Self-realization: a necessity in the patriarchal society for female protagonists of Margaret Laurence and Shashi Deshpande

Ms. DIPIKA RANI
Associate Professor, Department of English
Government P.G. College, HISAR, Haryana

Abstract
Writing is a gendered activity: it bears the insignia of the writer’s ‘gender’ and its appraisal is also gender-centric. Many a woman writer has been shrouded in silence due to literary misogyny. To avert social censure some of the early women writers adopted a male pseudonym and a male narrative voice. Writing is regarded as a male prerogative. It is wielded as a powerful tool in preserving patriarchy. Hence women are denied access to writing, and many an Eve who has attempted to pluck the forbidden fruit of writing leads an accursed life. The blight cast by the frosty patriarchal atmosphere on the burgeoning of female creativity and the struggle of women writers for their blossoming have become matters of serious concern for feminists. The exclusion, marginalization and trivialization women writers have to endure are voiced in many articles, interviews and fiction. With the emergence of Feminism in the twentieth century the number of women writers rose steeply and steadily, effecting a sea change in the literary scenario. Using their captors’ double-edged weapon – language with its defensive and subversive properties –women writers forge ahead, and give visibility and validity to their existence.

Key Words: female protagonists, femininity, patriarchal society, relationship

Introduction
A woman writer problematizes her relationship to art in her writing. In other words, the conflicts a woman-as writer faces in relation to her art are consequent upon the conflicts she faces in her personal life as a woman. To be precise, the hindrances to the ‘becoming’ of a woman are but the hindrances to her ‘being’ as well. The study entitled “Self-realization: a necessity in the patriarchal society for female protagonists of Margaret Laurence and Shashi Deshpande” attempts to examine how Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence problematize their relationship to art. The study primarily focuses on the presentation of the
writer-characters in the select novels of these writers.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century Shashi Deshpande has become an undeniable presence among Indian English writers. Starting her career with children’s stories and short stories she majored into novels of serious import with *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. Other novels credited to her name are *If I Die Today, Come Up and Be Dead, Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence, The Binding Vine, A Matter of Time, Small Remedies, Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit*. In six of these novels she depicts a writer-character. Through these writer characters she presents the problematized relationship of an artist to her art. Her middle-aged writer-characters realise that deconstruction of the ‘woman’ is crucial to the removal of the impasse in their career.

Margaret Laurence, a leading Canadian woman voice, along with her contemporary women voices around the globe espouses the cause of women in her novels. Among the New Literatures in English, Canadian fiction has produced more women writers taking up in their novels contemporary women issues affecting the world and society. For them women’s freedom is indeed through an awareness and struggle for equality leading to selfrealization, well-being, and coming to terms with themselves and the world. In her novel, *A Jest of God*, Laurence projects Rachel Cameron struggling to come to terms with herself and the world, finally finding meaning in life in this world. Discussion Laurence’s *A Jest of God*.

Winner of several awards and honours, the Canadian writer, Margaret Laurence has to her credit several collections of short stories, essays, memoirs and novels. This writer from the small prairie town Neepawa of Manitoba province creates a similar place called Manawaka for her five-series novel — *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974). Apart from influencing a whole generation of writers, Laurence has given women a distinctive voice. She has created a strong breed of women characters that possess a keen sense of self or battle hard to find it. Morag Gunn, the writer protagonist of *The Diviners* redeems her creative powers from the stranglehold of marital ties. She snaps off her relationship with Brooke Skelton, the University Professor and forgoes the much-desired-dignified social status it entails.
Stifling of female creativity is apparently not only a means but an end in itself. So women fight those forces that curb creativity and thwart self-actualization. As a corollary, the topic of women’s problematized relationship to art often interposes in their writing.

This study on Deshpande and Laurence brings to fore the conspicuous connection between the constraints on self-actualisation and women writers’ restrained personal life. An examination of the patriarchal tentacles stretching out to strangle their creative powers exposes the politics of creativity operative in the phallocratic world. By reclaiming their sexed bodies from which they have been alienated they (w)rite back at the phallologos. The writer-characters mirror the life and crisis of the authors as they voyage in search of selfhood. The portrayal of women writers as characters becomes an appropriate medium for female authors to encode their troubled relationship to art.

Deshpande makes a point that economic deprivation and physical torture are the instruments used to curb the spontaneous growth of a woman. Like Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, this novel deals with the difficulties of women in general and woman writers in particular. Roots and Shadows comes out with its feminist approach in Indu's exploration into herself. It also moves beyond feminist boundaries into a realization of the predicament of Human existence. Indu traverses the rood of self-realization in her destination is the point of comprehension of the ministry of human life. The struggle of such women gives shape and meaning to their individual existence in a sexist society. The protagonist Indu is an educated and working woman. She is shocked to find that women prefer to mould their daughters into better women and not better human beings with the identity. Indus finds that the names of women are not mentioned on the family tree. Come Up and Be Dead – Kshama is not allowed to perform her father's last rites. The burden of social expectation force women to remain silent. Silence and compromise are often a key to a happy marriage.

The Binding Vine – Urmila is morbidly preoccupied with the problems of death and rape. She is a typical feminine voice who struggles through the gloom of her existence. No subduing but revolting, trying to sort out things for herself. In her we hear the conscious raging voice of the determined self affirming itself. 'I am not going to break'. Urmila fights
for other, a symbol of sacrificing Hindu womanhood. The hope of Indian woman lies in the fact that in spite of meek acceptance of the situation we have self sacrificing woman like Urmila. A Matter of Time – It reveals around an urban middle class family of goal. It begins with the crisis leading to an intense introspection by the protagonist. The novelist is deeply concerned as usual with the traumas suffered by woman in a middle class family, in India. Thus, A Matter of Time gives an honest account of the abrupt disintegration of Gopal's happy family and the diverse reaction of all the people concerned. It deals with a man's middle life leading to his desire for renunciation without any warning. Gopal one day announces to his wife that he is leaving the house for food. Sumi, his wife of 20 years and their teenaged daughters Anu, Charu and Seema are caught totally unawares. Sumi retreats into a shocked silence while 18 years old Aru cries bitterly to search for her one reason for this calamity. Small Remedies – It is a saga of women emancipation the novel is about the 'making of a writer, singer and a social worker'. Here the novelist envisages a hopeful future for women in their shared experienced as women and the imaginative continuum. The women of Shashi Deshpande are conscious of retaining family ties. They are entangled in the complexities of their life, and face identity crisis. But their relationship with their husbands and family is valuable to them instead of rejecting these tie, they want to redefine on an equal footing. We suggest that a conductive social environment should be created so the women can develop their potential fully and men also can learn to avoid capricious imperialism

Female anatomy has been skilfully wielded to prevent women from transcending the domestic roles. The realisation that ‘femininity’ is seductive — letting the values of the oppressive system reside in women’s minds, breeding low self-esteem and infusing humiliation of sexual objectification — accounts for the troubled relationship between the female artist and her creativity.

With the surge of feminism the concept of ‘gender’ got exploded. Women writers of this period regarded it their duty to raise consciousness: that gender can be deconstructed. They also questioned the binary slotting of women.

It is also apparent that women have explored and exploited the genre ‘novel’ and all its variant forms such as realistic novels, gothic novels, fantasy, science fiction, utopian
novels, etc., as a part of the quest for ‘something new’. They expanded the frontiers of the novel to include the whole gamut of women’s experience: the small trivia of their daily life, human relationships of all kinds, female bodily functions, etc.

Laurence and Deshpande are divided by temporal, spatial, cultural factors. However, feminism beats as a slow and steady pulse throughout their works. Both are concerned with the lives of women, their liberty and freedom, their space for growth and expression. While Deshpande’s heroines succeed to rehabilitate themselves within the fold of the family set up, Laurence’s break out of the conventional set up.

The stone angel (1964) is a compelling journey seen through the eyes of a woman nearing the end of her life. Since her childhood, as the daughter of a respected merchant to her disruptive marriage, Hagar has fought a long battle for independence and respect. In the course of examining and trying to understand the shape her life has taken between her divided feelings about her husband and her passionate attachment to one son and neglect of another. So, she is sometimes regretful but rarely remorseful. Asking forgiveness from neither God nor those around her, she must still wrestle with her own nature. In the first reading, the novel appears to be a story of an old woman consumed with pride. Margaret Laurence cites patriarchal society as a kind.

Hagar defines herself as her father’s daughter, raised in a tradition of patriarchal values. In order to resist the threat of death from which the image of her mother implies for her. As a result she dwells on the notion of the self made man as embodied by her father. As a self made person her father can deny his dependence on natural forces such as death. By adopting her father’s stern principles, Hagar attempts to become a “self made woman” independent of external forces. In The Stone Angel male identity is synonymous with strength whereas female identity embodies weakness. Since Hagar defines herself as strong and independent, the gap between her own idea of herself and her female role seems to be unfeasible. Her difficulty in finding a fully-fledged identity originates in a manifest imbalance between traditionally male and female. This fact reveals that the gender socialization she had gone through as a young girl. She was brought up with her two brothers. Her father was very proud of his daughter. Once Hagar overheard her father talking about her to Aunt Doll: “smart as a whip, she is, that one if only she’d been” (3). Obviously,
Margaret Laurence tries to focus on gender discrimination prevailing in the society.

The term ‘woman writer’ implies that the ‘gender’ of the writer is foregrounded. It goes without saying that when the tag ‘woman’ is attached to something it gets down-sized and assumes a pejorative connotation. This means that ‘sexual politics’ comes to the fore when women writers stake out a claim in the world of letters. The patriarchal intervention hampers the free expression of Deshpande and Laurence’s writer-characters.

A study of Mira, the budding poet in The Binding Vine is a prime example for the politics of creativity. Exclusion from the world of letters is perhaps, the most serious injustice women had to set aright. Women are pinned down as inferior creations on the ground that they are primarily ‘two legged-wombs’. The stamp of triviality is slammed on women’s writing. This explicates the exclusion of women’s works from canonical literature. Jaya in That Long Silence and Indu in Roots and Shadows have the experience of being cold shouldered by man-oriented publishing world. Brooke Skelton often greets Morag, despite her dislike, ‘my little one’, ‘my child’ and criticises her writing as sentimental.

Family evidently stands foremost among the regimes of censorship on women’s writing. In That Long Silence Mohan wants his wife Jaya to guard the honour of the family, and maintain the divide between the public and the private. Consequently she refrains herself from writing on man-woman relationship. In The Diviners Morag suffers role conflict. Her husband expects that she will always prioritise wifely duties over her career.

Women are the possession of man: sex, sexuality and fertility are all male prerogative. In essence, male control of women’s bodies is the cornerstone of patriarchy. Reclamation of the female body, therefore, is inevitable. It is apparent that the social construction of women’s bodies is a political process. The ideals of modesty and chastity are imposed on women to pinion them down to subservient roles of wifehood. The modern woman in quest of self-identity ‘outsteps’ the boundaries set for her by flouting the rules of chastity, and demystifying marriage and motherhood.

Through their representational characters Deshpande and Laurence reclaim female
subjecthood, and register their resistance by ‘writing the female body’ from which women are alienated. They challenge the cultural story about female sexuality by describing the conflict women experience between the feelings of their bodies and the cultural taboos on their desires.

When Laurence’s heroine, Morag realises that the procreative rights of women appertain to the male domain, she does not hesitate to wrest her rights over her body. Thus having a child, like her writing, is an act she undertakes on her own, without Skelton’s help or his approval. Rape is unquestionably a gendered crime, perhaps, the most atrocious cruelty inflicted on a woman. Deshpande’s novel *The Binding Vine* deals with rape and its ramifications inside and outside the fold of marriage. In the case of marital rape it is deemed that the husband is only exercising his authorial power, received through the transfer of the rights of possession. Rape outside the fold of marriage is treated as a sort of property damage. Deshpande opines that for women to ‘speak’ of rape is itself a measure of liberation. There is a shift in woman’s position: from serving as the object of voyeuristic discourse to the occupation of a subject-position, ‘master’ of narrative.

Interviews, self-authored articles, memoirs, etc., reveal an identical journey of growth, crisis and self-realisation of the writer-characters and the authors. The author’s handling of the troubled phase in the protagonist’s life is an important index of her own feminist awareness. The stages of self-crisis, self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-actualisation that Deshpande passes through in her career as a writer can be traced in the lives of Indu, Jaya, Mira, Sumi, Madhu, Vasu and Jiji as they regain their ‘face’ and ‘voice’ from the state of ‘anonymity’. Undoubtedly, Laurence and her writer-character Morag Gunn converge on many points, and she admits that *The Diviners* is her spiritual autobiography.

**Conclusion**
Thus the writer-protagonist becomes a mirror for the author, to examine, realise and revalidate herself. Thus, through these seemingly autobiographical novels Deshpande and Laurence discuss the various aspects of marginalisation and exclusion women writers face.

**References**
Analysis of Gender Construction in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande –Chandeshwar Yadav Ph.D. Thesis 223