



## Echoing Agonies in The Poems of Gauri Deshpande

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### Abstract

*Gauri Deshpande's poetry explores the different dimensions of human relationships and the feeling of frustration, alienation, love, loneliness, sadness. She published her first poem in English entitled "Between Births" (1968). This was followed by "Lost love" (1970) and "Beyond the Slaughterhouse" (1972). Deshpande's poetry seeks to highlight the idea of 'man – woman relation' of an urban existence; her poems reveal the chaos and anxiety of fragmented human beings who chased to fulfil their dreams in modern society. She also explores the repressed and claustrophobic world of women 'barren and bereft' of hope and consolation. Most of her poems are marked by a sense of frustration, sadness and loss, conflict and dilemma. Her poems reveal how at the end of the day women who sacrifice their lives for the sake of their family and children also long for some love or acknowledgement, recognition of the care that they have so profoundly bestowed. The paper attempts to investigate some of her poems and explore the various themes she creates.*

Gauri Deshpande was born in Pune. After passing out of Fergusson College in Pune where she completed her MA in English literature, she published her first poem in English entitled "Between Births" (1968). This was followed by "Lost love" (1970) and "Beyond the Slaughterhouse" (1972). Her first collection of poems *Between Births* (1968) explores sensitively the frustration and alienation resulting from her incapacity to make meaningful relationships. She expresses her closeness of experience through a tightly webbed series of images in poems as "A Change of Seasons", "Migraine", and "the Female of the Species". "Family Portraits" poetically portrays an entire lineage. Deshpande boldly encounters sexuality in *Between Births*. Her next collection *Lost Love* also breaks away from the sensuous and mellifluous treatment of conventional love. Her treatment of sex is more spiritual than carnal and it is seen to be the beginning of a process ultimately leading to spiritual fulfilment. Her primary concern with man-woman relationships is expressed in a series of poems with various aspects from the treatment of sexual love and abortion to barrenness and old age. She projects the dilemma of a lost love through poems such as "The Eclipse" where she is forced to accept her alienation, and "December" where she accepts love but hesitates because it chains and confines

her. A clear progression towards accepting poetry as a social outgrowth can be noted in *Beyond the Slaughter House* where she shows a rare insight about employed women in the busy city of Bombay. A woman who has lost her responsiveness to love is explored in the “Work of a Day Woman” and reiteration of the loss even of gender roles within a changing society finds expression in “Where Do Lonely People Live”. The existential anguish of the modern woman finds expression in Deshpande’s poetry. (Ray, 134)

GauriDeshpande writes in Marathi as well and after her mother’s death in 1970, she wrote her memoir in Marathi for a newspaper, and initiated a new tradition of Marathi writing with the idea of narrating ‘*kahani*’ or women’s tales. She started with *Ekek Pan Galawaya* (1980), then *TeruoTeAniKahi Door Paryant* (1985), *Ahe He AseAhe* (1986), *NiragathiAniChandrikeGaSarikaGa* (1987), *Dustar Ha GhatAniAthang* (1989), *Mukkam* (1992), *VinchurnicheDhade*(1996), *The Lackadaisical Sweeper* (1997) (a collection of short stories in English), *Goph* (1999), and *Utkhanan* (2002). She also translated SunitaDeshpande’s *AheManoharTari* as *And Pine For What Is Not* and sixteen volumes of Richard Burton’s *Arabian Nights* into Marathi.

Have I not, perhaps, just back from a  
dream espied a leprous being in the mirror  
eaten away with desires of treachery,  
crime, untruth complicity–cruel, obscene?  
 (“Two Self Portraits”)

Gauri Deshpande seeks to highlight the idea of ‘misery and discontent’ of living ‘in disharmony’ with decadent dreams; ‘barren and bereft’ of hope and consolation that characterize human lives in modern times exist urban society. Her poetry represents a sense of repression, deep-rooted gloom, morbid fancies and helplessness. Patriarchy creates and recreates the psychic conditions for women’s subordination. AparnaMahajan, in her essay on “The Portrayal of Relationships in GauriDeshpande’s “The Lackadaisical Sweeper”, goes on to point out how GauriDeshpande seeks to make her readers aware of the fact that women’s suppression and subjectivity should not be looked upon as her destiny for she believed that it was up to the woman alone to think and to create her own distinctive path in the given circumstances”. (59-64) GauriDeshpande’s women are not as types but as an individual. Her style of writing is not aggressive but certainly very strong, frank and true. The characters and their interpersonal relationships are so realistic and sensitive that every reader either feels that the poet must have experienced this or it is more than astounding to see that she has articulated the feelings and thoughts of women at every phase. She has spoken the innermost thoughts of women’s hearts. This feeling of the reader is the criteria of the good literature and GauriDeshpande achieves this success in her every work. In the words of Sherwyn T. Carr, “She is a mature poet, aware that neither passion nor disillusionment is simple emotions and the texture of her best poetry is accordingly complex. Most of her verse is marked by a sense of sadness and loss”. (Carr, 125) Keki N. Daruwalla stated that she, ‘Anchored in the world around her’, (Daruwalla, 98) GauriDeshpande’s poetry deals with the details of everyday life, the coming of a lover, the death of a puppy dog, ingratitude of children.

GauriDeshpande’s poems probed into the deep details about women and her feelings, about men women relationship and about the fragmented, anxious and disjointed modern society. Her poems depict life in its clinical details, representing facts as facts without any attempt on her part to polish over them or idealise them. In the poems of Deshpande the human efforts seem weak endeavours caught in the great web of unavoidable fortune. A note of sadness and loss prevails

over her poetic fabric. However this note of sadness and loss is not to be construed as something linked with her sense of defeatism or pessimism. It is fairly a gleaming hope of endurance and perseverance in a human being that makes her outcry, like a great foreteller, about the littleness of human endeavours and also the littleness of their achievement even after much labour and strife. In a poem titled “Female of the Species”, Deshpande writes;

Sometimes you want to talk  
about love and despair  
and the ungratefulness of children  
A man is no use whatever then.  
You want then your mother  
or your sister  
or the girl with whom you went to through the school,  
and your first love ,and her -  
first child -a girl-  
and your second.  
You sit with them and talk.  
She sews and you sit and sip  
and speak of the rate of rice  
and the price of tea  
and the scarcity of cheese.  
You know both that you 've spoken  
of love, despair and ungratefulness of children.

GauriDeshpande refers to an isolated world of all-females in her poem;the women indulge in mundane conversations, gossips and small talks to hide their inner insecurities. The protagonists in the poem “Female of the Species” try to find a catharsis in sharing and purging themselves of their repressed emotions and frustrations. These women are housewives whose world consists of managing rations, paying bills, providing food, health and assistance to all in the family. It is a common belief that no matter how much a mother has to tolerate, she is fated to love her children and so, perhaps in context of their perceived ungratefulness the feeling of despair manifests itself. The poem talks about these innumerable nameless faces that keep life going on sacrificing themselves for the sake of others. The poem recounts how at the end of the day they who sacrifice their lives for others also long for some love or acknowledgement of the care that they have so profoundly bestowed. Such women can be found anywhere across India, chatting with their saris tucked as they make a vociferous group of chattering women who seem happy and content but within their hearts hold secret desires which were stifled or sacrificed a long time ago.

Juliet Mitchell in her essay “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis” talks about the marginalized and repressed condition of women. She goes on to inquire, ‘What are our lives to be about? Who are we?’ and finally comes to the conclusion how a woman’s life consist of domesticity, personal relations, and personal intimacies. Stories...’ (Mitchell 407). Deshpande’s poem goes on to state how when a woman needs to have a candid heart to heart talk on love and despair or about children, talking to a man has no value or solace. In the poem “Female of the Species” Deshpande talks how a woman presumes that when she seeks to unburden herself another woman would make a better understanding heart hearing her saga of pain for her language of feeling and communication differs from that of a man in its essence and spirit. The

women indulge in mundane conversations, gossips and small talks to hide their inner insecurities. Robin Latkoff in his study “Language and Woman’s Place” goes a step further to assert how the personal identity of women is also linguistically submerged. He goes on to state how ‘the marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of.’ (Latkoff, 2)

GauriDeshpande’s another poem named “Family Portraits,” offers a glimpse into the life of a family not in possession of a good living. Hardly acquiring sufficient means of survival the members’ present wry look of sadness and loss. The poem highlights the fortitude, forbearance and struggles against poverty that had immunized the members of the family depriving them humanity and warmth. Their weak and feeble bodies, their bony structures, with ‘flaring nostrils’, ‘hazel eyes’, ‘drooped lips’ and ‘pale cheeks’ stands as graphic testimony of their want, pain and suffering. She goes on to describe of the inmates Iru’s hypochondria and gloom in clinical details:

She withheld that kingly proboscis  
from us all; none, obviously, fit  
to carry the fire, passion, despair, fortitude it  
stamped on her.

GauriDeshpande’s poem “I Wanted to Weep” reflects the pain and suffering. It is a woman's desperate efforts to hold to a relationship that has gone awry. The void in relationship makes a woman cry but then a woman has little role in re-making a life or reconstituting a relationship. Her fate remains in the hands of her predator. The poem expresses the abysses in sex harmony, which is discontentment in the congenial climax of love. A woman is subjected to only passive reception of sexual love but is deprived of the authority to express her sexual urge. A woman is trained in suppressing her sexual desire and the word 'sex' is a taboo to her, therefore should not be spoken with loudness. In another famous poem named “Migraine,” the same underlying note of sadness and loss 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.

The magnitude of pain intensifies as the poem progresses. The poetic persona complains of a melancholy and claustrophobic existence that creeps into senses and gains control over emotions and goes on to conclude how there is no easy respite from that numbing pain. There is no alleviation for the malaise; nothing can soothe the senses, or offer comfort or consolation.

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

Pain can be merely redeemed temporarily through momentary escapade and permanently through death. Gauri Deshpande seems to suggest that the final respite in life from pains of existence can only be sought through death. The poem "It Comes Slow", likewise, is loaded with a candid sense of defeatism and despair. In "The Guest" the sense of despondency is stifling while the "The Air Fills" chokes us with the sensation of all engulfing loneliness.

I wanted to weep for you  
And me  
But I had already spent All tears in useless  
mourning's;  
So now I watch arideyed  
As my fingers open slowly And let you go.

In the poem "Two Portraits" she negotiates between the two splits of her own self, she tries to come to terms with the dormant evil instincts ingrained within her own consciousness engendered by the forces of darkness dominating the world around her, and the deep rooted residues of virtues that still remain within her somewhere unknown and unseen. Her poems finally symbolise an integration and assimilation of both the instincts. She acknowledges the dormant forces of evil and violence in human nature and hints at the bitter struggle that the soul has to undergo while living in this modern world of lost hope where things fall apart and there is no strong centre of faith that can hold or sustain us. Deshpande's poems depict humanity in its raw details without any romantic idealization whatsoever. Her treatment of death is casual and bold. She invites death to come and meet her:

How long must I walk  
These long and windsome streets  
Before I meet you?

Some of Gauri Deshpande's poems reveal a somewhat sentimental outlook as well. In a nostalgic mode and schmaltzy tone, she celebrates the sweet-sour reminiscences of her lost love. "The Guest" is a poem of disharmony and of discord in married life. The poem is a picture of deep-rooted gloom and helplessness which is the fate of a woman since ages and pronounces her agony of her parting with her lover.

You are gone now  
The perfect mouth that kissed my words  
No longer by  
And as the clouds heap and heap upon the west  
I lie empty, barren and bereft

Gauri Deshpande's poem "In Absentia" deals with the theme of unsatisfied love. Deshpande expresses her sense of displeasure in parting, and her pain of longing for union and echoes the absence of true love in a man-woman relationship. The libidinous urges liberate a woman; the reconciliatory attitude of a woman is projected as:

And from our present misery  
Do yearn to believe  
That that too was a reality

To be lived again,  
As much as this -  
Of not - you - and - I

The compound not-you-and-I hints at the unwanted things, a woman is victimised with yet the sense of dislocation and exile is her fixed territory determined by patriarchal norms. Kuwar Dinesh Singh stated that, "The tone is that of sorrow and realization. The poet emphasizes on the need of honesty and trust in love to sustain a relationship." (Singh, 39) In the words of S. P Sree, "Deshpande could write with an authority and she never deviated from the simple usage of words". (Sree, 62) Her poems reveal the under streams of all types of relationships; may it be between friends, mother – daughter, husband - wife or any permutations and combinations of the myriads of the relationships. The gender relations are intricately composed in her poems. They describe the women and their hearts in a manner that they pierce into the hearts of the readers. Her imagination was vivid and graphic and she could spread herself to various human thoughts, she was a woman who possessed a vivid understanding of the multiple layers of the human mind.

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