

Unravelling the Web of Desire and Death: A Tale of Psychic Tension, Revenge, Lust, and Murder in Shashi Deshpande's Novels *If I Die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead*

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Abstract

It's not surprising for societies to have problems, as humans have faced difficulties since their existence. Shashi Deshpande's novels also address several social issues, including extra-marital sex, prostitution, rape (including marital rape), and murder, shedding light on the victim's pain and the root causes and attitudes contributing to these problems. *Come Up and Be Dead* examines prostitution and highlights psychological tension, lust, and revenge as main factors. *If I Die Today* reveals that mentally unstable and perverse individuals may commit murders to conceal their crimes. *The Binding Vine* shows that male attitudes of disregarding women's identity and personality contribute to rape and societal victim-blaming. Additionally, the male usually initiates extra-marital relations, but sometimes a woman's intelligence can attract a man, as shown in Bhaskar's fascination for Urmila. Societies are not immune to problems, and humans have faced difficulties since their appearance on Earth.

If I Die Today and *Come Up and Be Dead* are two of Shashi Deshpande's novels that explore the darker aspects of human nature like themes of psychic tension, revenge, lust, lasciviousness, and murder. and the consequences of giving in to base desires and impulses. *If I Die Today* focuses on the helplessness of patients when a doctor is a psychopath and highlights the tension and fear that arises when someone in a position of power abuses it. The novel also touches upon themes of morality, justice, and the consequences of remaining silent in the face of wrongdoing. On the other hand, *Come Up and Be Dead* explores the themes of revenge and lust and portrays how human weaknesses such as lasciviousness, fear, greed, and lavishness can lead to tragic consequences.

Keeping all that in mind, the objective of this paper is to investigate the issues we come across in Shashi Deshpande's novels *If I Die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead* and try to find if the chief cause of issues lies in prevailing socio-economic conditions and can people do endeavour to change those prevailing socio-economic conditions and try eradicate these problems.

Keywords: *Psychic, Tension, Revenge, Lust, Lasciviousness, Murder and social issues.*

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is more of a humanist than feminist. But she is known as a feminist writer in the sense that her fictional work is more or less concerned with the trauma and dilemma of the middle-class educated family governed by traditional and long-established social code. It is very close to the fact that through her portrayal of a protagonist fighting oppression, she has shed light on the challenges faced by Indian women. She has sought to highlight various forms of exploitation of the Indian women in her fiction. She has attempted to expose the evils of child-marriage, matchless marriage, sati-pratha and restriction on widow-remarriage. Now feminists from all over the world are supporting women in general who are struggling for their rights. Gender politics has occupied their minds. They condemn it from every angle. When in an interview asked by Geetha Gangadharan if she would like to be called a feminist, Deshpande replies in positive saying, quote is from the Indian author and feminist, Mahasweta Devi. It appears

“She is a feminist, but did not want to be called a feminist writer. Yes, I would. I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simon de Beauvoir that the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women. I think that is my idea of feminism. My objection was to being called a feminist writer. Yes, I am very much against such categorization. It is just good writing and bad writing and not men's writing women's writing..when you deal with just my work then take me as an individual writer and deal accordingly. Don't call it women's writing or feminist writing. Today we have women writing about women, for women. These works are being published by women, criticized by women, read by women and studied in the Women's Studies Departments

and so on. I hate this women's lib separating women's writing. It is just self-defeating.” (P. 254-255) [1].

Shashi Deshpande, the second daughter of the famous Sanskrit Scholar Adya Rangacharya, who was also known as Sri Ranga, inherited certain admirable qualities from her father despite his emotional distance from his children. Her father's influence helped shape her into an intellectually curious individual who pursued degrees in Economics, Law, and English, as well as a diploma in Journalism from various universities. Her passion for reading led her to become a journalist, and eventually, a prolific writer of articles, short stories, and novels. Shashi Deshpande drew inspiration from both native and foreign writers during her studies, which helped shape her writing style. She has authored nine novels, several collections of short stories, and four children's books to date.

The thematic patterns and technical aspects of Deshpande's fiction make her a distinguished writer. Her themes comprise socio-cultural and economic aspects of middle-class, educated Indian society. Her feminism is based on and guided by humanism. She writes with a view to attaining domestic, familial and social harmony. She believes in careful craftsmanship. She prefers the use of English as medium of expression. The role of memory and experiences interwoven artistically in her fictional works add to her lasting appeal and enduring popularity. She is today one of the major novelists of the world.

Psychic tension, revenge and murder in *If I Die Today*

Published by Vikas in 1980, *If I Die Today* is a fictional novella by Shashi Deshpande that explores the theme of death. This captivating novel, featuring the character Mriga and other characters, provides a glimpse into the issues prevalent in a patriarchal society. The book is not a perfect detective thriller, but rather a

poignant and insightful portrayal of the effects of murder on a community. Indeed, *If I Die Today* is a remarkable work of fiction that offers a thought-provoking reflection on the nature of death and its impact on society.

Despite appearing to be a campus novel, the story is an incisive and compelling detective thriller that portrays the impact of murder on a community. The setting of the novel is the S.D.M. College and Hospital, established by the present Sethji and his father with a vision to make it "the best in the country". The campus of the college has been known as the place of murders in the sense that most of the serious patients have met their death for one or other reason. Murders too have been attempted.

The story of the novel opens with the admission of Guruji, a patient of cancer, to the hospital. He has risen above all human weaknesses and even the eternal human fear of death. Guruji, a cousin of Dr Ashok's, accepts his impending death. Accordingly, his behaviour, attitude to life and gestures are interpreted in different ways by different persons. To Ashok's wife Meera, he is "a rather peculiar man... a sadhu... or sanyasi or something... not really, but like that" (p. 5.) Also "a brave man... "a saint ready " to give himself" (p. 9). To Manju the narrator, he is all of a piece with no false facade (p. 83). To Cynthia, "a saint..a black mailer" (p. 68). "Either a malicious man or a silly fool (p. 101).

The passing of Prabhakar Tambe, "a prominent figure among the workers of Sethji's Mills" (p. 103)., has already caused unrest on the college campus." But after the arrival of Guruji, his disturbing and dangerous presence makes the matters still worse. Since he is a man different from all around him, he finds himself to be a spectator. It is again a peculiar thing to note that the mystery of the death of Tambe becomes a matter of whispers, doubts and conjectures. Even the women-folk of the hospital employees are found discussing this and such other cases of deaths and murders. Rani, the Dean's wife, Manju, Mriga, Dr. Kulkarni's hyper-sensitive

daughter and Dr. Vidya discuss these cases among them.

Overall, *If I Die Today* is a marvellous work that showcases the author's ability to create a compelling story that sheds light on important social issues.

The novel seeks to explore the diminishing influence of psychic fear on the human mind. The main theme of the novel is concerned with Manju, the protagonist who at a later stage gets relief from her tension, and her problem is resolved. Evidently the novel is set against the background of a small community of doctors and their families living in the college campus. At the campus they are leading happy and peaceful life. It is a co- incidence that with the arrival of Guru, a cousin of Dr. Ashok, that peaceful atmosphere is disturbed. After the death of Guru, a sense of unknown fear prevails upon the minds of the campus residents.

Manju, the narrator protagonist in the novel, is stunned to find that her husband Vijay, is doubted to be one of the suspects involved in the death case of the patient. She herself feels shattered and grief-stricken. The murder of Guru is followed by other two deaths in the hospital campus where she lives. The deaths and murders create an atmosphere of fear and distrust but Vijay reveals nothing to her. Unable to bear his silence, she urges him to communicate with her but in vain. Manju feels alienated on the other hand Vijay too realizes that she married him against her wishes. That is why a sense of distrust prevails between the two. However, when Manju tries her best to convince him with all sincerity asserting that she loves him truly, Vijay seems convinced with her confession. Now both of them begin to trust each other. The happiness and peace of the family is restored. This puts an end to Manju's sense of alienation from her husband. A sense of compromise and reconciliation regains their faith and loyalty to each other.

Thus in *If I Die Today*, the narrator Manju differs from the typical Indian woman who values marriage and motherhood above all else. She sees motherhood as a trap that limits her independence and bears a grudge her kids are a big obstacle in her freedom. Manju wants her daughter to be independent and fearless, not displaying typical female characteristics like fear or cowardice. Shashi Deshpande successfully portrays Dr. Vidya as an exceptionally courageous woman who proves that women can be more ferocious than men when determined. The novel's portrayal of women is outstanding and memorable.

Y.S. Sunita Reddy has aptly said, "Deshpande tries to unmask the outwardly sophisticated and well-educated person's yearning for a son. Deshpande also lays bare the feeble male ego which cannot tolerate the idea of female superiority."

Lasciviousness, fear, greed and lavishness in *Come Up and Be Dead*

In Shashi Deshpande's novel *Come Up and Be Dead*, the themes of lasciviousness, fear, greed, and lavishness play a significant role. The story revolves around the murder of a young woman, which is motivated by the murderer's desire for revenge and lust. The characters' weaknesses, such as their lasciviousness, fear, and greed, contribute to the tragedy that unfolds. For example, the protagonist's sister falls into the murderer's trap due to her lasciviousness, while other characters spend lavishly to maintain a high standard of living and fall into the trap of criminals due to their constant need for money. The novel portrays how these human weaknesses can lead to dire consequences and emphasizes the importance of overcoming them to prevent tragedies.

Come Up and Be Dead (1993) is also a detective novel. The theme of the novel *Come up and Be Dead*, (1983) revolves round Kshama, the protagonist, who happens to be the head mistress of a renowned girls' public

school. She is a dynamic lady with progressive views. She aspires to give a new and modern look to the school. She also desires to make the school a unique institution in which there is a feel of freedom, frankness and openness. In her attempts she succeeds to a great extent but amidst severe opposition at every step from among her colleagues. To add fuel to fire, a 10th class girl named Mridula commits suicide which creates a havoc in the school and proves a great shock to Kshama's efforts. The hostile atmosphere of the school questions her existence as a head mistress. Her job is at the stake.

Accustomed to hardships and difficulties followed by success and achievement in life, Kshama does not yield to the hostile circumstances. She realizes that the things are not really as what they seem to be. She faces the situation boldly and courageously thinking that she has always emerged stronger through adversities whenever they challenged her. Another sufferer, Jyoti Raman, who is a teacher in her school, becomes a source of inspiration to her. However, Jyoti feels shattered by her husband's insensitiveness and indifference. She holds the view that one should face failures and difficulties with the support of one's own moral and emotional strength. She overcomes her predicament and her relations with her husband are restored. Kshama takes a lesson from the life of Jyoti. Then both of them are offered relief from the psychic tensions, resulting into success, happiness and joy.

The novel abounding in the evil of revengefulness, lasciviousness and proneness to commit murders, conveys the message of keeping hope amidst despair. Whereas revengefulness is represented in Varma, lasciviousness in Sanjay, Sharmila, Mridula, and proneness to commit murders in Sanjay, Girish and Mridula. Readers can perceive the central theme of this novel from the following lines:

“What is noticeable in this regard is that he (varma) occupies a respectable possession in society, as he is a member of the Board of the Governors and also tries to continue to be respectable. He silences the people, who come to know of his diabolical activities, either by bribing them or by getting them killed.” [4]

Most of the characters of the novel, are either school girls, school authorities or boyfriends. They seem to be involved in lustful activities which lead them to their decay, death or suicide. Lust, revenge and murder are the outcome of the sex scandals. In the novel this is the evil that makes its appearance in horrible forms.

Varma is a supplier of school girls to serve as call girls. He is not an ordinarily revengeful man. He treats the whole female sex as his enemy. The conversation between Girish and Devyani affords evidence to his nature:

“Strange, isn't it, that a man who has so much money should make himself vulnerable by going in for a thing like this? when I went to him I knew at once that he enjoyed this trade in girls. It was not just the money for him. Some sort of a kink, I suppose.” [5]

'Mridula becomes pregnant even though she unmarried', (p.9). Sharmila is 'totally under Sanjay's influences (p.251). The Strangers come to the hotel 'Open Sesame' to have a call girl (p.251). In the words of Girish 'they must have got the girl drunk. I suppose, for the next thing she (Mridula) remembered was that she was alone in that room with the strange man' (p.251). For Mridula, to have boyfriends and lovers is to be modern. [6]

According to Sonali : “You don't think, do you, that Mridula just got into trouble like that? Oh, she was a crazy girl, all right. She was dying to get into the mod crowd and have boyfriends and go running all over town, doing nothing but being silly. She used to flatter Bunny like mad. And Bunny use to ignore her. One day Bunny invited her home and Mridu was so thrilled like

as if Indira Gandhi had invited her or the Queen of England.” [7]

The outcome of the involvement in the lustful acts is murder. In the novel out of the six attempts to murder three are successful, on the lives of Pratap Rao, Mridula, and Jyoti Raman. Commenting on the murder of Pratap and Jyoti, Girish says.

“The boy Sanjay came to me that night. He told me Pratap had seen the girls, Sharmila and two others, in the hotel. He had followed them to a room and confronted the girl Sharmila with his accusations. And so Pratap had to be got rid of “ [8]

Through various episodes Deshpande conveys the message that evil should be punished. Even suicide is a punishment to the person who commits it, this is punishing the inward evil. What the inspector says regarding suicide is correct:

“I believe in the theory of evil. Just simple evil that drives men and women to deeds that seem incomprehensible to other. And yet, the truth is that all of us carry this, potentiality for evil within us. We have to struggle against it all our lives. Some prefer not to struggle. that's all.” [9]

On the whole the *Come Up and Be Dead* shows the human weaknesses that contribute to the disaster to a large extent and depicts characters involved in lustful activities leading to their decay, death, or suicide. Murder is the outcome of the sex scandals, and the novel suggests that evil should be punished. The author's view is seen as partial and conservative, as the problem of prostitution is isolated from socio-economic roots and blamed on inherent human potentiality.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande's novels, *If I Die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead*, explore the darker aspects of human nature and the consequences of giving in to base desires and impulses. In *If*

If I Die Today the story highlights the helplessness of patients when a doctor is a psychopath and portrays the tension and fear that arises when someone in a position of power abuses it. On the other hand, *Come Up and Be Dead* focuses on the themes of revenge and lust and portrays how human weaknesses such as lasciviousness, fear, greed, and lavishness can lead to tragic consequences. To prevent such tragedies, young women must overcome these weaknesses.

Both novels emphasize the importance of overcoming these human weaknesses and working towards a better society. Deshpande's writing delves into the complexities of human nature, the societal issues that plague us, and the need for empathy and understanding. Through her storytelling, she encourages readers to question their own motivations and actions and strive towards personal growth and social change. Overall, these novels offer insightful commentary on the human condition and the importance of personal responsibility and compassion towards others.

Here Shashi Deshpande seems to accept what our Upanishads teach us. Even the advice given to Arjun by Lord Krishna to try to restrain his mind from the evil also stands the test in the novel. It implies that the good should be rewarded and the evil be punished and moreover, suicide is also a form of self-punishment.

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