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Reimagining Gender: Exploring Feminist Consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's Literary Landscapes – A Comparative Study of Three Novels

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Abstract: ***Shashi Deshpande, an eminent Indian author, has contributed significantly to contemporary Indian literature, particularly through her exploration of gender and feminism. This research paper aims to delve into Deshpande's literary landscapes by analyzing three of her prominent novels: "Roots and Shadows," "That Long Silence" and "Dark Holds No Terrors" The study focuses on uncovering the intricate portrayal of feminist consciousness in Deshpande's works and examining how her characters challenge traditional gender roles, negotiate societal expectations, and seek personal liberation. By employing feminist literary theory and employing textual analysis, this paper aims to shed light on the themes of identity, autonomy, patriarchy, and the complexities of women's lives in Deshpande's novels.***
Keywords: ***Intersectionality,Patriarchy, Power Dynamics, Stereotypes, Ecofeminism, Gender Performativity***

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background And Significance Of The Study

Shashi Deshpande is a renowned Indian author whose literary works have captivated readers and critics alike. Throughout her career, Deshpande has explored the complexities of women's lives, delving into issues of gender, identity, patriarchy, and autonomy. Her novels offer nuanced and thought-provoking portrayals of female characters who navigate societal expectations and challenge traditional gender roles.

Deshpande's works provide a fertile ground for exploring feminist consciousness in the Indian context. By analyzing the feminist themes present in her novels, this study aims to shed light on Deshpande's perspective on gender and feminism, examining how her characters navigate their personal and social identities. Her novels depict the challenges faced by women in Indian society, offering insights into the limitations imposed by patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Through this study, we can gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Deshpande's female characters and their struggles for autonomy and self-expression.

Shashi Deshpande is a significant figure in contemporary Indian literature. Her works have not only received critical acclaim but also serve as a rich source for feminist literary analysis. By examining her novels, this study contributes to the existing body of scholarship on Deshpande and adds to the broader understanding of Indian women's writing and feminist consciousness.

Deshpande's novels have resonated with readers across generations, sparking conversations about gender, identity, and women's empowerment. By delving into the themes and characters within her works, this study aims to highlight their potential impact on society, provoking critical discussions and encouraging a reimagining of gender roles.As her novels are deeply rooted in the Indian cultural and social milieu. By studying her works, we can gain insights into the intersection of gender, culture, and tradition in the Indian context, providing a valuable perspective on the challenges and complexities faced by women within this specific cultural framework.

The background and significance of this study lie in the exploration of Shashi Deshpande's novels, "*Roots and Shadows*" ,"*That Long Silence*" and "*Dark Holds No Terrors*" in order to unravel the feminist consciousness within her works. By examining the themes of gender, identity, patriarchy, and autonomy, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of Deshpande's literary landscapes, while also shedding light on the broader discourse of feminist literary criticism and its relevance in the Indian context.

B. Objectives and Research Questions

1) The objectives of this research paper are as follows:

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- To analyze the portrayal of feminist consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's novels, specifically "*Roots and Shadows," "That Long Silence" and "Dark Holds No Terrors"*.
- To explore how Deshpande's female characters challenge traditional gender roles, negotiate societal expectations, and strive for personal liberation.
- To examine the themes of identity, autonomy, patriarchy, and the complexities of women's lives within Deshpande's literary landscapes.
- To contribute to the understanding of Deshpande's works in the context of feminist literary criticism.

2) To achieve the objectives outlined above, this research paper will address the following research questions:

- How does Shashi Deshpande depict feminist consciousness in her novels "Roots and Shadows", "That Long Silence" and "Dark Holds No Terrors"?
- In what ways do the female characters in Deshpande's novels challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations?
- What are the central themes of identity, autonomy, and patriarchy explored in Deshpande's literary landscapes?
- How do Deshpande's female characters negotiate their personal liberation and seek agency within the constraints of their social and cultural environments?
- What are the similarities and differences in the portrayal of feminist consciousness across the three novels?
- How does Deshpande's feminist perspective evolve and manifest through her works?
- What are the broader implications of Deshpande's novels for feminist literary studies and gender discourse in the Indian context?

C. Methodology and Scope

1) Methodology

To accomplish the objectives of this research paper, the following methodology will be employed:

The primary method of data collection will be a close reading and textual analysis of Shashi Deshpande's novels, namely *"Roots and Shadows," "That Long Silence," and "Dark Holds No Terrors*" The focus will be on examining the portrayal of feminist consciousness, gender dynamics, and related themes within the novels. The study will employ feminist literary theory as a theoretical framework to analyze Deshpande's works. This approach will involve examining the representation of women, patriarchal systems, gender roles, and power dynamics within the novels. Concepts such as gender performativity, intersectionality, and agency will guide the analysis.

A comparative analysis will be conducted to identify patterns and variations in the portrayal of feminist consciousness across the three novels. This approach will enable a deeper understanding of Deshpande's evolving feminist perspective and thematic consistency across her works.The study will draw upon a range of scholarly articles, books, and critical analyses on Shashi Deshpande's works and feminist literary theory. These secondary sources will provide additional insights and support the analysis and interpretation of the primary texts.

2) Scope

The scope of this research paper is limited to the analysis of three novels by Shashi Deshpande: "*Roots and Shadows," "That Long Silence," and "Dark Holds No Terrors*" These novels have been selected due to their significant exploration of feminist consciousness and gender-related themes. The study will focus on analyzing the representation of women, gender roles, identity, autonomy, and patriarchy within these novels.

The research paper will primarily employ a feminist literary analysis approach, drawing upon the theoretical framework of feminist literary theory. The analysis will be centred on the exploration of feminist consciousness and related themes, examining the ways in which Deshpande's female characters challenge societal norms and seek personal liberation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Overview of Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism is a branch of literary theory and criticism that focuses on analyzing and interpreting literature through a feminist lens. It seeks to explore the representation of women, gender roles, power dynamics, and patriarchy within literary texts.

Feminist literary critics examine how literature reflects, challenges or reinforces societal attitudes and norms regarding gender, while also highlighting the experiences, struggles, and agency of women.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, a key figure in feminist theory, "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*" This statement underscores the social and cultural construction of gender, emphasizing that gender identity is not biologically determined but is shaped by societal norms and expectations. Feminist literary theory seeks to expose the ways in which gender roles and expectations are perpetuated or subverted in literature.

Virginia Woolf, another influential feminist writer, argued for the need to create a "*room of one's own*" for women in literature. Woolf highlighted the historical exclusion of women from the literary canon and advocated for female autonomy and agency in storytelling. Feminist literary theory seeks to uncover and celebrate the voices and experiences of women in literature, challenging the dominant male-centred narratives.

Judith Butler, a contemporary feminist theorist, introduced the concept of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent attribute but a set of performative acts that individuals adopt to conform to societal expectations. Feminist literary theory explores how literature represents and challenges these performative acts, highlighting the potential for resistance and transformation.

B. About the Author

Shashi Deshpande, born on 7th June 1938 in Karnataka, India, is a renowned Indian author whose works have made a significant impact on contemporary Indian literature. Deshpande was raised in a progressive and intellectual family, which fostered her love for literature from an early age. She pursued her education, earning a degree in Economics and later obtaining a Master's degree in English Literature.

Deshpande embarked on her literary career in the 1970s, starting with short stories and subsequently exploring other forms of writing, including novels and essays. Her works are known for their introspective exploration of women's experiences, the complexities of human relationships, and the intersection of tradition and modernity in Indian society. With a writing style characterized by subtlety, nuance, and deep psychological insights, Deshpande has garnered both critical acclaim and a devoted readership.

Feminism plays a significant role in Shashi Deshpande's literary works. Her narratives often centre on women's lives, their struggles, aspirations, and relationships. Deshpande explores the limitations imposed on women by patriarchal structures, societal expectations, and gender roles within the Indian context.

Deshpande's writings reflect a nuanced understanding of feminist consciousness, agency, and the complexities of women's experiences. Her female characters grapple with issues such as gender inequality, the stifling of individual desires, societal expectations, and the tension between tradition and personal freedom. Deshpande's works resonate with feminist concerns as she illuminates the ways in which women navigate and challenge the patriarchal constraints that limit their autonomy and self-expression.

Shashi Deshpande's works have received widespread critical acclaim and have been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis. Critics and scholars have recognized her contribution to Indian literature, particularly in her portrayal of women's experiences and her exploration of feminist themes.Deshpande's ability to delve into the complexities of human emotions, relationships, and societal dynamics has earned her praise for her insightful storytelling. Her nuanced characterizations and sensitive portrayal of women's inner lives have resonated with readers and critics alike.

Scholars have analyzed Deshpande's works through various lenses, including feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and socio-cultural contexts. They have explored themes such as gender, identity, power dynamics, and social critique within her narratives. Deshpande's works have been celebrated for their ability to raise pertinent questions about gender roles, traditions, and the struggles of women in patriarchal societies.

Additionally, Deshpande's works have been included in academic curricula and have been the subject of numerous research papers, dissertations, and literary analyses. Scholars have praised her contribution to feminist literature and her ability to capture the intricacies of women's lives, making her an important voice in contemporary Indian literature.Shashi Deshpande's literary voice has had a profound impact on Indian literature.

Her exploration of women's experiences, her engagement with feminist themes, and her astute portrayal of human relationships have earned her critical acclaim and scholarly attention. Deshpande's works continue to inspire readers and scholars alike, solidifying her position as a significant literary voice in India and beyond.

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III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *"Roots and Shadows"*: Exploring the Quest for Identity

"*Roots and Shadows*" by Shashi Deshpande is a remarkable novel that delves into the intricate journey of self-discovery and the quest for identity. Through the protagonist's exploration of her roots, Deshpande intricately weaves together themes of family, tradition, and societal expectations. This paper aims to analyze the novel's portrayal of the quest for identity and the ways in which the protagonist navigates the complexities of her personal and cultural history. Drawing upon quotes from the novel and critical perspectives, we will unravel the profound exploration of identity in "*Roots and Shadows*"

The novelcentres around the life of Indu, the protagonist, who embarks on a quest to understand her identity amidst the constraints of societal expectations and traditional family dynamics. The novel addresses the themes of self-discovery, cultural heritage, and the struggle to reconcile one's personal desires with societal norms.

The quest for identity forms the backbone of the narrative in "*Roots and Shadows*" Indu, as a young woman, grapples with her own sense of self and seeks to understand her place within her family and society. She is torn between her individual aspirations and the expectations placed upon her as a daughter and a woman.

One of the key aspects of Indu's journey is her exploration of her cultural roots. She delves into her family history, traditions, and the stories passed down through generations. Through this process, she attempts to connect with her ancestry, seeking to understand how it shapes her identity. As Indu reflects, "*The past had caught up with the present, and the small, insignificant events had assumed significance, and the insignificant people were significant*."

Deshpande skillfully portrays the conflict between tradition and personal freedom that many women face. Indu grapples with societal expectations that limit her choices and suppress her individuality. She questions the predefined roles assigned to women and yearns for autonomy. She asserts, "*I want to be somebody... I want to have an identity of my own."*

The novel also explores the impact of familial relationships on one's sense of self. Indu's relationship with her father, mother, and sister shapes her understanding of who she is and who she wants to become. Through their interactions and conflicts, Deshpande highlights the complexities of familial ties and their influence on one's identity formation.

Critics have lauded "*Roots and Shadows*" for its nuanced portrayal of the quest for identity. They emphasize Deshpande's ability to capture the internal struggles of her characters and their navigation through societal constraints.

Noted critic Meenakshi Mukherjee states, "*In 'Roots and Shadows,' Deshpande combines the autobiographical mode with a narrative which probes the protagonist's search for her identity*." This observation highlights the novel's deep exploration of personal identity and the protagonist's introspective journey.

A powerful quote from the novel reflects Indu's inner turmoil "*In me there was a battle between two forces, and the war was endless.*", this encapsulates the internal conflict Indu experiences as she grapples with societal expectations and her own desires.

Furthermore, Deshpande weaves vivid imagery to convey the complexities of Indu's quest for identity. She writes, "*It was not just a battle between two people, it was a battle between two worlds. It was the conflict of the earth and the sky*." This metaphorical description emphasizes the magnitude of Indu's struggle and the clash between tradition and personal liberation.

B. "That Long Silence": Negotiating Patriarchy and Autonomy

In Shashi Deshpande's novel *"That Long Silence*", the negotiation of patriarchy and autonomy serves as a powerful lens through which gender is reimagined and feminist consciousness is explored. Through the protagonist's journey, Deshpande delves into the complexities of patriarchal structures, the quest for autonomy, and the transformative power of feminist consciousness. By examining the protagonist's struggles and triumphs, we will unravel the profound exploration of gender dynamics and feminist thought within Deshpande's literary landscapes.

In the novel Shashi Deshpande presents a compelling narrative that challenges traditional gender roles, examines the negotiation of patriarchy, and highlights the quest for autonomy. Through the lens of feminist consciousness, Deshpande's exploration of reimagined gender roles offers critical insights into the complexities of women's experiences within a patriarchal society.

The novel portrays Jaya's journey as she confronts the patriarchal structures within her marriage and society, seeking to reclaim her autonomy. Her experiences provide a platform for reimagining traditional gender roles and exploring feminist consciousness.

Jaya's negotiation of patriarchy is reflected in her determination to challenge societal expectations and assert her agency. She declares, "*I have found my voice... I will not be silenced*." This demonstrates Jaya's conscious effort to defy the constraints of patriarchal norms and find her own voice and identity.

Through Jaya's quest for autonomy, Deshpande engages with the reimagining of gender roles. Jaya's pursuit of personal fulfillment and self-expression is an embodiment of feminist consciousness, as she resists the limiting roles imposed on women. She reflects, "*I have to be myself. I have to find a way of being myself in a world that wants me to be someone else*."

.Uma Parameswaran notes, "*In her portrayal of Jaya, Deshpande raises important questions about the nature of gendered selfhood and the role of women in society*." This observation highlights the novel's contribution to the feminist discourse by challenging the traditional narratives surrounding gender and autonomy.

Literary critic Sharmila Rege highlights the transformative power of feminist consciousness in the novel, stating, "*Deshpande's text is a site of feminist consciousness... through the narrator Jaya, she begins to question patriarchy and articulate her own subjectivity*." This recognition underscores the novel's role in challenging patriarchal norms and empowering women to redefine their roles and identities.

"I will not be shaped. I will not be moulded. I will not be silenced." Jaya's determination to break free from the constraints of patriarchy shows her resistance to societal expectations and her commitment to reclaiming her autonomy and agency.

In "*That Long Silence*" Shashi Deshpande skillfully reimagines gender roles and explores feminist consciousness through the negotiation of patriarchy and autonomy. The novel challenges traditional notions of gender, empowers women to question societal expectations, and advocates for their right

C. "Dark Holds No Terrors": Women's Liberation and Identity Politics

In Shashi Deshpande's novel *"Dark Holds No Terrors"*, the themes of women's liberation and identity politics intertwine to create a powerful narrative that challenges societal norms, explores the complexities of gender identity, and delves into the transformative potential of individual agency. Through the protagonist's journey, Deshpande critically examines the interplay between gender, societal expectations, and the struggle for self-realization. By exploring the characters' struggles and their triumphs, we will unravel the profound exploration of women's agency and the negotiation of identity within Deshpande's literary landscape.

The novel portrays the struggles faced by women in their quest for liberation and self-realization, challenging the prescribed roles and expectations imposed upon them by society.

One of the central themes is the exploration of women's agency in defining their own identity. The protagonist, Sarita, asserts her desire for personal fulfillment and liberation, proclaiming, "*I want to be myself, no more, no less*." This quote encapsulates the yearning to break free from societal expectations and embrace one's authentic self, thereby challenging the constraints of gender norms.

Deshpande exposes the patriarchal structures that perpetuate inequality and limit women's agency. Through Sarita's journey, the novel confronts the pressures placed on women to conform and sacrifice their individual aspirations. The narrative invites readers to question these societal norms and encourages the pursuit of personal autonomy and liberation.

"*Dark Holds No Terrors*" engages with the complexities of identity politics, highlighting the negotiation of self and the search for an authentic sense of identity within societal constraints.

Sarita's struggles with her own identity reflect the broader issues of gender and identity politics. As she grapples with societal expectations, she questions, "*Who am I? Who am I, really?*" This quote signifies the inherent tension between the roles assigned to women and their individual desires, prompting a deeper exploration of identity politics.

Deshpande's novel aligns with the feminist discourse that seeks to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems. Scholar Nayantara Sahgal recognizes the novel's contribution, stating, "*Shashi Deshpande's works embody the essence of feminist literature, where the negotiation of identity and the fight for liberation intertwine*"

Prominent feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak comments on the novel's significance, stating, "*Deshpande's characters negotiate complex spaces of gender, power, and selfhood. 'Dark Holds No Terrors' exposes the internal struggle of women against patriarchal structures and their search for an authentic sense of self."*

"*I am not a shadow. I am not an echo. I am not just a reflection of others*." This quote encapsulates Sarita's rejection of the prescribed roles and expectations placed upon her, emphasizing her agency in defining her own identity and challenging the limited narratives imposed by society.

Scholar Anjali Nerlekar reflects on Deshpande's portrayal of women's liberation and identity politics, stating, "*In 'Dark Holds No Terrors,' Deshpande highlights the ways in which women negotiate their identities within oppressive structures. The novel presents a nuanced exploration of the complexities of gender, selfhood, and societal expectations*."

Deshpande's novel goes beyond the surface exploration of gender and delves into the intersectionality of identities, recognizing the multifaceted nature of individuals' experiences.

The characters in "*Dark Holds No Terrors*" embody diverse identities and confront intersecting forms of oppression. The novel raises important questions about the intersections of gender, class, and caste, emphasizing the need to address these multiple dimensions in the pursuit of women's liberation and self-actualization.

Deshpande's portrayal of the negotiation of identities within a patriarchal society resonates with the feminist concept of intersectionality. Scholar bell hooks notes, "*Deshpande's characters confront the intersectional aspects of identity and oppression, illustrating the importance of acknowledging and addressing the complex layers of privilege and disadvantage."*

In *"Dark Holds No Terrors*" Shashi Deshpande masterfully intertwines women's liberation and identity politics to present a thought-provoking exploration of individual agency, the negotiation of gender roles, and the complexities of self-identity within a patriarchal society. The novel challenges societal norms, celebrates women's agency, and advocates for the recognition of multiple intersecting identities. Through Deshpande's nuanced storytelling and the characters' struggles and triumphs, "*Dark Holds No Terrors*" stands as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of women's liberation and the reclaiming of authentic selfhood within a world that often seeks to diminish and confine.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: EXPLORING FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S LITERARY LANDSCAPES

When examining Shashi Deshpande's novels, "*Roots and Shadows*" ,"*That Long Silence*" and "*Dark Holds No Terrors*" it becomes evident that they share several thematic threads that contribute to a broader understanding of feminist consciousness in Deshpande's literary landscapes.

One common theme is the exploration of women's quest for identity and autonomy within patriarchal societies. Each novel delves into the complexities of women's experiences and their struggle against societal expectations. Additionally, all three novels showcase the challenges faced by women in negotiating traditional gender roles and the tension between individual desires and societal norms.

Furthermore, the theme of rebellion and resistance against oppressive structures is present across the novels. The female protagonists challenge patriarchal ideologies, subvert traditional gender norms, and seek personal fulfillment beyond societal expectations. This rebellion often takes the form of questioning traditional familial relationships, challenging the silence imposed on women, and pursuing individual ambitions.

While the novels share common themes, they also demonstrate patterns and variations in feminist consciousness. The feminist consciousness depicted in Deshpande's works evolves and manifests differently in each novel, reflecting the diverse experiences and journeys of the female characters.

In *"Roots and Shadows*" the feminist consciousness emerges through the protagonist's quest for self-discovery and rebellion against societal expectations. Indu challenges traditional gender roles and pursues personal growth and autonomy. However, her resistance is somewhat tempered by the weight of societal pressure and the internal conflicts she experiences.

"*That Long Silence*" presents a more pronounced feminist consciousness as Jaya confronts the stifling silence imposed on her and seeks her own voice and identity. Her rebellion against patriarchal norms and pursuit of personal fulfillment showcases a growing feminist awakening and a demand for agency.

In "*Dark Holds No Terrors*" the feminist consciousness takes a more assertive form. Sarita's character demonstrates a strong rebellion against patriarchal ideologies, subverting traditional gender roles, and pursuing her own ambitions. Her journey represents a radical challenge to societal expectations, empowering women to assert their agency and shape their own destinies.

Examining the three novels allows us to reflect on the evolution of Shashi Deshpande's feminist perspective throughout her literary career. Her early works, such as "*Roots and Shadows*" portray a more nuanced and introspective exploration of women's experiences and the challenges they face within patriarchal structures.As Deshpande progresses in her career, her feminist perspective becomes more pronounced and explicit. "*That Long Silence*" and "*Dark Holds No Terrors*" exhibit a more assertive feminist consciousness, advocating for women's autonomy, rebellion against oppressive norms, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment.

The evolution of Deshpande's feminist perspective suggests a growing confidence in asserting women's rights and challenging patriarchal ideologies. It also reflects a deepening understanding of the complexities of women's lives, highlighting the intersectionality of gender with other social, cultural, and familial dynamics.

A comparative analysis of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals cross-novel thematic comparisons, patterns, and variations in feminist consciousness, and a reflection on the evolution of Deshpande's feminist perspective. These insights contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the feminist themes explored in Deshpande's literary landscapes, showcasing the diverse experiences and journeys of her female characters while highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and empowerment.

V. CONCLUSION

This research paper has explored the theme of feminist consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's literary landscapes, focusing on three novels: *"Roots and Shadows," "That Long Silence," and "Dark Holds No Terrors*." By examining the plot summaries, character analyses, thematic comparisons, and variations in feminist consciousness across the novels, as well as reflecting on the evolution of Deshpande's feminist perspective, several key findings and contributions have emerged.

Throughout the analysis, it became evident that all three novels share common themes, such as women's quest for identity and autonomy within patriarchal societies, rebellion against oppressive structures and gender norms, and the exploration of silence, domesticity, and the quest for freedom. The female protagonists in these novels challenge societal expectations, question traditional gender roles, and assert their agency and individual ambitions.

Moreover, patterns and variations in feminist consciousness were observed across the novels. The degree of feminist awakening and rebellion differed, reflecting the diverse experiences and journeys of the female characters. Deshpande's feminist perspective evolved from a nuanced exploration of women's experiences in her early works to a more assertive and explicit advocacy for women's autonomy and empowerment in her later novels.

This research contributes to feminist literary studies and gender discourse by highlighting Deshpande's portrayal of women's experiences, their struggles against patriarchal norms, and their quest for identity and autonomy. The novels serve as powerful tools for understanding the complexities of women's lives within societal and familial contexts. They challenge prevailing gender norms, shed light on women's agency, and provide insights into the barriers and possibilities for women's empowerment.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis underscores the significance of examining feminist consciousness across multiple works by an author, allowing for a deeper understanding of the evolution and variations in their feminist perspective. This analysis also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, as Deshpande's works explore gender in conjunction with other social, cultural, and familial dynamics.

In conclusion, this research paper has provided a comprehensive exploration of feminist consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's literary landscapes. The findings contribute to feminist literary studies and gender discourse by highlighting the themes, variations, and evolution of Deshpande's feminist perspective. The implications of this research extend to understanding women's experiences, challenging patriarchal norms, and advocating for gender equality. Further research in this area will continue to enrich our understanding of Deshpande's works and their significance in the broader context of feminist literature.

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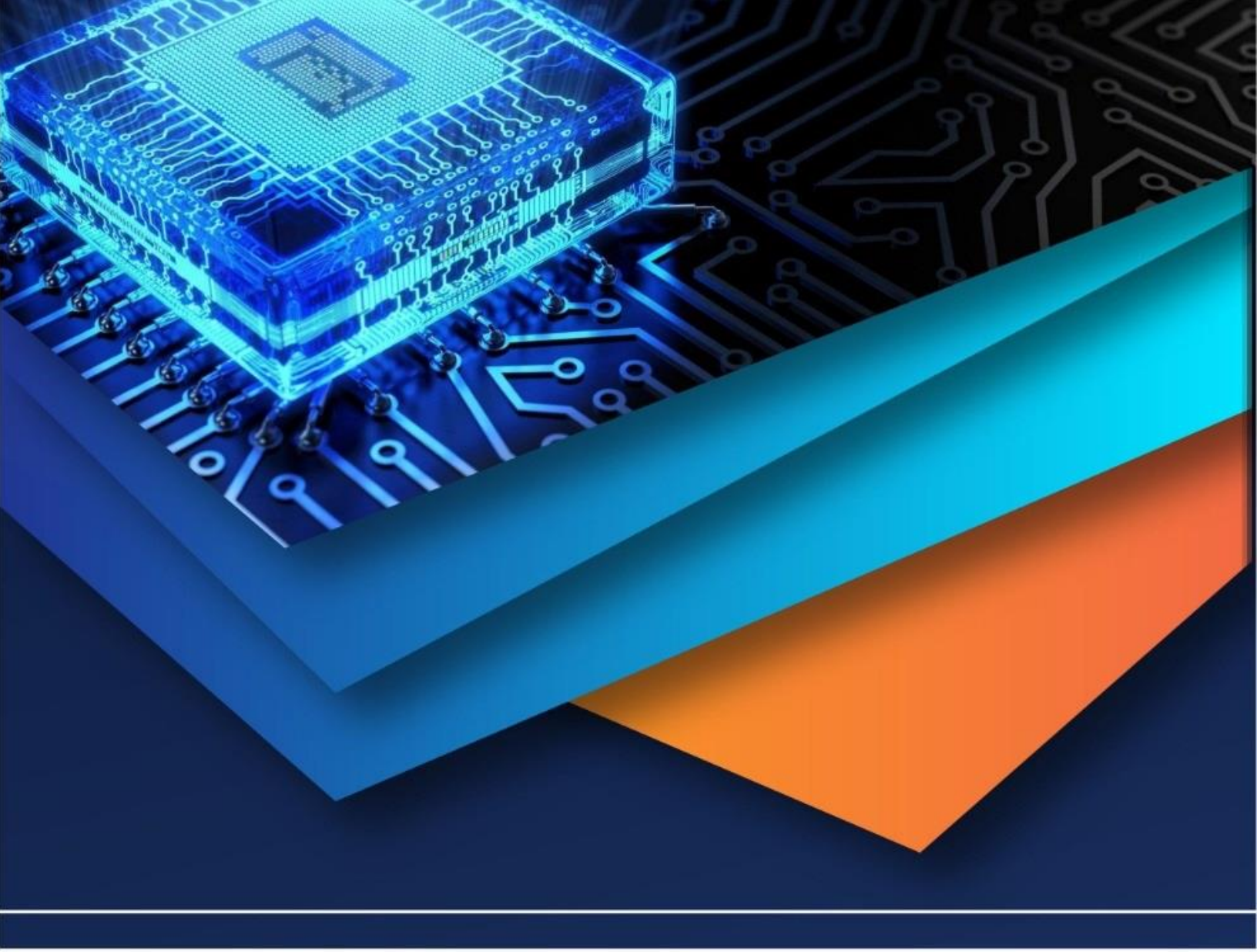

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