

# Pragmatic Analysis of Feminine Writings in the Works of Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das & Lakshmi Kannan

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## ABSTRACT

*In India, from birth a female is taught that she is inferior to her opposite sex. There is a willing submission of women to the subordination of the male. They have accepted this subjugation as a cruel truth of the society. By virtue of her tolerance, patience and the sense of servility an Indian woman maintains the harmony, order and sanctity in a family. Present research paper outlines a pragmatic analysis of some of the writings of and Lakshmi Kannan with those of Kamala das and Shashi Deshpande. The comparison has been done on topics like Gender Inequality, Culture/ Tradition, Feminism, Marital Difficulties, Loneliness and Freedom for women has been highlighted.*

*Moreover, Lakshmi kannan's works deal with a variety of themes, related mainly with women and not only focus on sufferings but convey positive messages to women's issues. The stories of Lakshmi Kannan are sharply evocative and haunting in their exploration of the lives of women in India, and Indian women living abroad. The women in these stories are unforgettable in their struggle towards self-realization, committed to a special feminine sensibility, strong-willed, pathetic and rebellious and a kind of revelation of a new and unexpected dimension of an ordinary simple reality.*

*Noticeably these three authors are feminist and their writings had somewhat similar themes / issues like Gender inequality, freedom for women, backward culture and tradition, marital discord etc. which were expressed differently.*

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## 1. Introduction

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka, India. An award winning Indian novelist, Deshpande is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Sriranga. She was born in Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. Deshpande has undertaken degrees in Economics and Law. In Mumbai, she studied journalism at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for a magazine 'Onlooker'.

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with Indian middle class women. Her novels deal with the inner world of Indian women. Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of relationship. In her novels one will find women in search of inner-self and the web of relationships around them. In her career as a writer, she has written four books for children, a number of short stories and nine novels till date. Her essays are published in a volume entitled Writing from the Margin and Other Essays.

Kamala Das, daughter of the well-known Malayalam poetess Balamani Arama, was born in Punnayurkulam in Kerala on 31 March, 1932. Her father V.M. Nair was a successful executive in an American firm in Calcutta. He later became the editor of Mathrubhumi. Kamala had her early education in St. Cecilia's School in Calcutta and later in the schools at Punnayurkulam and Trichur.

In February 1949 she got married to Madhava Das who, after his retirement as an Executive Director of the Reserve Bank of India got posted at UNO in Sri Lanka. The Das family

stayed mainly in Bombay except for brief periods in Calcutta and Delhi.

Writing both in Malayalam and English under the pen name 'Madhavikutti,' Kamala Das has published eleven books in Malayalam and was awarded the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Prize in 1967 for her collection of stories, Thanuppu (The Cold). Earlier in 1963 she was awarded the Asian Poetry Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award for Poetry in 1985.

Lakshmi Kannan is a bilingual writer who writes in English and in Tamil using the pen name Kaaveri for Tamil. She is a novelist, short story writer, poet and a translator. Lakshmi Kannan has done B.A. (Hons), M.A. and Ph.D in English and American Literature. She taught English in several universities and at IIT Delhi before she joined the Hindustan Thompson Associates as a senior writer and Language Coordinator. She stays in Delhi with her husband and two sons. She has published more than twenty works till date, which include four collections of poems in English, two collections of short stories and a novel in English and her original works in Tamil.

Moreover, Lakshmi kannan's works deal with a variety of themes, related mainly with women and not only focus on sufferings but convey positive messages to women's issues. The stories of Lakshmi Kannan are sharply evocative and haunting in their exploration of the lives of women in India, and Indian women living abroad. The women in these stories are unforgettable in their struggle towards self-realization, committed to a special feminine sensibility, strong-willed,

pathetic and rebellious and a kind of revelation of a new and unexpected dimension of an ordinary simple reality.

Noticeably these three authors are feminist and their writings had somewhat similar themes / issues like Gender inequality, freedom for women, backward culture and tradition, marital discord etc. which were expressed differently. The themes / issues taken up by these authors have been deeply elucidated below:

## 2. Objectives of research

**Following are the aims and objectives of current research study:**

- a) To comparatively study the feminist writings of *selected authors* in India.
- b) To elucidate the short story collection of *these* authors.

## 3. Research methodology

In general term research is known as search for knowledge; the main aim of any research is to generate measurable and testable data, gradually adding to the accumulation of human knowledge for welfare of human mankind in one or other way. Research Methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problem. It may be understood as the science of studying how the research is done scientifically. This present research article is based on Secondary Research Methodology with the help of three of books and stories of these selected three authors.

## 4. Findings of research

### **Gender Inequality**

Gender is a primary marker of social and economic stratification and, as a result, of exclusion. Regardless of one's socio: economic class, there are systematic gender differences in material well-being, although the degree of inequality varies across countries and over time. As a result, gender inequality is a characteristic of most societies, with males on usually better positioned in social, economic, and political hierarchies. For more than two decades, the goal of reducing gender inequality has held a prominent place in international organizations and in national strategy statements.

Shashi Deshpande occupies an important place among the contemporary women novelists who boldly expresses the problems of women and their quest for identity. Deshpande's creative talent and accomplishment have established her credential as a worthy successor and contemporary to the writers. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed by a male-dominated and tradition-bound society.

Similarly, Kamala Das, a poet of modern Indian woman's ambivalence was highly sensitive and feminine who exposed her psychic geography through her poetry in such a way that made her a controversial and unconventional poet. She raises a woman question against gender inequality through her poetry and displays her inner urge to live a life on her own terms. She seeks to establish her own individuality in such an unconventional way that leaves the whole world dumbstruck.

Women writers mainly stood against the injustice practiced by gender inequality in the society and one among those was Lakshmi Kannan. Lakshmi Kannan's works unravel the challenges present within and outside i.e. self and society. Also this work project the oppressive elements of patriarchal society and disturbing elements in terms of violence done to woman and exploitation on the marginalized lot. Any exegesis displayed by the author in her works may be viewed from the angle "collective conscious efforts". Hence her works are effective discourses aimed at personal and social revelations.

The three authors Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, and Lakshmi Kannan in their work stated on a common factor "Gender Inequality" but they were presented differently in their poems or novels which are elucidated below:

Shashi Deshpande's in her novel "A Matter of Time" which goes beyond their gender roles prescribed by the society. In this novel Deshpande subverts stereotypical conventional ideals of motherhood, femininity, and masculinity. She shows both male and female genders transcending their gender attributed traits.

Gender inequality stems from distinctions, whether empirically ashore or socially constructed. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), the protagonist Sarita's sense of reasoning and questioning develops; she feels she is unable to tolerate the preference showed towards her brother. She feels jealous of her brother when he gets all the parental care and attention. Sarita's mother, who considers girl as a liability and a boy as an asset, instills a sense of insecurity in her daughter's mind. Shashi Deshpande exposes the traditional method of preferring a boy instead of a girl. Even the mother is dejected when she begets a female child. The parents think that the boy will take care when the parents become aged whereas the girl expects dowry and leaves the parents after her marriage. In the same way, Sarita is rejected by her parents at every point. Shashi Deshpande has emerged as an eminent writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Deshpande's novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being part of them. Shashi Deshpande uses this point of view of present social reality as it is experienced by women. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives are also to present indirectly the fathers, sons and husbands the relation between men and women and between women themselves. The word which is associated with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal woman is self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. The birth of a girl is considered as an ill omen. Sarita's mother does not consider Sarita as her daughter and explains that Sarita was born amidst heavy rain.

"It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible." And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rain (DHNT, 169).

Sarita finds her mother's preference towards her brother Dhruva and an indifferent attitude towards her as humiliating because they were invalidating her survival as a human being in the family. She also remembers the sense of enthusiasm

which pervaded their house on the occasion of his naming ceremony.

They had named him Dhruva. I can even remember even now, vaguely, faintly; a state of joyous excitement that had been his naming day. The smell of flowers, the black grinding stone that I held in my hands ... these are the only tangible memories that remain. (DHNT, 168)

In the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the mother-daughter relationship is based on gender-bias and lovelessness. Sarita's mother was the dominating character. Sarita is a girl and she is dark. Her mother dislikes Sarita's first for being a girl and secondly for being of dark complexion. In Indian tradition, the dark complexioned girls are valued less at the time of her marriage. If a girl is dark the parents are expected to give more dowries.

At every given opportunity Sarita's mother snubs her. This sense of rejection by her mother fills the adolescent Sarita's mind with a feeling of hatred towards her mother. Shashi Deshpande clearly highlights the gender discrimination by parents towards their own daughters. Deshpande effectively conveys the patriarchal system in our society and parent's craving for a male child.

Kamala Das' rebellious attitude against patriarchy and male-domination is very well reflected in her poems 'Off Calcutta', 'The Old Playhouse' and in 'An Introduction' where she gives voice to a modern Indian woman's ambivalence and finds herself a mere puppet or doll dancing on others' tunes. Her candid and bold expression through her poetry is a kind of contribution in uplifting the position of Indian women in society where they can inhale a breath of freedom and live their life without any inhibition.

In her poetry, she asserts her right to obtain a distinct identity as an individual. She displays her vehement protest against the restriction that traditional society imposes on a woman. She expresses;

*"Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers."*

In a male dominated society, Kamla Das tried to assert her individuality by violating social norms. She protests against the oppression of the female class and wants to emancipate woman from their stereotype roles which they are forced to play against their wishes.

*"Then I wore a shirt and my  
Brother's trousers, Cut my hair short and ignored  
My womanliness"*

Kamala Das articulates the desolation and anguish of fellow women through her writings. Apart from this, Kamala Das' poetry enunciates agonies of women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage. She speaks about the emancipation of women in a male-dominated society and seeking to establish their identity that mark in her poems like 'A Relationship', 'Summer in Calcutta', 'Marine Drive' etc.

Lakshmi Kannan in her novels revealed that gender inequality in Indian society by presenting various pictures of families who made the women suffer in various kinds of misery. The core issue of gender identity is to rediscover new meanings of identity consistently and not just alter one kind of definition for another. Lakshmi Kannan's 'India Gate' wishes to crack down the gender inequality and hypocritical practices within the limits of a household, where the husband exposes himself as a provider, he doesn't want his wife to work outside and suffer, and how traditional families practice such good customs as respecting the elders, paying obeisance to them and serving the men and the elders first. The truth is that man has been selfish and is not self sufficient to do his own duties, wives are only unpaid servants; even if she works outside, her earnings are his; she has to struggle in both the places without help; she cannot come late; and she ought to sustain herself only with the left-over food. The institution of marriage which is a bond between a man and his wife is actually a bond between a master and his slave in our tradition.

Lakshmi Kannan's short stories make the readers become aware of the hypocrisy behind every action. In her stories nothing goes unnoticed. Every detail and every word shocks us into reality. At a time when India was awakening to the hypocrisy of traditional superstitions her stories came, offering a ready hand to enlighten the masses. They are very powerful and challenging to the readers' minds. Lakshmi Kannan endeavors to expose hypocrisy in our society, particularly with the practices of the Tamil Brahmins. The double standards that are measured out to women in terms of their upbringing in the family, in work circles, as daughters in-law, as the sick and suffering and such, are exposed.

Parijata, *India Gate* and other Stories were published in the nineties, and hence her stories reflect the travails of growing up in the society then. The restrictions that society imposed on women during that time were numerous. Kannan's protagonists are full-blown rebels in some of the stories, and rebels only to a certain extent in the others. They represent the difficulties in rebelling for their rights against the docility that is expected of them. Many of her stories are food for thought even today, for although many women may have changed their dress styles, they are still imprisoned inside their own mental cocoons.

The decades from the seventies to the nineties witnessed the rise of the new woman who instead of being in conflict with the male, learns to realize her woman power by rejecting forced lack of choice and accepting responsibility for self. The march, however, is not smooth and the short story writers have been judiciously balanced in their narratives, the lived reality of women's lives with their own doubts, beliefs and convictions.

### **Culture/ Tradition**

The female writers in their writings evince sufficient vigour and courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion and culture, but yet they refrain from taking the paths suggested by the western feminists. They rather seek to find their own paths.

Shashi Deshpande's in her works talks about family traditions and culture which force the Indian women to lead a traditional life. Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are caught in the conflict between responsibility to oneself and conformity to the traditional role of wife. The protagonists of her novels are the objects of cultural/ social oppression and they revolt against family traditions in search of freedom and quest for their selves'. She compares her protagonists to the mythical characters like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, etc.

How we see ourselves collectively or individually depend greatly on myths. They are part of the human psyche, part of our cultural histories. The myths present role models. And images that women are expected to adhere to: to be 'as pure as Sita's, 'as loyal as Draupadi', 'as beautiful as Laxmi', 'as bountiful a provider as Annapooorn's, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga- these are the ultimate role Models we cannot entirely dismiss. It seems odd that it took us women so Long to realize this truth, to understand why this is so.

In the novel *A Matter of Time*, it deals with human predicament, of three women representing three generations of the same family. Deshpande deals with a woman's psyche and the way she is made to feel an inferior being, an unwanted child, and a burden of the family. In this novel Kalyani, Sumi and Aru are portrayed as women who break tradition norms, by which women are trapped, between traditional and modernity.

Kalyani gets married to Shripati. Kalyani's mother, Manorama had failed to beget a male heir to their property. She was afraid that her husband would marry for a second time. So Manorama is opposed to Kalyani marrying into a new family, as the property would then go to them. Due to this, Kalyani married Manorama's brother Shripati just to keep the property within the family. In those days, in forming relationships, importance is given to property than to feelings. This shows the important of social set up of the culture.

Being a cultured woman, Kalyani teaches her daughters the traditional norms of the society. Shripati comes back to Manorama's house when she is in death bed. Although he obliges, not even a word is exchanged between them. Kalyani sees no difference between her mother's home and husband's house as a state of silence exists between them in both the places. This incident shows the vulnerability of the male-dominated society.

Even when nothing is left of married life between a husband and a wife, women suffer in silence just to maintain peace in their married life. Sumi reflects about Kalyani in the same sense, but her kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife. (167)

Sumi, is different from Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmila, the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels. Sumi gets married to Gopal. They also enjoy a harmonious relationship during the early years of their marriage. In their union, she gives birth to three daughters- Aru, Charu and Seema. The commencement of their matrimony was filled with bliss when compared to the other protagonists of Deshpande's novels. At forty years of age, life has cornered her with various

agonies and as a consequence of this, she was left all alone and helpless with her teen aged daughters. But Sumi is emotionally strong. She brings up her daughters as they have lived before. Thus, Sumi can be characterized as a responsible mother.

With her three daughters, Sumi finds shelter in the big house, Vishwas' owned by her mother Kalyani. Sumi's life is filled with vacuum because of Gopal's desertion. She feels, "I can't find my bearings, there are no markers any more to show me which way I should go". But she does not remain a passive mother or as a sufferer, an oppressed and a wronged woman. It shows that Sumi is an example of a traditional and cultural woman than the other protagonists like Rukmani in *Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Saru in *the Dark holds no Terror*.

Sumi wants to be self dependent and assert her identity. She looks for a permanent job with a great determination. Though her parents do not consider them as a burden, Sumi decides to move out of her parent's house into an expensive and congested apartment. This shows the strength of will in Sumi. Though she is brave and live courageously in the society, a woman gets respect only if she lives with her husband. Even today the fate of women is being measured only through their marital status. Sumi thinks about her parents, Kalyani and Shripati who lived like stranger under the same roof and had not spoken for years. Though Sumi behaves like a modern woman she follows her mother's cultural and humanistic value.

Sumi's daughter Aru rebels against her father. She approaches her father not expecting sympathy for her or for her mother. She wants to unravel the strange behaviour of her father. She asks Gopal "Why did you get married at all, why did you have children?" Aru is disappointed to see the tragedy of her grandmother and mother. Out of frustration she declares "I'm never going to get married". As a young and modern girl she conveys her opinion without considering the traditional society.

Thus, the women of Shashi Deshpande is born and brought in Indian tradition and culture. Though the protagonist is educated and influenced by western ideas, they are not at all ready to leave their roots that are in the family setup. She is a woman who is far from being short sighted. She is a woman blessed with a vision of future. In the ultimate analysis, she is a modern Indian woman who is "reformed and free". We can say that the feminist approach of Shashi Deshpande with its root in humanism is based on Indian ideology and positively constructive in the Indian social and cultural context.

Kamala Das was an original, universally acknowledged Indian poetess who is known for her blatant resistance to various cultural taboos. She has shocked Indian society by breaking traditional boundaries through her open description of women's sexuality, its needs and desires in both; her poems and her autobiography. Her poetry is intensely personal but her deep and explicit articulation of women's experience makes it universal in which countless women find solace. She is the first bold voice in Indian poetry of feminine sensibilities with intense

sensitivity and deep care for the poor, the deprived, the exploited and the neglected. Kamala Das's poetry is a revolt against the traditional patriarchal culture of India in which women are conditioned to be a 'good woman'. Kamala is apprehensive that this 'idealized image of woman' would produce docile and submissive women and jeopardize the development of humanity as it results from the slavery of women. Likewise, novels with human issues and culture related problems; Shashi Deshpande's grabs the interest of humanity. Her novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into female psyche. Deshpande's women stand at the cross-roads of traditions; they seek some change but within cultural norms. Whereas writers like Lakshmi Kannan, have taken the society as a background for their stories. The Indian society that is caught in a transitional phase is highlighted. The hold of tradition and the changes in the society leave the female characters to struggle to expose the hypocrisy that the society practices without any qualms.

Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande and Lakshmi Kannan had a variety of outlooks on tradition and culture which are highlighted in their poems or novels respectively. It has been explained below:

Kamala Das is one of the comets in the galaxy of post-independence Indian English Women Poets who shines brightly in the sky of literary world because of her open resistance to the patriarchal culture of Indian society. She was married at a very early age of fifteen to Madhava Das who was a bank officer. She was not more than 16 when she begot her first son. She had bitter memories of her early marriage. She had to

suffer a lot of hardships due to traditional and stable culture of her society which denies freedom. She was deprived of proper study, proper marriage, proper love and a respectable livelihood. In the introductory page of her autobiography, *My Story*, she claims that,

*"every middle class bed is a cross on which the woman is crucified. Man falls in lust, not love; women crush in real self-destroying love" (My Story).*

Kamala Das wants to emancipate Indian womanhood from the widely circulated myth of 'Pativarta' as she asserts, "Marriage should be a light weight contract, a promise of protection when the need arises and championship in bed and out of it" (What Women Expect Out of Marriage 20-21). She raises her voice against the inhuman torture of women in her essay *Enough of Pativarta*, and motivates women to proceed ahead with courage and confidence to face the challenges of their lives. In her own words,

"Challenges should be met with courage and confidence, not with a canine whine" (15)

To heighten the woman's predicament Lakshmi Kannan suggests that while nature registers a growth and renewal, the woman has remained static – virtually living in a limbo. The only visible growth about her is the lengthening of her shadow. Apart from suggesting the process of ageing, the "lengthening shadow" implies that her real, inner self has been arrested and the false, social image that she has acquired has assumed a larger dimension, no matter how insubstantial it may be.

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