

## **IMAGE OF WOMEN IN INDIA POST COLONISATION : REFLECTIONS IN THE POETRY OF GAURI DESHPANDE**

Agnes Nirmala, J. and Veena Selvam

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This paper is an analysis of the poetry of Gauri Deshpande which experiments with the image of Indian women soon after the British period, through several works of her poetry in which she has questioned hypocritical societal mores, much to the embarrassment of the male establishment of that time. Image of women represented is a holistic image of all women in India irrespective of caste, creed or religion in the post-colonial period. The experimentation has the background of gender inequities, prevalent, both in domestic and social life and culminates in the dominant need for emancipation from the bonds of patriarchy. It moves towards the distinctive search of an authentic self-identity of Indian women, who is liberated and respected both as human-being and male counterpart as reflected in her poetry. Gauri Deshpande, whose works include poetry, essays and short stories in Marathi and English has published extensively in both languages. In all her poems, she constantly makes attempts to redefine social ethics and voices the need for emancipation of women from gender inequities prevailing both in domestic and social life. The poetess envisions an authentic self-identity for women which shall be respected and considered on par with that of men.

**Keywords:** Emancipation, Gauri Deshpande, Indian Literature, Post-colonial feminist theory, Post-Independence poetry

### **1. Introduction**

The objective of the study is to analyze how the image of women in literature reflects or rejects the social forces that have historically kept women from achieving total equality. The analysis proceeds from presenting the conceived image of women by society in India and culminates in the transformed image from oppression to emancipation, as desired by the poet through self-realization. It reveals certain problems concerned with complex relationships between men and women in family and in public. Her personal space is denied in family, workplace, education and economy. The question of identity and dignity is raised. To analyze in a systematic way, the misconceptions of women in society by and large, and to probe the true understanding of the real nature of women, as conveyed in her poetry, post-colonial feminist approach has been used which creates the scope for a deeper and richer analysis. This paper throws light on the fact that there was a remarkable shift from a voice of complaint against alienation and oppression, to the voice demanding liberation in her poetry, representing Indian women with patriarchy as the background.

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*Address for communication:* **Agnes Nirmala, J.**, PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, CEG, Anna University, Chennai, India and **Dr. Veena Selvam**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, CEG, Anna University, Chennai, India.

## 2. Post-Colonial Feminism

In the mid-1800s the term 'feminism' was used to refer to the "qualities of females". Since the First International Women's Conference, Paris held in 1892 the term was used for an advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. "First Wave" started from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with the struggle to achieve basic political rights and the "Second Wave" started in late 1960's and early 1970's to fight for greater equality across the board ,e.g. in education, the workplace ,and at home. The "Third Wave emphasized "identity" as a site of gender struggle.

Post- colonial Feminism also known as 'Third World Feminism' emerged in 1940's and 50's after the formation of UN. It discusses experiences of colonialism like slavery, oppression, gender, difference, representation and resistance. In 1980's feminist critics such as Sara Suleri and Chandra Mohanty sensed the urgent need for a more wider concentration and appreciation of this theory .Chandra Mohanty, a principal theorist within the movement, addresses this issue in her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes." and from then on, postcolonial theory is applied to examine how women are represented in post-colonial literature and challenges the assumptions made about them in both literature and society. Postcolonial feminism attempts to account for perceived weaknesses within both postcolonial theory and within Western feminism. It states that colonialism and patriarchy are closely entwined historically and how patriarchy continues to oppress women, even after the end of colonial rule by British. Post colonialism implies the fact that even after the colonizer has left India, the oppression of women by men still continues. It is used to prove that patriarchy is not just the ascendancy of the father, but, also the male hegemony, which restricts the necessary freedom of women. "Patriarchy is not just the ascendancy of the father in a family; it rather encompasses all the symbols of the imposed tradition, culture and power, which affects both men and women equally. (Singh 2008, 77).

It analyses colonial relationships, which sees women as secondary and argues that, the end to formal empire has not meant an end to oppression of women in the former colonies and seeks to justify the deconstruction of power relationship between men and women which paves way for crimes perpetuated on women, as seen in the poetry of the poet selected. It is used to prove that patriarchy is not just the ascendancy of the father, but, also the male hegemony, which restricts the necessary freedom of women. themes deals with Family Violence, Sexual Violence, Child Brides and Child mothers which highlights gender differences and subjugation of women and finally revolts against the patriarchal ideologies. Postcolonial feminism analyses the parallels between the decolonized nations and the status of women in a patriarchal society from the perspective of a socially oppressed people influenced by their dominant power.

### 3. Post-Independence Poetry

Much of Post-Independence poetry in English was an exploration of a new identity for modern India.

The IE [Indian English] debate is not just about a literature or a language but about the very identity of modern India. It is a debate about who we were, who we are, and who we want to be...as it was conceived and constructed by the imperial British, as it was contested and counter-constructed by the nationalists, as it was modified and deconstructed by the generations born after independence—this whole evolving and fluid process of nation building and culture formation is implicated in this debate ( Paranjape, 1998).

The identity is incomplete and anti-national if it does not include the women of India in its truest sense, with their identity as a separate, unique entity in the patriarchal society, with all the essential requirements such as freedom and due respect.

#### 3.1. *Women in Post-Independence Poetry*

The task of constructing a new image of Indian woman from the subordinated to the emancipated was in the hands of the women writers of the post-independence era, and this task has been carried out successfully and effectively by notable women poets including Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Suniti Namjoshi and Lakshmi Kannan. While Kamala Das exposed the problems of Nair community women, Eunice threw light on those of the Goan-Catholic community, Gauri of Maharashtra women, Suniti of the expatriates, and Lakshmi of her Tamil community. Though these women writers came from different cultures and backgrounds, their concerns and experiences were similar with regard to issues such as female infanticide, child and adolescent marriage, sexual and domestic violence, mental and emotional abuse women face throughout their life. Their poetry undeniably explored their collective consciousness and shared experiences to transcend the barriers and limited boundaries that fetter women even after independence.

Many women poets, including Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Monika Varma, Lila Rai, Margaret Chatterji, Suniti Namjoshi, Lakshmi Kannan and Eunice de Souza, have made significant contributions to post-independence poetry. Gauri Deshpande, who hails from a family of social reformers and intellectuals, is well known as a feminist confessional poet. In spite of her high caste status and eminent heritage, her writings revolved around challenging social and gender norms that fettered women. Dr. Gaurishankar Jha remarks, “Confessional poetry is the outpouring of human emotions which was hitherto considered objectionable acquired new dignity. In their own individual manner, poets express their feeling or failure of guilt, disappointment, incestuous desires and experience, defying all taboos.” (Rukhaiyar, 2002, 245).

The women poets, in constructing the image of Indian woman, drew heavily from their own personal experiences. Singh (2008, 106) acknowledges this truth: “the female poets are subjective and articulate their felt-experience, boredom, monotony, and fatigue of domestic chores and agony of dissatisfaction in marriage are inter milieu in women’s poetry.”

#### 4. Poetry of Gauri Deshpande

Gauri Deshpande was born in 1942 and pursued her studies in Pune. After completing her PhD in English, she taught in Fergusson College and in the University of Pune. She also worked as a sub-editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and later as an assistant to the editor of *Opinion*. Gauri’s mother was the famed anthropologist Iravati Karve, whose interpretations of the Mahabharata opened up a new way of studying its women characters. Her grandfather Maharshi Karve spearheaded reforms for education to girls and remarriage for widows, and her uncle Raghunath Karve was an early proponent of family planning.

Everyday incidents that Gauri Deshpande witnessed around her triggered her intolerant outburst against the subjugation of women and her outpouring of humane feelings and feminist ideas. These evoked strong emotional responses in her, and her poems are expressions of these powerful emotions. Her poetry collections include *Between Births* (1968), *Lost Love* (1970) and *Beyond the Slaughterhouse* (1972). She has also edited *An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry* (1974).

The simplicity of her style, the frankness of expression and the sense of immediate reaction and empathy that pervades her make her readers delve deeper into her poetry. “Gauri Deshpande’s encounter with life is multipronged, subtle, restrained and mature, with a cultivated idiom, making her a more impressive and readable poet,” comments Dr. Ram Sharma.

Her poetry often revolts against the patriarchal ideologies and experiments with women’s sexuality. She has said in an interview with Dickman: “The sub-theme of most my work is sexuality—a woman becoming aware of her sexuality—and there are a few incidents described” (1995).

“In Marathi or in English, in person or in print, the prolific poet, fiction-writer, and translator Gauri Deshpande has a distinctive voice: strongly feminist, wryly humorous—usually at her own expense, confident yet self-critical, irreverent yet steeped in tradition, cosmopolitan yet grounded in her love for language and place. No matter who or where her audience is, she is bound to challenge their assumptions, producing both discomfort and delight,” comments Urmilla Deshpande.

Her style of writing is direct, often colloquial and ironic. The use of I (self-awareness in the ‘self’) and self-critical is typical of Gauri Deshpande’s writing). The use of the pronouns “you” and “we” in her poetic lines signifies her warmth to the readers. She identifies the woes of women as her own, by showing her empathy

towards them. She is emotional though candid. On women writers, Singh (2008, 173) comments, "They [women poets] have taken liberties with form and structure though they show greater organic unity in their poems. Their form is the form of powerful emotions that gush out overflowing like an energetic jet." Woman and her milieu are always central to her poems. On Gauri's poetry, Singh (2004, 75) remarks, "She divulges her feminine urges, seeks out redemptive measures, and concomitantly tries to locate and secure her marina in the man's world." To be self-critical is the uniqueness of Gauri Deshpande's writing. She questions hypocritical societal mores and sexual ethics fearlessly. Gauri was largely concerned with the attitude of man towards woman across all relationships, within the family or in the society, and on the crucial struggle of the female psyche to overcome the problems at various stages. In an interview with Ranjana of Indian Institute of Advance Study, Simla, Gauri had said, "As a feminist, I feel a woman has her right to have her own space both physical and mental." Gauri urges all women to bring about a change in their circumstances by fighting against oppression. With reference to Indian women poets showing greater courage and determination in tackling social issues, A.N. Dwivedi remarked, "They have succeeded in voicing in their own tender ways the hopes, fears, and aspirations of the feminine world." (2001, 14).

#### **4.1. Social Image**

Gauri's poetry deals with family violence, sexual violence, child brides and child mothers, which the poetess considered as root causes of the subjugated status of women, even as the nation began its march towards independence. While in slavery to their men, the atrocities inflicted on these women often drove them to suicide by poisoning, drowning or immolation. Feldhaus (1998) in the preface of her book states, "Even more than actual women, it is ideas about women that are the focal point here. Understanding ideas of this kind is a necessary first step toward understanding the actualities of women's lives."

'A Lunch on Train' indicates the social evil of girls forcibly married at young age and reflects her views on the strange conditions of them.

*The woman in front of me, a mere girl,  
Too young to have been a mother of three  
Is struggling vainly to feed one, control  
The other, and the third is abandoned  
From a weary care. [11-15]*

If marriage was the condition of womanhood in traditional India, it is also the case that many women were married as girls.

In the opening lines of 'Two Self-portraits',

*One learns to live with  
All the misconceptions about oneself,*

the question of self-identity and self-respect is raised and the society is made accountable for it. The poetess relates the image of a woman to that of an 'onion' where the layers of skins describe the disguised image of the self. The woman from childhood is nurtured with the thought that she is always secondary to man and be subdued in all ways .By the time she could realize that she is not what her true-self is, she also realizes that she could not come out of her nutshell.

In 'Workaday Women', the plight of working women is portrayed:

*In a city  
there are six long mondays  
When you spend your mornings  
jammed up against women  
sour smelling of sweat  
perfume talcum soap  
each bracing herself to face the files  
machines pencils pupil's people  
slights yells lunches delays.  
And evenings they are packed more dense  
grimy with weariness. [1-11]*

"Six long mondays" points to the fact that, there is no difference between the first day of the week and the rest of the days and the work life of women is burdensome and full of stress. The word 'long' emphasizes that the whole day is extended with tensions and packed with heavy work. Even travelling to workplace in trains is a burden on these women, as it is over- crowded. The different professional profiles of women mentioned here, such as typist, stenographer and school teacher also belongs to not much of a higher cadre, once again reminding the unequal status of women.

"The skin will thicken, toughen" [line 14] also clearly indicates this. The tragedy is brought out in the last stanza of the poem:

*And the too solid flesh  
Will refuse  
When he demands that it melt  
At a Saturday -touch.  
You have not been protected after all  
From women men children cats [25-30]*

Even one day in a week she is not allowed rest but has to give in to the physical needs of her man though her 'flesh' is too tired to accept it. Women have the 'natural' duties of being a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and caretaker of the whole family in addition to having to work to augment family's income, which put them under enormous physical, mental and emotional stress. The poetess feels that women lack social security, which is indicated by the line of "Six long mondays".

The poem 'The Female of the Species' deals with the impoverished freedom of expression of women, especially of their feelings, emotions and sufferings. In the preface of his book, Sree (2008) explains, "Sufferings do not necessarily mean physical pain and suffering but the mental agony experienced by many women who seem to be happy at the peripheral level but are really suffering in the depths of their hearts." The man in her life is not ready to hear her woes. She is not given the opportunity to express her feelings and present her thoughts. "A man is no use whatever then" (4) clearly indicates this view. It is a woman who is always the listener, as stressed in the following lines:

*You want then your mother  
Or sister  
Or the girl with whom you went through school [5-7]*

Female bonding is conspicuous here. The only consolation is that there is some woman to hear her woes. Women feel warm and comfortable when they talk among themselves. In addition to her subdued condition, the economic crisis worsens her suffering to a great extent. The particle of happiness in the society gets blown away by the steep rise in prices and scarcity of essential commodities. Parents are being loved by their children only for their rich inheritance. All are burdened on her and women speaks of all this and share all their problems giving vent to their frustrations.

*The rate of rice  
And the price of tea  
And the scarcity of cheese  
You know both that you've spoken  
Of love and despair and ungrateful children [13-17]*

'A Love Poem to Ella' speaks of the relationship between the husband and wife. There is no bonding between them. The man does not treat his wife as better-half and the wife is not happy with his attitude. Possibly, truth and rapport never exists.

*But there is never any truth  
Between them, never any rapport  
For they have not in swift one look [6-8]*

The 'Guest' exposes the misery of living in disharmony.

*"Slightly unwelcome, taciturn, you moved in  
And we lived on in disharmony" (3-4).*

Unmindful of the relationship between the husband and wife that turned unhealthy and lacking the element of truth and trust, the society expects the woman to remain subdued in the marriage. In Sree (2008,11), Vishnu Priya remarks, "Though ours is a traditional country where power, knowledge and wealth are represented by goddesses and where women are adored, these aspects of culture seem to have

faded into a mythological haze and women are totally eclipsed by the burden of subservience”.

In ‘Union’, the poetess shows her grudge against male dominance, which is socially accepted and practiced. In our family system where husband is always considered the head, decision-making in all matters is left to his will.

*Authority of haste that pinned  
me beneath ardent mouth [37–38]*

brings out the fact that woman has no equal rights in her family matters. She is considered merely as an object of pleasure. Even a whore who boldly beds for money does not undergo humiliation and is respected, than a faithful wife who has submitted her life and soul to him. The frustration of woman is pronounced in these lines:

*Why was I not made  
an unfaithful whore? [15–16]*

‘Migraine’ displays the disintegrated personality of woman and the intolerable reality of pain forced upon her, as a result of being catapulted between what she is or wants to be and what the society wants her to be. Women, according to her, are totally misunderstood in mind, body and soul by men. They are forced to conform to the image created by men for them. Men do not penetrate into the depths of their souls and the bodies. In ‘Migraine’, this feeling of being lost and sadness is conspicuous.

*you rage and pretend. you’re dead. .  
But it’s clever, goes on-until, tears streaming  
from pain-destroyed face, mouthing  
long, inarticulate screams your body  
Heaves up its very guts and you cry,  
Reduced to sweat-drenched, shivering,  
Whimpering lump of agony, smelling of sickness  
And vomit, humiliation  
Boredom creeps in. what help now [10–17]*

Male stubbornness and aggressiveness is compared to migraine, the non-stop killer pain. The incipient beginning, the determined growth and the final triumph of migraine over the body suggests the male hegemony over the female.

*What help now? Not love,  
Not medicine, not gods and ancestors. None.  
Only your total humility and surrender  
to this fact of pain [21–24]*

Women are forced to pretend to live with her identity only during the brief non-migraine spells.

*You can resume human disguise till its next advent  
and masquerade as a person, sane, intelligent,  
loved and desirable. [26–28]*

Gauri Deshpande followed the footsteps of Kamala Das in denouncing male supremacy. In her foreword to an *Anthology of Indo-English Poetry*, Gauri Deshpande wrote about Kamala Das, “she and in general all the women poets must be given credit, however for coming to terms with the man: women relationships in blunt, bitter and concrete terms, where the men still puss foot around in metaphor, metaphysics and round aboutation”(1974,9). This observation is true of Gauri Deshpande’s poetry as well.

#### **4.2. Cultural Image**

Post-Independence poetry is witness to cultural terrains in which the dominant and dominated do exist. “Cultures actually assume more ‘foreign’ elements, alter ties, differences than they consciously exclude” (Said, 1993, 15). Feminine sensibility challenges the cultural image imposed on women. Commenting on the feminine sensibility in Indian English poetry, Melwani says: “Their themes are few in number. Thwarted desires, the frustration of living in a male dominated world, sex and of course Love are common ones. Contemporary situations are finding more frequent mention in their poems. The viewpoint is peculiarly feminine, a distinctive tone setting of their work from the rest of Indo-English Poetry” (1977, 35). Gauri shows her feminine sensitivity through events that are exciting, thought-provoking and sensuous.

A woman is not given due respect for her roles as wife or mother. Her work, love, care and sacrifice for the family are often considered the fate of womanhood. Poems such as ‘Workaday Women’ and ‘Female of the Species’ talk about this.

‘Union’ brings to fore the cultural aspect that men indulge in ‘sexual violence’ within marriage, which is considered a symbol of manliness. Sexual abuse within marriage, in this country, is considered a lesser crime.

*yielding to tortuous insistence  
I have allowed surrender [17–18]*

Woman is subordinated physically and emotionally in the tag of ‘family woman’. Male hypocrisy is a concern shown in these lines:

*I return contrite  
Find your fever soaked lip in feeble Scream,  
my name [54–57]*

Woman is a source of moral support to her man, who goes without appreciating it consciously. But when he is down with fever, he instinctively murmurs her name, but again ‘screaming’, that is yelling out and not polite to her.

The lines in 'We Hadn't the Guts' talk of the position of woman in a traditional family:

*Now what floundering lives we lead  
Have got left not love nor lust.  
To us is given the hollow task  
Of watching the sunset in the frame of tears [3-6]*

A woman is not allowed to contribute to her family and society and she is not loved either. Rich (1976, 39) wrote "Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own specifications."

*The opening lines  
And O God we hadn't the guts  
to cut and quit when the quitting was good. [1-2]*

portray the turmoil of a burdened heart of a helpless woman and ensuing efforts to free herself from the clutches of a biased society goes waste. She is disheartened and out of despair she feels she could have quit rather than struggling to fight against her subservience, but out of fear of social ostracism she couldn't. The cruelty of a widowed or a deserted woman being ostracised by society is reflected here.

'A Change of Seasons' reflects the life of woman who is trained not to complain. Just as the seasons change, her life constantly shifts from one responsibility to the other. Life for her is monotonous with nothing left to quench her interests.

*And I felt exhausted by the long walk to the kitchen. (7)  
.....Yet nothing happened  
And I dreamt in the night of long travels. (11-12)*

In 'Still Life, No: 2', the woman is politically charged to slash social beliefs and cultural practices that see her as secondary.

*We crowd into homes that disguise  
Concrete with curtain [2-3]*

In another verse, the poetess stresses how a woman's self-identity is lost in the shadow of her husband:

*That pale miniature framed in pupil  
is me in you –  
slate-slate (11-13)*

In 'Union', it is said that women are highly charged and confident in a political sense. Broad mindedness, gentility and the virtue of forgiveness, though considered the strengths of womanhood, are exploited by men to the fullest. Women too, like most men, cherish ambitions and dreams, but social prejudices come in their way. These lines of 'Union' present this fact.

*But have you forgotten  
 How your lips and hands  
 Went soaring home  
 To realize every dream  
 I might have dreamt. [27–30]  
 The lines  
 I had not hoped  
 For such revenge [58–59]*

show that the poetess is fully aware of the crooked nature of men, and this awareness is what the poetess wants her fellow women to have. Gauri calls upon all women for self-awakening. From a lamenting woman to a conscious woman, who is prepared for self-redemption from the cruel hands of patriarchy, is the new image of Indian women as portrayed by Gauri.

The courage of the woman can be seen in ‘I shall Arise and Go Now’

*“and blessed with nothing but fortitude”(9)*

This is the image of Indian woman which she intends to show in her poetry, the image of a lamenting woman to the conscious- woman who is prepared for self-redemption from the cruel hands of patriarchy.

Janaki Devi remarks, “the voice of woman consciousness has made the contemporary English verse by Indian woman—‘A Phenomenon’—a theory which women are at their liberty of expression and it’s in fact an explosion of their long-suppressed voice that could even shatter the mountain range shackles of society” (Sree, 2008, 58).

## **5. Conclusion**

Gauri Deshpande exposes the tyranny of the patriarchal society, in which she lives is much appreciated by contemporary poets, critics and readers all over the world.

De Souza (1997) claims the reason for including Gauri amongst other poets in the introduction to her book, *Nine Indian Women Poets*, as “staying power and the varied range of topics that are illuminated including cultural, religious, sexual and personal themes”.

Gauri decries the image of woman as marginal and subservient to male supremacy and encourages women to transcend the traditional boundaries and become aware of and sensitive towards the issues troubling them, rather than show acquiescence to their situation. The analysis of her poetry points to the courage she and others in the genre of poetry had, when it was a taboo for women to speak of their inner-self, even love. In her blog, K.R. Usha has said, “Gauri Deshpande’s formidable reputation precedes her – poet, essayist, translator, short story writer in Marathi and in English, with an equal facility in both languages, a writer whose honesty and outspokenness cut through every veneer of social hypocrisy;”

Yet written in a personal and confessional style, post-Independence poetry has marked the beginning of the march towards social change and modernization. It asserted the autonomy of women against social and cultural conventions that constrained their freedom and kept them in subjugation. A real challenge for the post-independence women writers was the creation of the image of a liberated woman. One can see the concerted efforts by the women poets to assert the equality and dignity of women in family and in social life.

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