

SHASHI DESPANDE'S TECHNIQUE AND STYLE IN ROOTS AND SHADOWS AND THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS

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ABSTRACT

The narrative technique employed by the novelist is also gaining importance, considering the gradual increase in the different methods of story telling. Plain narrative or story telling is still the most common method employed by the novelist who is omnipresent and omniscient in this type of writing. The first person narrative is usually employed by the novelist to make his story appear more realistic and more credible. While novels written in such a manner have a ring of authenticity to them, they do not enable the novelist to look deep into the minds and motives of the rest of the characters. Shashi Deshpande overcomes this problem by using a combination of the first person and third person narrative coupled with flashback devices to lend force and realism to the novel.

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is an undisputed fact that novel is the most important literary genre. It is widely accepted that "the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our time."¹ The manner in which to write a good novel, however, remains highly debatable. Many modern critics believe that in the past too much attention was paid to the story or plot overlooking psychological aspects. Some modern novelists have written novels that are experimental and far removed from the traditional story-telling methods. According to Somerset Maugham, these writers who are dubbed anti-novelists "consider the telling of a story for its own sake as a debased form of fiction."² The principal features of the anti-novelist, according to Paul Verghese, are "lack of an obvious plot; diffused episode; minimal development

of character; detailed surface analysis of objects; repetitions; experiments with vocabulary, punctuation and syntax, variations of time sequence, alternative endings and beginnings."³

A chronological analysis of Deshpande's development as a novelist requires a keen study of the narrative techniques employed by her, beginning with her first full length novel, *Roots and Shadows*. The novel essentially deals with the protagonist Indu's painful self-analysis. The author also tries to encompass several other themes in this slim novel. Apart from the obvious and central theme of Indu's relentless probing to discover herself, there is the theme of bohemianism in the person of Naren in stark contrast to the middle – class values of Indu's family. There is the theme of woman's fate in general which is brought to the reader's notice, unobtrusively, in the form of Indu's observations. There is also the theme of the old order giving way to the new—symbolised by the demolition of the old house to construct a hotel. As Shama Futehally observes: "This slender novel attempts, in a way, to encompass too many themes, and is unable to develop them beyond making reflections on each which are almost in the nature of asides."⁴ Other critics like Madhu Singh, however, are highly appreciative of her skill in interweaving myriad themes into a coherent whole. *Comparing Roots and Shadows with That Long Silence*, Madhu Singh points out that the former "is the more powerful of the two. In its succinctness lies its strength and the punch,"⁵

To capture interest of the reader, Deshpande avoids the simple technique of straightforward narration, and instead employs the flashback method. While the first chapter deals with the present, the later chapters move backwards in time, culminating in the final chapter which again ends in the present. This convoluted narration has come in for some criticism by reviewers who feel that it has only contributed to creating confusion in the minds of readers. For instance, Shama Futehally comments: "This is a device which is useful either when some element of suspense is needed, or for a novel with a non-narrative structure. For this novel chronological clarity is essential, as the reader already has to cope with an abundance of

characters and their complex interactions. The first chapter, where we are faced with all of them simultaneously, and without introduction, is rather confusing." The entire novel is written in the first person, the narrator being young woman writer who returns to her childhood home and finds herself caught in the whirlpool of family intrigues. Seen through the eyes of a young woman with liberated and progressive ideas, ordinary everyday incidents acquire new meaning and highlight the gross inequalities in society. The first person narration also allows the author to probe deep into the mind of the protagonist, exposing her fears and frustration with admirable candour, inviting the praise of reviewers like C.W. Watson, who compares Deshpande to the master story teller, Chekhov: "Other South Indian writers have been compared to Chekhov, but Shashi Deshpande in this novel at least, come closest to that writer, and the tragi-comedy of *The Cherry Orchard* is constantly recalled in the description of the crumbling house and the squabbling of the family. The writing is beautifully controlled and avoids the temptation of sentimentality which the subject might suggest and again the control reminiscent of Chekhov."⁶

The Dark Holds No Terrors is commendable for its honest portrayal of the psychological problems faced by the protagonist, Sarita, a career woman, achieves a rare level of authenticity because of the use of a double perspective—the shifting of the narrative from the first person to the third person in every alternate chapter. When asked by Lakshmi Holmstrom in an interview as to how she had hit upon this technique, Deshpande replied:

The present is in the third person and the past is in first person. I was doing it throughout in the first. But that's often a perspective I use in my short stories. I wanted to be more objective. So then I tried in the third. But it wouldn't work at all. Yet I really needed to distance myself from the narrative in the present, otherwise it was going to be far too intense. And then I read an American novel by Lisa Alther where she uses this method. And the minute I came across her novel I

*thought—let me admit it freely —Oh god, this is how I am going to do my novel.*⁷

CONCLUSION

This is how the novelist manages to tell the story objectively, and at the same time, "No summary will do justice to the intricate web the author has woven through the superimposition of the past over the present, through dreams, nightmares, flashback, introspection and simple straightforward third person narration."⁸

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