

**Literature, Culture and Media**  
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**Lecture – 30**

**Interconnection between Literature, Culture and Identity: Woolf and Deshpande II**

Welcome dear friends to the fifth module of the sixth week, in the previous module we had started discussing the works of Virginia Woolf and in this module we would continue the discussion of Shashi Deshpande. We would review how gender is a praxis for the construction of identity in the works of these women characters.

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- Construction of identity in women writers
  - Virginia Woolf
  - Shashi Deshpande
- Across the globe there are some common characteristics in their portrayal of women characters
- Gender and cultural conditioning as a praxis, as gendering is a process of learning
- Inseparable axis of culture
- It is how one expresses one's sexuality and also how one's identity is related with the social construction/understanding of gender in a given belief system

We have also discussed how across the globe in different cultures, there are certain common characteristics in the portrayal of women characters by certain authors. We can see, looking at the representative novels of Virginia Woolf and Shashi Deshpande, how gender and culture conditioning work is a praxis as gendering is a process of learning and it is an inseparable axis of culture and cultural understanding.

Gender is a component as we have seen in our previous discussions also which helps us to express one's sexuality and also how to understand our relationships in a given social construction; it helps us to understand the belief system of a particular culture.

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- Among women writers belonging to different cultures we find some Commonalities of gender construction
- Only a few writers take it up in explicit manner and discuss the role of social conditioning in detail
- India has rich national literary traditions in English – creative and critical
- Indian writers Incorporates native rhythms, lucidity, retaining a universal appeal



We find that only a few women writers have taken up the gender construction in as explicit manner in which Shashi Deshpande has taken up. India has a rich national literary tradition in other languages as well as an English. In terms of creative and critical writings we find that Indian writers have been able to incorporate their own rhythms, the lucidity of their own mother tongue whereas retaining a universal appeal using the medium of English for expressing their artistic talent and to express their understanding of cultural issues.

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### Technology of Gender

- Analysis of the growing up process which constantly casts its shadows on the mature personality.
- Artificial Construct, propagated by patriarchy
- Supported often by social and religious traditions
- Conditions mind sets. Social conditioning – a double edged sword
  - Social practices
  - Religious myths and taboos
  - Economic facets
  - Guilt in a woman's heart
  - Cultural climate



In the works of Shashi Deshpande we find that the technology of gender, to borrow the phrase from De Laurentiis, has been presented, she has been able to take up the growing up process of young girls which continuously casts its shadows on the mature personality in her novels. She is

one of those very few novelists who have taken up the complete life span of women and have shown, through their narratives, how gender is an artificial construct which is propagated by patriarchy only.

In her narratives, we find that a gendered identity is formulated not only for women but also for men and this identity formation is supported often by social as well as religious traditions. In her novels we find how the propagation of particular gendered norms condition the mind-set of the people. In her opinion social conditioning is a double edged sword which works against men as well as against women. However, since women are often the victims, they feel the impact more but it does harm the psyche and the personality and identity of men also. In her narratives, she has taken up and discussed the role of social practices, the religious myths, the economic facets as well as the cultural climate which are responsible for the formulation of the individuation process and the ultimate formulation of one's identity.

She has also tried to tap in her novels through various women characters, the guilt which is there in a women's heart, if she is not able to conform to the societal standards in the given cultural setting. In various novels, we find the different facets of the technology of gender in an Indian context have been taken up. Even though, there are many facets which are typically found in Indian subcontinent only we find that there are several others which have a universal appeal.

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## Technology of Gender

- Preference for the boy child:
    - Vanna, *Binding Vine*; Manorama, *A Matter of Time*; Mriga, *If I Die Today*
  - Social and Religious Customs:
    - Family tree in *That Long Silence*; Last rites in *Come Up and Be Dead*
  - Negligence of Parents:
    - Indu, *Roots & Shadows*; Kshama, *Come Up and Be Dead*
  - Growing up process:
    - *Roots & Shadows*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*
  - Emphasis on sexual purity:
    - *Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On*
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A particular aspect which she has taken up in her novels is the preference for the boy child. In several novels through various women characters through Vanna in *Binding Vine*, through Manorama in *A Matter of Time*, through Mriga, in *If I Die Today*, she has suggested how in our society it is the preference for the boy child which works as a motivation for retaining the marriages intact.

She has also referred to various social and religious customs which reinforce this preference. For example, in that long silence she has illustrated the preference for a boy child with the way in which a family tree is constructed because the girls are not a part of this family tree. In *Come Up and Be Dead*, she has suggested how the preference for the boy child which ultimately is a gender and patriarchal norm is supported by the religious rituals. Because in the Hindu tradition last rites should be preferably performed by the son only. She has suggested how because of the preference for the boy child, girls often have to face a certain negligence in the family. It has been presented through the character of Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* very effectively as well as through the character portrayal of Kshama in *Come Up and Be Dead*.

In *Roots and Shadows* again as well as in the Sahitya Academy prize winner novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, she has depicted how the growing up process for a girl becomes a matter of shame for her as well as sometimes for the family. She is also depicted the over emphasis which the Indian situations lays on sexual purity of girls, it has been illustrated through various motives in *Binding wine*, in *small remedies* as well as in *moving on*.

So, in the novels of Shashi Deshpande we find that these aspects through which a gendered identity is created in an Indian society has been presented through these various ways, interestingly she has also suggested how one aspect of our cultural tradition supports the other one as far as the formation of a gendered identity is concerned. We can see that the preference for the boy child results in certain social and religious customs which ultimately result in the marginalisation of girls. And this also makes the growing up process, a shameful activity for girls and women.

Through the presentation of this technology of gender, we find that Deshpande has also presented how the concept of femininity can be a burden for a women, it is considered preferable

if a woman conforms to the societal norms, follows the given societal roles that of a daughter a sister, a wife and later on that of a mother. She should not be thinking outside these constraints.

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## Burden of Femininity

- Intelligence is a burden for women: "... we want our women not to think". (*Roots & Shadows*)
- Autobiographical links : "The stress laid on feminine functions, at the cost of all your potentials as an individual enraged me". (Interview to Geetha Gangadharan)
- Emphasis on Womanly Functions - leading to an inner vacancy
- Silence misinterpreted as strength - *That Long Silence*



And therefore in *Roots and Shadows*, we find that one of the old uncles of the family advises the woman protagonist by saying that intelligence is a burden for women, "we want our women not to think". The patriarchal preference for silence within the family which is often misunderstood as a reflection of inner grit and courage is also presented through this particular statement in which it is clearly said and suggested that women should preferably pursue their own given roles in a social setup.

Sometimes, we find that this emphasis on womanly functions leads to an inner vacancy. We have seen it being depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf also, where Clarissa Dalloway tries to arrange for a party to fill up the inner void. In the same way we find that an emphasis on womanly function, the repeated nature of the household chores creates an inner vacancy which women try to fill up with following different activities only.

Shashi Deshpande has clearly admitted in an interview to Geetha Gangadharan that there are certain autobiographical links also as far as this projection of the burden of femininity in her novels and stories is concerned. She has clearly accepted that "the stress which was laid on

feminine functions at the cost of all your potentials as an individual enraged me” and this aspect has been presented in her novels and stories repeatedly.

She has shown how this burden of femininity is equated not only with a preference for silence but also how the silence is often misrepresented as an inner strength in traditional women. And when a woman starts to speak up against the atrocities she has to put up in her life, it is often presented in a negative light. In Shashi Deshpande also there has been a delineation of the theme of marriage from different perspectives.

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## Marriage! Marriage!! Marriage!!!

Husband as a *Sheltering tree*

- Marriage as a panacea
- A girl is not prepared for a vocation
- Mothers become tools
- Society encourages self-effacement
- " if your husband has a mistress or two ... ignore him. Take up a hobby instead ... may be cats ... or your sister's children ...." - *That Long Silence*
- Among women it generates self-effacement and a tendency to unquestioningly accept their secondary status.
- Among men it consolidates the belief that such servile self-effacement among women is natural.

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In her novels, we find that the presence of a husband as a sheltering tree has been presented. As in the novels of Jane Austen and also to a large extent the novels of Virginia Woolf, in the novels of Shashi Deshpande too, marriage has been presented as a panacea that is the ultimate aim of a woman's life. We can also quote Simone De Beauvoir from the *Second Sex* in which she has said that a woman is compulsorily introduced in terms of being married, being unmarried etc. So, marriage is a compulsory component in a woman's introduction.

Deshpande has suggested how a girl is not prepared for a vocation and she is always trained to become a better housewife. This aspect is discernible in *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf also. Shashi Deshpande has gone slightly ahead and has represented that over a passage of time particularly in the traditional Indian household even the mothers become tools to perpetuate the patriarchal preference for women in terms of following certain rules.

She has also suggested how the society encourages self-effacement among girls and women and how the projection of our desire of a women's desire is often considered in a negative manner. In fact in *That Long Silence* a character gives a very interesting piece of advice to the protagonist of the novel. This character has been given the name of Vanitha mami, one of several owns in the family who are there as stock characters. And she says “if your husband has a mistress or two, ignore him take up a hobby instead may be cats or your sister's children”. The idea behind this advice is that marriage is such as sacrosanct of fear that it should never be disturbed at any cost. Even if a girl has to face out her personality absolutely, the marriage has to be there. Among women, this concept generates a sense of self-effacement and a tendency to accept their secondary status without questioning. However, we find that among men it consolidates the belief that such servile self-effacement among women is natural and therefore, they accepted as a norm.

So we find that in Deshpande's novel, the constitution of identity, the formation of identity is also related with the definitions of normative behaviour. So we find that gender is a major component of identity formation which tells us that certain behaviour is normative and has to be accepted and certain behaviour is not to be accepted. We can particularly refer to Deshpande's novel *Roots and Shadows*, in which she has looked at the social conditioning in terms of construction of identity from a gender perspective from different perspectives.

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### *Roots and Shadows*

- Indu – Childhood constraints and resultant behaviour
- Mini – Traditional option of marriage
- Akka and Atya – Trauma of widowhood
- Kakis – Meek submission





Through various characters we find the different facets of marriage and girlhood, marriage and womanhood, the presence of economic independence etc., have been presented very thoroughly. Through the protagonist Indu, we are told how childhood constraints can result into a constricted personality which would hinder the progress of an individual. Through the character of Mini, we are told that in the absence of any vocational training, how in the absence of any professional education, girls would have no other way but to opt for marriage. Because marriage is the only way to gain as semblance of economic independence for them. Through the characters of Akka and Atya, the trauma of widowhood in India is depicted and through various Kakis, like Vanitha kaki etc., referred to in one of the previous slides, the idea of meek submission of a women as a traditional value has been presented.

A major issue which had not been taken by Virginia Wolf or by her contemporary writers is the issue of economic independence.

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### The Economic Question: Authoritarian Submission Syndrome

- Economic security is not a guarantee of freedom for a woman:
  - What if the wife earns more ... *The Dark Holds No Terrors*
- Guilty Conscience among women: "Bits of garbage...", Indu in *Roots & Shadows*; "A woman who coped...", Jaya in *That Long Silence*
- Emphasis on surrender; not on valid authority
- Culture of Martyrdom
- Principle of a master and a subordinate
- Ideal woman loses her identity
- Tone deafness of Indian males
- Deshpande matured as a novelist
- Women consistently become bolder



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And we find that this economic independence has been presented by Shashi Deshpande very thoroughly. We find that in all her novels and in the majority of her stories, the women protagonists are economically independent. They are highly educated women, for example, they are doctors or teachers or journalists or officers but we find that not all of them are necessarily liberate self. And here in Shashi Deshpande attempts to show how the social conditioning and the constructions posed by the normative behaviours of a society are responsible for constructing



an individual's personality, identity and ideology also. In Deshpande's novel, we find that though all the women protagonists are shown as being economically successful and secure, it is never presented as a guarantee of freedom for women. She has also presented how firstly women themselves are not very comfortable with their economic security.

Another aspect which is very interestingly presented by Deshpande and which is a very contemporary Indian problem in our lives is the issue of economic independence of women in those situations, when the wife earns more than the husband. So what would be the reactions of the husband to this scenario have been interestingly depicted in Deshpande's novels. It begins with one of her early novels, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and this motive continues in many of her later date novels also. Sometimes, we find that this economic success when wives earn more than their husbands, generates a guilty conscience among women because they think that culturally they should not do it. And they start treating their own emotions as bits of garbage as we find in Indu's case in *Roots and Shadows*. In *That Long Silence* we have it in the character portrayal of Jaya, who tries to come across as a women who coped with this fact.

However, we find that the economic aspect and what exactly economic independence means for a girl and a women has been depicted by Shashi Deshpande taking up different social situations. We find that in a gendered perspective, the emphasis on the creation of an authoritarian submission syndrome. And Deshpande's novels depict how many of contemporary Indian women suffer from this syndrome. In the novels of Shashi Deshpande we find that the portrayal of the issue of economic independence and how it provides an interesting dimension to the individuality of Indian women, the portrayal of authoritarian submission syndrome also presents an interesting scenario for us. In the authoritarian submission syndrome, we find that the emphasis is on surrender to a certain authority without wondering whether that authority holds any validity or not.

In a way, we can say that this submission to an authority without looking for the validity of that authority generates a culture of martyrdom which is in consonance with the culture of patriarchy. In the culture of patriarchy the relationship between a husband and wife is not on an equal footing,

it is based on the principle of master and a subordinate and the culture encourages a woman to lose her independence and identity and merge it with the identity of that of her husband.

While she has talked about how the culture promotes Indian women to follow a particular ideology and formulate a particular type of identity, Deshpande has also commented on how Indian men are encouraged to develop a tone deafness towards this plight of women. In Deshpande we find that there is a continued maturity in terms of the projection offer women protagonists. We find that gradually as she progresses as a novelist, the women protagonists she has displayed also become mature. They become bolder gradually in the assertion of their individual choices, in the formation of their identity, in claiming their sexuality and in emphatically putting across their desires.

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- Working protagonists
- Submissiveness to open admission of sexuality:
- Figure of a friend/ lover, *Dark Holds No Terror, If I Die Today, Roots and Shadows, A Matter of Time, Binding Vine*
- Later novels: *Small Remedies, Moving On, In the Country of Deceit*
- Childhood/youth/old age: all conceivable connotations
- Economic differences within same strata among women
- Figure of woman writer

Deshpande has also taken up the issue of sexuality in relative openness. We find that in all her novels, her protagonists are working women and they have moved from submissiveness to open admission of their sexuality. In all her novels we find that there is a figure of a friend or a lover. Without fail, in all her stories and in a novels, we find that this figure exists. In one of her interviews with Pallavi singhasan, Shashi Deshpande has admitted that this figure has been important for her.

Even though she has consciously not thought of depicting extramarital relationships in a novels, she has presented this figure. Her idea is that it is not possible for women to express all facets of their identity and personality in the constricted relationships within a marriage and therefore they are able to open up with this figure who may be a friend or who may also be a lover but then there should not be any associated guilt in the mind of a woman about her.

In her later novels particularly in *Small Remedies* in *Moving On* and in a last novel *In the Country of Deceit*, we find that this motive has been presented in a very emphatic manner. We find that in Deshpande's novels all conceivable connotations of gendered identity have been presented during the childhood, during the youth as well as during the old age, what it means to have a gendered identity has been presented by Shashi Deshpande. She has also taken up the question of economic independence and she has also discussed how the status of women becomes different within the same strata, if they have economic independence. At the same time we find that she has also introduced the figure of a woman writer in most of her novels as an important sub motive.

So when we look at the role of gender as a basic component of identity formation, we find that it has played a very significant role in literary products. We have seen how it is important in a cross cultural fashion in the novels of different women writers belonging to different societies and cultures. When we would look at some of the works by the male writers, we would also understand how this motive of gender constituting a particular type of personality and identity is taken up in a different formation.

So, in this module we have discussed how ideology is important for the formation of an identity. And how identity is formed on the basis of our understandings of these core issues which have been presented in literary works. In our next modules, we would continue this discussion of what culture means in the context of literature and also in the context of media, thank you.