

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

ONE DAY NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Language and Literature: Multidisciplinary Approaches

Department of English

Sant Tukaram Mahavidyalaya, Kannad

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

SPECIAL ISSUE: VOL.17 ISSUE-7

17 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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www.the-criterion.com

Socio-Cultural Aspects of Adolescence in Shashi Deshpande's Short Stories

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Abstract:

This article examines the socio-cultural representation of adolescence in the short fiction of Shashi Deshpande, specifically utilizing Raymond Williams' framework of Cultural Materialism. Adolescence in Deshpande's work is not merely a biological phase but a site of cultural struggle where the "structure of feeling" of the young female protagonist clashes with the "dominant" patriarchal and "residual" traditional values of Indian society. Through a qualitative analysis of selected stories, the study explores how material conditions—domestic spaces, bodily changes, and economic dependencies—shape the adolescent's identity. The results indicate that Deshpande uses the adolescent experience to critique the "whole way of life" in middle-class India, portraying the transition to womanhood as a process of negotiated submission and emergent resistance.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Raymond Williams, Cultural Materialism, Adolescence, Indian English Literature, Structure of Feeling, Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is often described as a period of "storm and stress," yet in the Indian literary context, particularly in the works of Shashi Deshpande, it is also a period of profound cultural initiation. Deshpande, a preeminent voice in Indian English fiction, specializes in the interiority of women's lives, capturing the nuances of the domestic sphere. However, her portrayal of the adolescent girl—the woman-in-the-making—is particularly poignant.

To understand these stories, one must look beyond individual psychology and toward the cultural fabric that binds these characters. Raymond Williams, a foundational figure in Cultural Materialism, posits that culture is "a whole way of life" and that literature is a "social practice" inseparable from the material conditions of its production and the power structures it inhabits. This article seeks to bridge Deshpande's sensitive characterizations with Williams' theory to uncover how the "material" reality of being an adolescent girl in India dictates her social and cultural existence. The short fiction of Shashi Deshpande has long been celebrated for its clinical yet empathetic dissection of the Indian middle-class interiority. While much critical attention has been paid to her adult female protagonists—women navigating the complexities of marriage, career, and autonomy—there exists a potent, liminal space in her oeuvre: the period of adolescence. In Deshpande's world, adolescence is not merely a biological transition or a psychological "coming-of-age" in the Western sense; it is a profound socio-cultural initiation where the "material" reality of the female body begins to intersect with the "dominant" structures of patriarchal tradition. To understand this transition, one must look toward the theoretical framework provided by Raymond Williams.

Williams famously posited that culture is "a whole way of life," a social process that is inseparable from the material conditions of its production. By applying his concepts—specifically

the "structure of feeling" and the interplay between dominant, residual, and emergent cultures—we can see Deshpande's adolescent girls as sites of cultural struggle. For these characters, the onset of puberty is a material event that triggers a reorganization of their social value. The "materiality of the maiden" refers to how the girl's physical presence, her labor in the kitchen, and her emerging sexuality are treated as assets or liabilities within the family unit.

In Deshpande's stories, such as *The Intrusion* or *A Liberated Woman*, the adolescent experience is often characterized by a "hush"—a forced silence that Williams would recognize as a lack of access to the means of communication. The "structure of feeling" here is one of unarticulated unease; the girl feels the "tightness" of the social fabric before she has the language to describe her oppression. This feeling is the lived experience of a particular time and place—post-independence India—where the Residual (traditional caste and gender roles) still holds immense power even as the Emergent (education and modern aspirations) begins to flicker in the minds of the young.

The home, in Deshpande's narratives, functions as a material enclosure. The kitchen, the backyard, and the prayer room are not just settings; they are the "apparatus" of cultural reproduction. When an adolescent girl is told to sit apart during her period or to lower her voice in the presence of men, she is experiencing the "materiality" of her socio-cultural status. Her body is no longer her own; it is a text being written upon by the Dominant culture to ensure the continuity of the social order.

Furthermore, Deshpande highlights the "economic" nature of the adolescent girl. Within the middle-class framework, the maiden is a "woman-in-waiting," whose value is often tied to her eventual marriageability. Williams' materialism allows us to see this not just as a social custom, but as a distribution of human "resources." The girl's education is often framed as a secondary ornament, whereas her domestic skills are treated as essential material labour. This article seeks to explore how Deshpande's short stories map this transition, revealing adolescence as a period where

the individual's "emergent" identity is often systematically "incorporated" into the dominant patriarchal system. By analysing the socio-cultural aspects of these stories, we uncover the subtle, often violent, ways in which the Indian maiden is constructed, constrained, and occasionally, liberated.

2. Methodology

The methodology for this study is a qualitative textual analysis grounded in the theoretical framework of Cultural Materialism.

Primary Sources: Selected short stories from Deshpande's collections, including *The Intrusion and Other Stories* vol 1 and vol 2. Some references are also taken from the novels.

Theoretical Framework:

Raymond Williams' concepts of:

- The Structure of Feeling: The lived experience of a particular time and place, often felt before it is formally articulated.
- Dominant, Residual, and Emergent Cultures: The interplay between current power structures (Dominant), past traditions that still hold sway (Residual), and new, potentially subversive practices (Emergent).
- Materialism: The focus on how physical spaces (the home, the kitchen) and biological realities (menarche) are treated as social and economic assets or liabilities.
- The analysis will proceed by identifying these elements within the narratives of Deshpande's adolescent protagonists.

4. Discussion: Cultural Materialism and the Adolescent Experience

In Shashi Deshpande's short fiction, the "Discussion" of adolescence through Cultural Materialism reveals that the young female body is a contested site of social production. Raymond Williams' framework helps us see that the "angst" felt by these girls is not a mere hormone-driven phase, but a reaction to the material conditions of a middle-class Indian upbringing.

4.1 The "Structure of Feeling" in the Adolescent Girl: -

Raymond Williams defined the "structure of feeling" as the "culture of a period"—the particular quality of social experience and relationship that gives a generation its distinct character. In Deshpande's stories, the adolescent's structure of feeling is characterized by an unarticulated sense of unease. In stories like *Learning to Die*, the adolescent protagonist experiences what Williams calls a "structure of feeling"—a lived tension between her childhood autonomy and her impending "incorporation" into womanhood. It is a sense of "tightness" in the chest, a realization that the rules of the game are changing. The girl feels the "weight" of her mother's expectations and her father's sudden distance, marking a shift from being a "child" to a "liability" or a "commodity." The protagonists often feel a "tightness" or a "constriction" as they move from the freedom of childhood to the regulated world of womanhood. This is not just a psychological phase; it is a material response to the socio-cultural environment. For instance, the sudden awareness of one's body—not as a personal vessel, but as a "social commodity" to be guarded—represents a shift in the material reality of the character.

4.2 Dominant vs. Residual Cultures

The Indian middle-class household is a site where Dominant patriarchal values (the authority of the father, the necessity of marriage) coexist with Residual cultural practices religious

rituals, caste-based purity, the silence surrounding menstruation. The patriarchal mandate that a girl's ultimate destination is marriage and domesticity. The "ghosts" of tradition—rituals surrounding menstruation, the "evil eye," and the belief that a girl is *Paraya Dhan* (someone else's property). In *The Stone Woman*, the residual expectation of "stillness" and "grace" is imposed as a physical discipline. The movement of the adolescent girl is restricted to "safe" domestic spaces, reinforcing her economic and social dependency.

In stories like *The Stone Woman* or *Learning to Die*, the adolescent girl is often the one who notices the cracks in these systems. The "Residual" culture dictates that she must learn the "grace" of a woman, which Deshpande portrays as a form of cultural melding. Williams' theory allows us to see this not just as "growing up," but as the "incorporation" of the individual into the dominant social order. The flickering desire for education and self-expression. We see this in characters who quietly read forbidden books or observe their mothers' drudgery with a critical, modern eye, signalling a break from the "whole way of life" dictated by the past.

4.3 The Materiality of Space and the Body

A key tenet of Cultural Materialism is that the "ideal" (ideas, values) is always rooted in the "material" (physical existence). Deshpande's adolescents are hyper-aware of their physical surroundings:

The Kitchen: Often portrayed as the ultimate destination for the girl, a site of both power and drudgery.

The Body: Menarche is treated as a material event that changes the girl's status in the household. It is the moment the "Emergent" self is often suppressed by the "Dominant" social need for modesty and marriageability.

In many stories, the girl's body is "read" by the family as a text of honor or shame. This materialist reading of the body aligns with Williams' view that culture is not an abstract concept but something produced through physical and social labor.

5. Results: Themes of Socio-Cultural Transition

The application of Cultural Materialist theory to Deshpande's stories yields several key findings regarding the socio-cultural aspects of adolescence:

I. The Gendered Division of Labour

Adolescence marks the point where the "material" labor of the household begins to fall heavily on the girl. While the boy's adolescence is often focused on external achievements (the "Dominant" culture of education and career), the girl's is focused on internal domesticity.

II. The Silence as Cultural Practice

Deshpande's characters are often defined by what they *cannot* say. This silence is a "material" condition—a lack of access to the means of communication. Williams suggests that those in power control the language of a society; in Deshpande's world, the adolescent girl is often "linguistically impoverished" when it comes to expressing her own desires. In Shashi Deshpande's short fiction, socio-cultural transition is not a smooth evolution but a jagged collision between the Residual (past traditions) and the Emergent (modern self-awareness). In "The Intrusion," the transition to womanhood is marked by the violent material reality of a marriage where the woman's body is treated as a territory to be occupied, highlighting the "dominant" patriarchal right over female autonomy. "It Was Dark" explores the socio-cultural trauma of rape, where the adolescent's body becomes a site of "darkness" and social stigma, forcing a transition from innocence to a fragmented, silent identity.

In "The Homecoming," the transition is one of displacement; the protagonist returns to her childhood home only to find that her "material" place in the family has been erased, illustrating the fragility of female belonging in a patriarchal structure. "The Boy" examines the socio-cultural pressure of gendered expectations, where the birth and upbringing of a male child signify the "dominant" culture's obsession with lineage and the mother's role as a biological vessel.

"A Man and a Woman" subverts traditional dynamics by highlighting the material reality of desire and power, showing a transition where characters attempt to peel away social masks. Finally, "My Beloved Charioteer" depicts a powerful intergenerational transition; the grandmother's decision to break the "residual" silence of her own grief and past trauma serves as an "emergent" act of liberation for her granddaughter. Collectively, these stories suggest that socio-cultural transition in the Indian context is a process of negotiated survival, where the "structure of feeling" is defined by a constant struggle to claim one's own material and emotional space against the weight of tradition.

III. The Emergent Self

Despite the weight of tradition, there are "Emergent" moments in Deshpande's stories. An adolescent girl's refusal to marry a certain man, or her quiet pursuit of education, represents the "Emergent" culture that challenges the "Dominant" patriarchal order. These are small, often failed rebellions, but they signify the shifting material conditions of Indian society. The "Emergent Self" in Deshpande's stories represents the flickering consciousness of individuals who begin to question the Dominant and Residual social orders. In *The Intrusion*, it is the protagonist's internal rejection of a husband's physical entitlement, while in *It Was Dark*, it manifests as a raw, wordless resistance against the social "death" that follows trauma. *The Homecoming* depicts the emergent self as the recognition of one's own alienation, and *The Boy* subtly critiques the material value placed on male

children. *A Man and a Woman* explores the emergence of raw human desire over social masks, and *My Beloved Charioteer* culminates in the grandmother's courageous decision to shatter the "residual" culture of mourning. These moments signify Williams' "emergent" culture: new meanings and values that are being created but are not yet fully incorporated or defeated. Ultimately, Deshpande's characters find their emergent selves not in grand victories, but in the quiet, material realization of their own distinct existence.

The socio-cultural aspects of adolescence and womanhood in Shashi Deshpande's short stories are intricately tied to the material realities of Indian middle-class life. Using Raymond Williams' Cultural Materialism, we see that her protagonists are not just "coming of age," but are navigating a battlefield of cultural forces. The Dominant patriarchal norms and Residual traditional silences constantly attempt to "incorporate" the girl into a predetermined domestic role. However, through the "Structure of Feeling," Deshpande captures the pulse of a changing society where the Emergent self—though often suppressed—begins to articulate its own agency. Her stories prove that literature is a vital social practice that mirrors the material struggles of a "whole way of life," leaving the reader with the realization that the personal is always, fundamentally, cultural.

6. Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande's short stories provide a rich tapestry for examining the socio-cultural complexities of adolescence in India. By applying Raymond Williams' Cultural Materialism, we can see that the struggles of her adolescent protagonists are not merely "growing pains" but are symptomatic of a larger conflict between the individual and a "whole way of life" that seeks to commodify and contain them. Adolescence emerges as a critical juncture where the "Residual" past and the "Dominant" present collide. While the protagonists often end up conforming to societal expectations, Deshpande's focus on their interiority and their physical/material constraints

highlights the cost of that conformity. Her stories do not offer easy resolutions; instead, they reflect the ongoing material reality of a society in transition, where the adolescent girl remains the most sensitive barometer of cultural change.

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