

Shashi Deshpande's Novels: as the Finest Examples of Modern Indian Feminism

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists, who concern themselves with the problems of women and their request for identity. She is a champion of weak, lonely, defeated, and the forsaken. The unhappy women in Indian society, Deshpande has presented a variety of women characters to show how they have to suffer for being women. She has presented characters of women of all groups and classes adolescents married, aged, neglected, persecuted, of course the prosperous and well-attended ones have been left out, perhaps because the champion 'the weak, the lonely, the defeated, the forsaken, the unhappy' had no concern whatsoever with prosperousness. Deshpande has presented a vivid picture of women.

Women today are determined to realize their full potential capacity and are ready to fight with anything that comes on their way. Today, the position of women in society has changed radically because of 'Feminist Movement'.

Feminism means different things to different people. Feminism, as a concept has vastly different meaning in India. In the Western context, feminism is a social, political, economic battle for rights of woman. In the east, however, feminism is only in the germ. There is only a nascent awareness that the woman, as an individual, is not sub-servants to the needs and desires of man, and alteration of social rules, with regard to the status of woman is necessary. Far from being a battle, or even a movement it is only a developing awareness. Indian feminine ideology is entirely different from Western feminism. In social life it is influenced by religious codes and the directives of the scriptures.

This paper attempts to study of Deshpande's major characters and traits of feminism in them.

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is known for her female characters. She portrays a huge gallery of females of Indian middle class society. After interacted with all females we feel that they are like us. They can be anyone among all of us. In our daily life or I must say in every next home we can find Saru, Urmi, Indu, Akka, Vanna, Nalu, Kalpna and so on. She portrays a true picture of Indian middle class society.

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly the most significant of the contemporary Indian novelists in English. She has taken for study the issues and problems of contemporary middle class women. Almost her protagonists are women; her heroines are sensitive, intelligent and career-oriented. She is one with Anita Desai and Nayantara Sehgal. She is not merely describing the pathetic life styles of Indian women but, trying to understand and suggest measure for amelioration. Shashi Deshpande is very recent author in Indian writing in English. Her contribution to the world of fiction dates back to the 70s. Initially she wanted to bring forth in her novels the changed society, but she is too much fascinated by her women characters' so that she lays more emphasis on women. She herself says that she knows how women feel and she knows the mood of India.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a niche of her own in the later part of the 20th century. She is known for her lucid and simple

narration. Her language is simple and elegant. She is known for writing a simple story depicting the struggle of the individual to live in the society despite several forces suppressing his survival. Being an author of the recent past, Deshpande reflects a realistic picture of the contemporary middle class woman. The predominating issues and terms in her novels arise from the situations that focus on women caught in the crisis of a transitional society where the shift is taking place from traditional to modern. In consequence, there are tensions emerging out of this scenario, wherein the Indian woman is caught.

Comparatively, Shashi Deshpande is newer in the scene of Indian English writing. However, despite the smaller volume of her writing work has drawn attention because of her detailed, sensitive, and realistic representation of the Indian middle class women in the domestic sphere. In her novels, the predominating issues and themes have emerged from the situations. It focuses on women caught in the crisis of a transitional society where the shift is taking place from the conventional to unconventional. She traces out the tension in which the Indian woman is caught in a transitional world. Deshpande, being the author of 70s and 80s, understands the women well, and has tried to project the realistic picture of the middle class educated women, who are financially independent. She portrays modern educated women who are sensitive to changing time and situations. They are aware of the social and

cultural disabilities, to which they are subjected in the male-dominated society. They want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but they find themselves up against well-entrenched social inertia.

The author presents her woman as daring to become economically and ideologically independent. She finds them caught in a conflict between individual aspirations and social demands. Her women protagonist 'Indu' in *Roots and Shadows* and 'Jaya' in *That Long Silence*, being women writers are torn between self-expressions and social stigmas, material and psychology. As Maria Mies observes:-

“Her problem arises firstly, from the contradictions between this image and Demand of the social situation and then from the discrepancy between new aspirations and the lack of o Her woman like ‘Saru’ succeed in overcoming social stigmas asserting their potential arena; Deshpande’s career women:-

“are not satisfied with the rhetoric or equality between man and woman but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities are realized in the their own lives opportunity.” (1)

It does not mean that ShashiDeshpande deliberately made women the focus in all her novels, she, in fact, wanted to portray the whole society, but she was fascinated by her women characters. The woman she portrays is undeniably a forerunner of the ‘doomed female’ (to use Raja Rao’s words) of modern India. The portrayal is quite unique i.e., she neither represents the old, orthodox image, nor a modern westernized woman. She is the ‘every woman’ of the Indian middle class society, also turns hard to rise above tradition but is involuntarily adopted into it.

A close study of her novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian woman, who feel smothered and fettered in a tradition-bound male-dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and limitations, but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mind-set. She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a male-dominated society. Now they are fully aware of their rights and fighting with society and homes for their existence. This is all because of feminist movement.

Feminism has now become a recognized genre and, in literary criticism, a recognized discipline. Casual concern for the emancipation of woman from the bondage of man can be traced since earlier times in the writing of Plato, Locke, Diderot and others. Part of it is there in the overall message of the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Human Rights. But at that time it could not be very vocal. An unassuming statement in Jane Austen’s novel ‘Persuasion’ gives expression to a feminist sentiment. Deshpande’s women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. They are conscious of the great social inequality and justice towards them. They struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms is rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained to them by society.

Although she has a small volume of writing to her credit, her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels.

Feminism is by definition is a movement to gain equal rights for women with men in social, political and economic fields. ‘Feminism’ means the difficulties she faces and suffers in the hands of man as well as by society.

Lisa Tuttle attempts to define in the following manner. The term feminism taken from the Latin word ‘Femina’ (woman) originally means ‘having the qualities of female’. It began to be used reference to the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women’s rights replacing womanize in the 1890s. The early editions of the Oxford English Dictionary defined ‘Feminism’ as a state being feminine or womanly, as did the 1901 edition of *The Dictionary of Philosophy*. By 1908 however, the *Dictionary de Philosophie*, as defined ‘feminism’ as a position favourable to the rights of woman. The Webster’s Dictionary, defines the term ‘feminism’ of as (a) the principal that women should have political rights equal to those of men, and (b) the movement to win such rights for women. Sandra Gilbert at its ambition, she asserts feminist criticism:-

“wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answer that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality; genre and gender, psychosexual identity and culture authority.” (2)

For some:-

“Feminism criticism was an act or resistance to theory a confrontation with existing cannons and judgement.” (3).

“a matter of negation within a fundamental dialectic.”(4)

“Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relation between woman and man in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family education, and welfare the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what for whom, what we are and what we might become.” (5)

Feminism is an expression of resentment against the unjust treatment meted out to women. It is the expression of the refusal of women to be treated as a doormat or a piece of furniture meant for convenience of man. Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is a struggle against hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. Feminism asks why women have played a subordinate role to men in human society. It is concerned with how women’s lives have been changed throughout the history, and it asks ‘what about women experience?’ It is different from men’s either as a result of an essential or ontological or psychological difference or as a result of historical imprinting and social construction. Feminist literary criticism studies literature by women for how it domination of women addresses or expresses the women’s lives and experiences. And it also studies the male-dominated canon in order to understand how men have used culture to further themselves. Bell Hooks argues:

“Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice.”(6)

The implication of the term ‘feminism’ cannot be restricted to the advocacy of woman’s political rights because it refers to an intense awareness of identity as an individual. According to feminist theory, the subordination of women originated in primitive societies in which women served as object of exchange in father dominated families that formed alliance through marriage. While such clan relations have changed its pattern course, dissolved and taken the form of sexual alliances. The modern industrial world is still by and large patriarchal in character. Men hold almost all the positions of politics and economic work. In such a way that women are more likely to be poor and men likely to be rich. They assumed room in many societies for woman is to be change of domestic labour and child rearing while men emerge in more public concern. According to some feminist, such continued male domination is a consequence of male violence against women. Social structure translates a historically continue threat of physical force. Rape and other forms of consensual gender relations that just happen to unequally tied in favour of men.

Indian feminine ideology is entirely different from Western feminism. In social life it is influenced by religious codes and the directives of the scriptures. Vivekananda in his lectures in America provided a marked contradiction in the two currents of thoughts. He appreciated that Indian womanhood can’t be defined in the context of canons. He stated:-

“In India the woman the visible manifestation God and her whole life was given to the thought that she was a mother and to be perfect mother, she must be chaste. The girls in India would die, if they like American girls were obliged to expose their bodies to the vulgar gaze of youngmen.” (7).

Deshpande’s uniqueness is that her protagonists are not rebellious but they learn in the course of their encounter with the harsh realities of life to generate in themselves the power to cope up with male-orientation.

An analysis of the novels by Indian women novelists with a feminist view reveal that these novelists have written with immense concern and suppressed world of Indian women come to full light for their rights. It will not be wrong to call these novelists the most powerful fore rumors of women’s liberation movement of India.

Today women should unite as they have nothing to lose but their fetters. Love, respectability and freedom will not come on golden platter. Women must work hard for it. Freedom will afford them a chance to improve their lot.

Thus, a new movement of emancipation was started and women were aware of their self-identity, not as a wife, mother, sister and any other relation but, as a woman with her own name and fame. Therefore in Victorian age lots of women writers emerged, who wrote about women and their rights in society and family. Virginia Woolf points out:-

“A woman must have money and room of her own.” (8).

ShashiDeshpande produces the middle class career oriented woman. Her ‘Sarita’ referred in the novel ‘Saru’ is the true representative of middle class Indian woman, her inner and outer struggle throughout the novel shows her more real than imagination. The female dilemma of Saru’s life, the exploration of woman psychology that how she behaves in that circumstance, how she wins the life and now no dark holds creates terror in her life. ‘Saru’ the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* suffers in her life and the last she wins from circumstances. The novel ends with lots of questions in our mind that Saru will survive in life or not; and what will be the reaction of Manu; would he understand he wife’s feelings and so on.

Saru is from traditional middle class Brahmin family protest for her life. She is presented simultaneously as an individual and as a female. She does love marriage with Manu a low caste man against the will of her mother. She says: - “my life is my own” (9).

The novel is about the quest of an anxious, eager, ambitious, self-assertive and self-righteous woman Saru who gains herself successfully. Her quest leads to uncover that strength in human beings which makes living a pleasurable possibility. Saru has desires like every woman has in her life. Her mother always restricts her to go anywhere.

Ai wants Saru at home and learns household works. Saru feels the oppressive dominance of her mother who insists on her conforming to the traditional ways of life. She took no interest in Saru’s education and personal advancement. Instead she constantly snubbed Saru for one thing or the other, denied her the love and attention which Dhruva, her younger brother was given. Her mother makes unkind remarks about her dark complexion without realizing how her words would affect the child. And so Saru grow up feeling herself an unwanted, unloved and insecure child. Her mother says,

Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll get even darker.
Who cares?
We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.
I don’t want to get married.
Will you live with us all your life?
Why not?

You can’t.

And Dhruva?
He’s different. He is a boy. (10)

The Roots and Shadows explore the struggle of Indu, who is an educated and modern girl. She comes to her paternal home for the funeral ceremony of Akka. She has been determined girl, who always wanted to be free and independent. She got married to Jayant her own choice like Saru. The major themes of this novel are Women and Femininity.

Indu strives to seek a new environment where nobody especially people like Akka, can exercise their wills on her. She marries Jayant, a man of different caste but of her own choice and leaves her parental home. Her marriage with Jayant suppresses her femininity and her human demands. She is physically and spiritually dissatisfied with her husband who takes her for granted and expects her “to submit”. Her love

towards Jayant makes Indu to accept what he wants and does. Her love marriage degenerates into a mere psychological affair and makes her feel that she has abused her body's sanctity. The paradox of the situation is that Indu is not completely happy with Jayant, but at the same time she cannot live without him. Indu speaks about her own incompleteness and says:-

“This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself. Until I had not known it.....that there was, somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant....and lost the ability of be alone.” (11)

Roots and Shadows present another facet of deprived womanhood through the character of Akka who is the youngest sister of Indu's grandfather. Akka had become the victim of the evils of patriarchal practices. At the age of twelve she got married to a man who was much older than her. Child marriage stifles her childhood which expounds to her the real trauma of being a girl. Her soul of a child wither when she has to tolerate the scathing and bestial sexual advances of her husband. Narmada-Atya narrates about panic-stricken Akka trying to escape her husband's brutality:

“But I heard that twice she tried to run away[...] a girl of thirteen. Her mother-In-law I heard, whipped her for that and locks her up for three days. Starved Her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband's room. The child, they Said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, ‘Lock me up again, lock Me up’. But there was no escape from a husband then. I remember her telling Me before my own marriage was consummated, ‘Now your punishment begins, Narmada’. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels.”(12)

Akka's story is an example of the suffering of a girl undergoes due to traditional evils like child marriage at the age of twelve to a man thrice her age and size; Akka becomes a victim of his lust. She fails to satisfy his fondness of woman and like feudal lords he had a number of mistresses. Akka's attempt to escape her nightly tortures by running away from home is foiled by mother-in-law who caught her and beat her up. In spite of being locked for days without food Akka would beg her mother-in-law in vain not to send her back to her husband's room. Through Akka's condition Deshpande brings out the brutish treatment of woman especially young girls in the name of tradition which compelled a wife to please her husband, no matter how brutal he was to her. She highlights the Indian tradition which had denied a woman any right over her own body and made her a victim of marital rape. As a result of such inhuman conditions, Akka begins to view sex as a punishment.

A woman's role is not only confined to the centripetal needs of the family in which she lives but also to its centrifugal needs. It is here that a woman has to be more than a submissive housewife. She has to become a ‘society lady’, as Shobha De would put it. Indu does not pride in her suffering. She cannot bear the suffering she has to face in the family and therefore breaks away from it and marries Jayant. In the family she was an incomplete being without a sense of the wholeness of personality. But with Jayant she feels a sense of completion and wholeness.

I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And Jayant I thought I had found the other part of my whole self. (13)

Through the character of Indu, Deshpande has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potential for creative writing. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service but her husband Jayant does not approve of this idea. He is a barrier to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that a person like Indu can do nothing against the whole system by wielding her pen:

What can one person do against the whole system? No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile gestures. We need the money, don't we? Don't forget, we have a long way to go. (14)

That long Silence has become the hallmark of women's existence is broken by Urmila, the protagonist of *The Binding Vine*. Urmila is one who ahead of her predecessors by her endeavors to help other women. Deshpande's latest novel *The Binding Vine* touches a chord in every woman as she responds to it with a recognition of her own doubts, complexes, fears, desires and suffering being mirrored in the narration of Urmila. As Urmila wades through the labyrinth of relationships, she witnesses experiences and analyzes the confusion and built the pain and anger; the joy and suffering-an entire emotional tornado surfacing in her turbulent journey.

The Binding Vine is about a bond among women of different types. Urmila the narrator of story is center who reveals the pain of women in their lives. Urmila is in pain of her daughter, she has just lost her. She feels helpless in the absence her husband. There are women surrounding her who are victims of patriarchy, tradition and dominance of male. Her mother Inni, long dead mother-in-law Mira, her friend cum sister-in-law Vanna, Shakutai and Kalapana. They all are victims of traditional bound society and marriage. Their upbringing in traditional middle class families made them mute sufferer in their lives. They bear load of feminity in their whole life. But some incidents of their lives made them rebellious or feministic. In the last of story they are ready to fight with situations and try to win it.

Urmi represents feministic traits. She differs from other heroines of Deshpande. Saru, Indu, Jaya are fighting for their existence, but Urmi raises her voice for another women surrounding her. She motivates Shakutai, and reveal truth of her mother-in-law, and provides opportunity to her mother to speak about reality. Feminism is not only about oneself, but it is a movement to gain equality for women in male-dominated society. Urmi has good relationship with Kishore, but being a Navy officer he cannot give her much time. This feeling of isolation creates a close friendship between Urmi and Dr. Bhaskar Jain. She understands her limit as an Indian woman. Now she decides that she would no more continue her friendship and be with Kishore, makes her a classic example of Indian middle class woman.

The Binding Vine discusses heroine's ‘sexuality’ and her ‘passion’. Today's women are deeply aware of their rights and duties, women feel that there is no excuse for keeping the down anymore. Feminine feminists reject man's freedom and women's subjection as natural phenomena. They discard male constructed rules of femininity and try to introduce their equality and their individuality. Many writers have come

forward to protest and to project and depict the real woman in their works.

In *The Binding Vine*, ShashiDeshpande makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape- a subject dealt with in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* where the protagonist Saru, is assaulted at night by her husband who vents his frustration on his wife as she becomes a successful doctor while he remains an underpaid lecture. In *The Binding Vine*, ShashiDeshpande portrays a man's obsession with his wife and her intense dislike of physical intimacy with him. The travail of the wife finds expression in a series of poems composed by her and discovered by her daughter-in-law Urmi, long after her death. Urmi's state of bereavement makes her highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of her long-dead mother-in-law Mira. She makes a desperate attempt to explore the mind of the young Mira by delve deep into the poems composed by her.

Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is a struggle against hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. Feminist literary criticism studies literature by women for how it addresses or expresses the women's lives and experiences. And it also studies the male-dominated canon in order to understand how men have used culture to further their domination on women.

So we can say that feminism is an idealist position but remain always in touch with the knowledge that the real not ideal, that it should change, and that it could change, if we could think a way through to enacting the necessary revolutions. Feminist theory is not prescriptive. It doesn't tell its readers/practitioners what to do, say, think, read. Rather it offers possibilities of approach, things you might do, say, think, read. The only prescription is that feminist theories must never

forget to be politicized in the joy of reading text differently. It is always offer some commitment to reading to real women's image. The task of feminist study is found a new language and our experience, our reason and our suffering, our skepticism and our vision. According to Showalter one thing is certain; feminist criticism is not visiting. It is here to stay, and we must make it a permanent home. It assumes the equality of sexes. It therefore is source of new awareness, power, consciousness and knowledge to women. Thus, the feminist principle is uncompromising pledge and an active antidote to exploitation and oppression of women it is against androcentric society that has hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities. Ultimately feminism aims at women's liberation and equality with men.

Deshpande's novels, we can observe a change corresponding to the change in the contemporary society. We notice that the plot begins with the problem of adjustment and conflict in the mind of the female protagonist; she expresses the frustration and disappointment of women, the experience of social and cultural oppression in the male dominated society. Her novels highlight the agony and trauma experienced by women in male-dominated and tradition bound society. The novelist exposes the absurdity of rituals and customs which only help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority. Deshpande's concern about the problems of women and their quest for identity make one to consider her novels as feminist leads. But she disappears the idea to label her novels as feminist texts and say:-

"A woman who writes of women's experience often brings in some respects of those experience that have angered her, roused her strong. I don't see why this has to be labeled feminist fiction."(Deshpande, 1985, p.33)

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