashi Deshpande is located in the reclamation of voice.

#### Optimism as Assertion in *That Long Silence* (1988)

In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande examines how patriarchy enforces silence on women and how breaking that silence becomes an act of resistance. Here, protagonist Jaya’s resolution embodies perhaps the most nuanced vision of hope in Shashi Deshpande’s fiction. Jaya begins the novel fragmented and silenced, describing herself as reduced to her roles as “Mohan’s wife” and “the mother of his children,” recalling that “I had been a writer once, but that was another life, another person” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 101). The Jaya suppresses her voice within her marriage to Mohan, accepting silence as a way to preserve order. This reflects what feminist critics describe as women’s complicity in their own marginalization, where speech is constrained by fear and social expectation (Singh 1991; Jain 1998). Jaya’s condition highlights how silence functions as both a survival tactic and a tool of patriarchal control. Her anxiety is compounded by decades of repression, but the novel charts her journey toward the realization that silence itself must eventually be broken. Her climactic declaration— “Sometimes words seem so futile. But it is words that will save me in the end. I must break this long silence” (Deshpande, *That Long Silence* 147). She begins to recognize that silence, while protective, also imprisons her. Her decision to speak signals a shift from passivity to power. As Mishra (2006) notes, Shashi Deshpande’s women embody resilience by negotiating change within oppressive structures. This movement toward articulation is modest but profound, suggesting that empowerment is not in grand rebellion but in the small but transformative refusal to remain voiceless. Protagonist Jaya’s assertion represents optimism—not as denial of pain but as a determination to reimagine herself beyond the limits of patriarchy. Chowdhury captures this vision aptly when she states that “Deshpande’s heroines embody a feminist vision rooted not in spectacular rebellion but in small, everyday acts of resistance, in the refusal to remain silent” (Chowdhury 110)

Jaya’s assertion thereby sustains the inherent puissance of language and posits that, despite the strictures of systemic coercion, the subject may repossess itself by the resolute choice to recount its own conditions of existence. Consequently, optimism is conceived not as unexamined cheer, but as a mode of

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feminist insurgency. In electing vocal articulation rather than acquiescent silence, the central character Jaya reconstitutes her identity and repudiates any tacit assent to her own subjugation. Within the parameters of this text, Shashi Deshpande models optimism as a subdued yet subversive praxis, one that enables women to contest hegemonic authority and to instantiate latent arenas of progressive re-formation.

Thematic Analysis:

Within these three novels, optimism emerges as an understated counterpoint to systemic oppression and pervasive psychological conflict. Confronting a patriarchal order that thrives by erasing women's subjectivity, saturating their interior lives with guilt, and instilling perpetual fear, Deshpande contends that hope materializes only through disciplined self-examination and an equally disciplined, though always measured, act of self-affirmation. Assertion is neither immediate nor blatant; it is tentative, regionally bound, and resolutely intimate, experienced by her protagonists as a minor yet persistent re-routing of everyday biographies rather than as a grand overturning of socio-historical structures. Her female protagonists do not reject family, marriage, or tradition wholesale; rather, they negotiate their place within these frameworks, refusing to be entirely subsumed. As Jain argues, "Deshpande's women do not seek to destroy their worlds, but to live authentically within them, to claim space for themselves without abandoning their bonds" (Jain 150). This thematic choice underscores Shashi Deshpande's realism: transformation is portrayed not as an escape from structures but as the refusal to accept erasure within them.

Deshpande's narratives center on a brand of optimism that is resolutely feminist and equally pragmatic. The feminist dimension is manifest in an unwavering insistence upon women's sovereignty—in their entitlement to articulate desire, emigrate from inherited definitions of identity, and narrate themselves beyond inherited scripts. The pragmatic bent, in contrast, stops short of utopian teloi and instead credits an adhesive parental future by cataloging and relishing quotidian victories, collectively tested and by no means guaranteed, against a still-entrenched patriarchal horizon. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru begins to claim bold ownership of her life only by first confronting the anxieties laden in her materfamilias and travail; in *Roots and Shadows*, Indu's resolute embrace of her craft provides the soil in which her authentic self emerges, daughter of none other than her own becoming. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's adamant, public rupture of self-imposed muzzles is her pronouncement, mesons, and preventive parental custody that no ledger of repressed speech shall serve as her *nom du guerre*. What these emblematic performances articulate, cumulatively and cumulatively provoke, is the necessary and possible dissolution of the patriarchal manufacturing of a quasi-monopoly over self-reliance from the bottom machinery, re-erred at which by women refusing any self-collusion in their own negation, a nous that stomachs before any terrain of fortress dismantling.





of volition, and the most regimented subjugation can sponsor trajectories of self-reconstruction. The denouements of the examined texts, therefore, frame hope and optimism as understated yet insistent counter-discourses to the broader narratives of subjugation and psychological distress. In Deshpande's cartography, feminine tenacity and the resilient substrate of hope mutually authenticate each other.

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