

# **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER ISSUES AND IDENTITY IN SELECTED NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON AND SHASHI DESHPANDE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study provides a broad perspective on literature, portraying a vision of the cultural universe. It highlights key feminist elements, tracing the evolution of feminism from power and politics to an appreciation of cultural diversity. In recent times, feminism often referred to as womanism has been a significant effort to address identity issues and find solutions to gender-related challenges. Shashi Deshpande explores the journey of self-awareness within the female psyche, while Toni Morrison, as an ethnic cultural feminist, celebrates the resilience of Black women in the face of racism, sexism, and classism. This study aims to analyze the fundamental relationships between men and women, parents and children, and examine how external circumstances influence these connections. Additionally, it sheds light on economic struggles, political tensions, and shifting societal values, emphasizing how gender-based power imbalances impact culture. Through feminist criticism, the research aspires to promote gender equality. Feminism has always emphasized the independence of the mind, spirit, and body. This study, based on selected works of Shashi Deshpande and Toni Morrison, delves into the complexities of male-female relationships, particularly within marriage, and the psychological turmoil experienced during adolescence. It also examines how both authors effectively portray the frustrations and disappointments women face in their marital lives. Ultimately, the study suggests that men and women must collaborate to foster a more mature and equitable gender dynamic.

**Key words:** Women struggle, assignment, Self-identity, confidence, relationships, freedom of women, Social Identity, Gender issues

## **INTRODUCTION**

A significant contribution to fiction in English is said to have issued from the hands of women writers who wrote what they experienced. They basically dealt with female subjectivity, domestic space and personal suffering. They did significantly succeed in experimenting with various different things at time, making them all stand out in all respects, thanks to their skill of storytelling and expressing the modern and traditional linkages in the best possible way. Their fiction can be the expression of a different way of looking at the world. Though several distinguished personalities have made efforts for years to bring literature to its

present status, today, women's writing is considered as a dominant and influential medium of modernism. The fiction of novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Toni Morrison has been widely noticed and acclaimed. Both the novelist attempts to portray feminine reasonableness. They fight for equality in women's rights on a broad and political scale. They emphasize the importance of the general public's perception of women. Shashi Deshpande's novel arrangements are based on the theme of a female identity's journey. The Indian lady has, for a considerable length of time, been a quiet sufferer. While she has assumed diverse jobs as a spouse, mother, sister and little girl, she has never possessed the capacity to guarantee her very own independence. She manages the internal universe of the Indian women in her novels. She depicts her heroines in a practical way. Morrison's novels have been lauded by critics almost unanimously, and have been the focus of several books and articles on gender analysis, multicultural analysis, postmodern philosophy, literary theory, and cultural studies. A lot of critics praised Morrison's complex treatment of African-American identity issues in her novels, as the author was shaped by different influences as an artist who is important to investigate the aspect under examination. In this analysis we review Toni Morrison's big novels.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explores the complexities of gender issues and identity, particularly in the context of male-female relationships such as marriage and the psychological struggles of adolescence, as depicted in the selected novels of Toni Morrison and Shashi Deshpande. The works examined include Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1989), and *The Binding Vine* (2002), alongside Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1972), *Sula* (1974), and *Song of Solomon* (1974). The research employs descriptive and analytical methods, with a detailed examination of the original writings of these renowned authors. Data is gathered from various sources, including texts, books, magazines, journals, and scholarly articles. The qualitative methodology involves analyzing original texts, journals, articles, and informal interviews, while relevant documents and collected materials further support the study. The arguments in this paper are developed through a comprehensive review of critical perspectives from diverse sources. The selected novels are examined using descriptive and analytical research approaches, incorporating feminist and gender-based theories. Given that this study is a critical and qualitative exploration of Toni Morrison's and Shashi Deshpande's works, a qualitative research paradigm is applied to investigate the social, cultural, and traditional dimensions reflected in their novels.

## ROOTS AND SHADOWS

**Roots and shadows (1983)** explore rather neatly the inner struggle of Indians who are very much in contact with society, dealing with critical problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and individuality. Dealing with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom, it depicts how it brings her into confrontation with her family, with the male world and with society in general. In her feminist approach to life, Shashi Deshpande creates Indians.

An Indian comes back to her ancestral place to attend the funeral ceremony of Akka, the old, rich family tyrant. The large family is on the threshold of change, though everybody is unaware of it, and the key to the in future lies in the hands of Indian. Indu has been a determined girl who has always wanted to

be free and independent. But now she is confronted with a slew of questions that have her perplexed and befuddled. She is unsure whether she has broken the strange grip of family and tradition only to be dominated by love for her husband, which she believes, is not true love. She realized she had accepted Jayant not for love, as she had previously believed, but to demonstrate to her family that she was successful. She returns to her parents' house in search of the roots, but instead finds shadows. It becomes a time of reckoning for her. She thinks about the town life, her career, her love, the traditional concept of marriage, her own marriage based on love, etc. After illuminating interactions with the varied personalities in her family, she works out their futures and also her own future. She decides to go back to her own home.

## **SULA**

In western literature **Sula (1974)** not only signifies with addictive in nature of black women, but also gives the permanent impression of being one of the few black heroes who play the role of a pariah. This novel has been even more successful than *The Bluest Eye*. It gave public attention to Morrison. It was nominated in literature in 1975 for the **National Novel Prize**. It depicts a Black neighborhood in the hills of Medallion, Ohio, fictional area. It also tracks the role of blacks in the wider community, which paradoxically forms the foundation for adventure and revolt. It is remarkable that all its women are graded rather than exquisite ornaments. The author portrays her female protagonists in a cool, emotional or financial way.

In the book there are several significant people. It focuses on the protagonists Nel and Sula, which the viewers have seen from childhood to one's death as well as the other's old age. Sula, Hannah's mother and Eva Peace's grandmother live in a place named Bottom in Medallion City, Ohio. Pearl, Plum, and Hannah children from Eva are vital to the house of peace. In knowing their relationships, Nel, Nel's mother Helen Wright, and Nel's husband, Jude is significant figures. Shadrack, the town prophet and madman, and Ajax, Sula's lover are both significant figures.

Sula is indeed an artist since the novelist herself admits that she never found a tool and a type. Sula until this point had been playing out just masculine archetypes herself. She moves from one city to another city. She never roots and works without Eros, with just herself, when she takes Jude from Nel or places Eva in a house of rest. She has little identification with other women or with her own female selves, with the example of Nel.

## **SONG OF SOLOMON**

In **Song of Solomon's** Album, Morrison discusses a self again. The tale reveals that Morrison is leaving because the protagonist is not a woman but a new man, Milkman Gone. Milkman grew up a comfortable, isolated African American middle-class household. This tale shows that Morrison connects the concepts of recollection, the quest for personal identification, family 84, cultural relations, fellowship and preservation of family and ethnic heritage by oral remembrances and traditional folklore.

This is the tale of Milkman, his father, Macon Dead II, mother Ruth Foster Dead, the sisters of Magdala named Lena, and First Corinthians. Milkman, on the other side, is related to his father or his values, and then with his aunt and his values. It's more white than black, Macon Dead II is. He is thoroughly Eurocentric while Pilate's viewpoint and vision are Afro-centered. The quest for fulfillment is ongoing between Pilate,

Reba, Hagar, Ruth, Corinthians and Lena. But for Pilate, no other women in black American society will understand and respect her position. Pilate, on the other hand, confronts the very social order that refuses to admit it. Therefore, the existence of a matriarchal social structure thrives. Like Eva, her family is cared for and controlled as an exact matriarch.

## THAT LONG SILENCE

**That Long Silence (1988)** tells the story of Jaya, who takes on the role of a spouse and mother despite her loss, and finds herself desolate and offended. The hero understands that she has been out of line with herself and in her profession as a writer. The journey to an authentic selfhood by the hero finds an aesthetic articulation through her in subordination to the man-centric strength in the general public. Jaya is an unsuccessful writer. Her inventive desire and imaginative selfhood of the hero find a masterful articulation through her resistance to the male-centric strength in the general public. Jaya is an unsuccessful writer. Her innovative inclination and aesthetic enthusiasm free her from her confined local and societal jobs. She took steps to declare her distinction by ending that long silence on paper which she had suppressed for a longtime.

Yet, she is against the character of superwoman or glorifying them. She added to a questioner, **“My characters have their own distinct manners.”** I've heard that we should have tough female characters. Be that as it may, my writing has to do with women as they seem to be. “Deshpande's female characters have a quality of their own, and, regardless of the difficulties and threats, they remain uncrushed. Each courageous woman in her novel rejects the customs that are the remnants of the past. In their dismissal, they dispose of pointless customs like circumambulating the Tulsi plant. Both Indu (Roots and Shadows) and Saru (The Dark Holds No Terror) decline to attempt such ceremonies, which are intended to build up the life length of their spouses. She advocates that a woman isn't only an aggregate of such capacities. She must decide whether or not to live with her male partner based on her potential.

## THE BINDING VINE

**The Binding Vine** was published in India by Penguin in 1992 (republished in 1998), and nearly a decade later it is published in USA by the Feminist Press. The Binding Vine is the tale of Urmi the mother who has just lost her baby daughter. Urmi, the childhood friend and sister-in-law of Vanna, Urmi the daughter of the beautiful Inni and granddaughter of the beloved Baiajji and Urmi the one comforting light in the life of Shakutai. The narrator in The Binding Vine is the clever, sharp tongued Urmi, grieving over the death of her baby daughter.

As much as The Binding Vine is the story of Urmi, it is also the story of Mira, and of Shakutai. Mira is the binding vine between Urmi and Vanaa. Vanaa's father's first wife, she died giving birth to Kishore, Urmi's husband. Writing poetry was for Mira not only a way of finding comfort in her life but also a way of protesting against the way society works. When during the marriage, her name is changed to Nirmala, a protest arises in Mira at the loss of her identity. And then again Mira is the symbol of the relationship between daughters and mothers, all over the world. She has one question she desperately wanted to ask her mother, a question she never asked: **“Mother, why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?”**

Then we have a sub-plot in the novel. Shakutai, an attendant at a school, is raising her three children all alone. Her elder daughter Kalpana has been raped, brutally beaten up, and is lying in coma in the hospital. Shakutai is torn between her motherly feelings for Kalpana, and at the same time is afraid of the dishonor this incident would bring to the family. Once she says, 'She was a good girl; I swear to you, my Kalpana was a good girl.' At other times she talks as if the girl is to blame for what happened to her. It is her fault that she was stubborn, she was self willed, she dressed up, she painted her lips and nails and so this happened to her. Shakutai mirrors millions of women in India who are torn between genuine love for their children and at the same time are ruled by the ever present scepter of family honor.

Urmila draws society's attention to her protest, and there is less agony in attempting to change societal roles and attitudes. Urmila is seen, at the end of the novel, recollecting the bonds of love that provide the "Springs of Life" for human survival. She is not a rebel against the system because she believes that things are gradually improving though at a slow pace. For example, with just four lines of Mira's poetry, But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? Deshpande does not just open up a rich world of Indian traditions and mythology but she also shows the anguish felt by an unwilling wife who knows what the coming of the night inevitably brings for her.

## THE BLUEST EYE

**The Bluest Eye (1972)**, Morrison reveals how culture puts an unsuitable range of appearance and meaning on its members. This is her first novel, of course, that is about a black girl's longing for the bluest eyes, the symbol for her of what it means to be beautiful. The story revolves round the Pecola Breedlove, a poor family member. Pauline, Pecola's mother, works as a housewife in a beautiful house, which shows the ideal women. The wealthy blonde girl doll that lives in the lovely house is a black mammon.

The novel presents Pecola Breedlove, a black child, at the moment she begins to menstruate. She poses destructive events that take her life under control. Her father's persistent sexual abuse. For their own relationship, after their children are born, they are brutal. Cholly necessitates a family replica. He is unfaithful and sometimes drunk. He ends his life in prison after destroying the lives of his wife and offspring Sammy and Pecola.

The paperback informs that racial prejudice is poisonous to the self-image Afro-Americans. The novel claims that bigotry is toxic to African-Americans' self-image. It interprets the sensitivity of poor black girls and shows how easily they can be victims of white society. It refers to Pecola Breedlove's sad tale, which belongs to a family that is far from the everyday existence of a city. The Breed loves dislike each other. Through their own embarrassment, they think the spitefulness of the women in that family. Pauline, Pecola's mother, works as a housewife in a lovely house. She hates her home, her 68 baby, her relatives and herself. She hates her home. She doesn't like her blackness and suffering and sees herself unworthy of community. The novelist reveals what a person who is divorced from positive black values may do. Pecola needs the white attractiveness icon, the blue eyes. She undergoes that those eyes will make her perfect, perfect and majestic.

The book is a review of the varying degrees of woman's satisfaction as woman. All should also notice



the feminist seeds. The central character is Pauline. The majority of the female protagonists are at least socially less visibly weak. The novelist operates on several stages. It operates in the White Community at the first stage, embodied by the Dick-Jane family, and penetrates the lives of Black children. The level 2 symbolizes the Meatier family's lifestyles which survive the poverty and racism in Ohio. The third stage employs a distorted revision of the paragraph for the Breedlove family, who lives in a distorted world that the ruling class exploits.

## CONCLUSION

A prevalent issue in contemporary society across nations is the status and treatment of women. The marginalization of women reflects both their societal position and the challenges they face. This marginalization stems from the deeply rooted social and cultural framework of patriarchy, which reinforces gender biases and places women at a lower hierarchical level. Through an exploration of the fictional worlds of Indian writer Shashi Deshpande and African American writer Toni Morrison—specifically *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon*—this research critically examines women's marginalized identities by exposing androcentric ideologies. Both authors use their creative narratives as a medium to challenge the male-centered norms that lead women to internalize patriarchal values. Their shared concern for feminist issues and their portrayal of women's struggles make their works significant for this study. Despite differences in their cultural backgrounds, the fictional works of Deshpande and Morrison reflect common themes related to tradition, societal values, and gender roles. Middle- and lower-class societies, as depicted in their novels, are shown to reinforce patriarchal ideals. Through their female characters, both writers bring attention to the societal roles and expectations imposed on women. They critically examine the mechanisms that contribute to women's oppression, vividly portraying their suffering, isolation, subjugation, and fears. Their narratives depict the marginalization of both traditional and modern women through parallel and contrasting characters. This study aims to illuminate the various ways in which women are subordinated across different cultural and social contexts. Both Deshpande and Morrison advocate for social change, emphasizing the need to dismantle gender-based discrimination. They envision societies where equality prevails, free from gender biases. Through their characters, Deshpande and Morrison seek to reshape perceptions of women, highlighting the importance of awareness in breaking the cycle of oppression. By fostering such awareness, they contribute to the feminist goal of achieving gender equality and social transformation.

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