

A Study on Feminism in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: The Contemporary Writer

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Abstract – Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to emancipate women from male oppression. In the past, the work by the women authors has always been undervalued because of some patriarchal assumptions. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman. In literature, it refers to any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience. The inequalities against which the feminist have raised their voice of protest-legal, economics and social restriction on the basic rights of woman can be traced throughout history. The term 'feminism' has its origin from the Latin word 'femina' meaning 'woman' (through French 'femine'). It refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power at par with men on the grounds of 'equality of sexes'. In other words, it relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. The study aims to find out if Shashi Deshpande's women really assert themselves or somewhere in their assertion process conform to endurance. For the purpose of this study, all her novels have been considered, but the thrust of this research is on three of her major novels viz., The Dark Holds No Terrors, Roots and Shadows and That Long Silence. These three novels have won awards and have been translated into a number of foreign languages.

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INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian Novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer shriranga. She was born in 1938 Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. She published her first collection, of short stories in 1978, and her first novel. The Dark Holds No Terrors in 1980. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, for the novel 'That Long Silence' Her works also includes children's books. Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of many complex relationships. In her novels many men and women living together, journeying across life in their difference age groups, classes and gendered roles. The old tradition bound world consists with the modern, creating unforeseen gaps and disruptions within the family fold. Women's understanding becomes questionable as the old patterns of behavior no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become in tense of quests for self-definition, because it would not be possible to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by clarity about one's own image and role. Shashi Deshpande an eminent novelist has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focussing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a

part of them. Shashi Deshpande uses this point of view of present social reality as at is experienced by women. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives is also to present indirectly the fathers, sons and husbands the relation between men and women, and between women themselves. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. The words which we always associate with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. As in the 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', the life of Sarita who is always neglected and ignored. 'Roots and Shadows' explores the inner self of Indu, Mini, and Akka and Shashi Deshpande Shows the 'That Long Silence', Jaya is not a silent and make sufferer. In 'The Binding Vine' Mira has hated the way her mother has been surrendering herself to her husband and ever she has not herself identity. In the 'A Matter of Time' is an exploration of Kalyani, Sumi and her daughters Aru. Shashi Deshpande's fiction is an example of the ways in which a girl child's particular position, social reality and identity and psychological growth determine her personality. Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. Basically she writes about the situation of women and their failures in the fast changing socio-economic milieu of India. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in middle class society Starting a Shashi

Deshpande novel is like sitting in a railway compartment and resigning oneself to an endless journey into the night of middle-class India. The very proximity of the stranger sitting opposite is disturbing. On top of this, he, or most likely she, is the kind who will stake her territory with carefully rolled bedding, one who would bring out a stainless steel tiffin carrier and insist that you partake of a meal with her. At the same time Deshpande's skill is such that by the end of the journey you are completely enraptured in the lives of the people that she forces you to contemplate. The very blandness of her characters, the ordinariness with which she anoints them at the outset gradually works in their favor.

Consequently, more and more woman writers are articulating anxieties and concerns focusing on woman's issues and creating a body of 'literature of their own'. Feminist issues transcend all limits of nationality, race, creed etc. Woman writers have been echoing the feeling of marginality and expressing their revolt against the purely masculine world. One of the major concerns of the contemporary literature all over the world has been to highlight the plight of women, their increasing problems, their physical, financial and emotional exploitation, and their mental anguish in the male dominated society in every sphere of life.

Simon de Beauvoir's has proclaimed, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". The male writers have tremendously reduced woman as inferior and weak. The male domination in woman's life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society and the consequent relegation of woman to a secondary position seemed to have prompted Indian woman writers to take up the cause of women as their western counterparts. They stressed their need for women to break free from the shackles of their traditional position. The new woman voices a note of resentment as they fell stifled under the oppressive restrictions. She has her notions of life as portrayed by women writers.

The political scope of feminism has been broadened by the impact of Marxist ideology that has made feminists challenge sexism along with capitalism for both encouraged the patriarchal set-up.

Shashi Deshpande's women characters keeping in mind the various types and phases of the women characters expressed in her six novels are studied here and it tries to link these novels with the various phases of feminism.

Feminism is, indeed, a serious attempt to analyze, comprehend and clarify how and why femininity is or the feminine sensibility is different from masculinity or the masculine experience. Feminism brings into perspective the points of difference that characterize the 'feminine identity' or 'feminine psyche' or 'femininity' of woman.

It can be studied by taking into account the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of femininity vis-a-vis masculinity.' The male writers have mostly seen women as inferior and weak. Gendering and some sort of misogyny are evident in the texts written by men. They see men as 'superior sex' or the 'stronger sex' while women are seen as are the 'inferior sex' or the 'weaker sex'. Men are considered as logical, rational and objective, and, women are perceived as emotional, inconsistent, intuitive, subjective and lacking self-confidence.

But the modern woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her by the system. And it is their pronouncement in an overt tone that has created the difference also in textuality. It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the contemporary feminist ideology evolved and the female voice was heard with special concern.

Shashi Deshpande, the daughter of an eminent Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar Sriranga, is a widely acclaimed novelist who has ten novels and five volumes of short stories to her credit. Her father is called "the Bernard Shaw of the Kannada Theatre." Like her father, she has also won various awards such as "Thirumathi Rangammal Prize" and prestigious "Sahitya Akademi Award" (National Academy of Letters) in 1990 for her novels. She also won the "Padma Shri" award in 2009 for her valuable contribution as a writer. She also wrote the screenplay for the Hindi film "Drishti." She is a postgraduate in English from Mysore University. After her marriage in 1962, she went to England with her husband. After her return, she started writing short stories which have records of her personal life. Earlier her short stories were published in bestselling Indian Magazines such as "Femina," "Eve's Weekly," "The Illustrated Weekly of India," "Deccan Herald" and "J.S. Mirror." Later on, after getting popularity her short stories were collected in five volumes. These are: "The Legacy and Other Stories" (1978), "It Was Dark and Other Stories" (1986), "It Was the Nightingale and Other Stories" (1986), "The Miracle and Other Stories" (1986) and "The Intrusion and Other Stories" (1993). Shashi admits that three things were responsible for her development as an English writer. She says: "There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female" (Of Concerns 107). This statement clearly echoes the voice of a feminist soul in her. However, unlike the early feminist authors who chose to portray the subjugation of women in ordinary life, Shashi Deshpande moved a step further and made educated women as the subject of her writing and voiced the agony of such women who have to depend on their male counterparts for the choices and decisions of their life. In the words of Y.S. Sunita Reddy, "She gives us a peep into the

state and condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism” (Reddy 146). Neither her male characters are culprits nor do her female character sufferers. Infact, the female characters in her novels know their rights and they raise their voice against the male domination and women oppression. Through her novels she raises various issues related to women and her position in human society.

FEMINISM –A GENERAL STUDY

Feminism throws a challenge on the age-long tradition of gender differentiation. It attempts to explore and enunciates a new found social order to identify pertinent resolves to the real life problems in the light of traditionally gendered role-playing. Woman has always been projected as a secondary and inferior human being. This bias against women can be seen right away from the first day of creation. It is said that God is ‘male’ and it is said that, God after creating man made woman from the rib of man. As Adam, the first man on the earth remarks about Eve. “..... This is now, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman, because she has taken out of man” .It implies woman is secondary to man! Feminism stands a socio-economic movement, demanding legal and political rights for women.

The term denotes the movement for women’s equality, legal rights and about women living on equal terms with man and not pushed down, by law or culture into a subservient role and heavy further rights to her ‘body’. It is an anti-musculinist movement of the women, by the ‘women’ and for the ‘women’. The history of the modern western feminist movement is generally broken down into three ‘waves’ dealing with different aspects of feminist issues. The first wave movement comprises of nineteenth to early twentieth century dealing mainly with suffrage, working conditions and educational rights for women. The second wave belonged to 1960’s and 80’s dealt with the inequality of laws, as well as culture inequalities and the role of women in society. The third wave of feminism (late 1980’s to early 1st decade of 21st century) is seen as both the continuation of the second way of celebrating and asserting womanhood and feminine experience, thus emphasizing the difference as against the stereotype of main stream literature.

Within feminist criticism, the idea that women’s experience is critical response also draws its strength from the ‘consciousness-raising’ groups that were so crucial to the development of feminist theory. Consciousness-raising was as carefully structured a political exercise as the ‘speaking bitterness’ campaigns. It worked by challenging and recasting and interrogating authoritative interpretations of every dimension of social and personal experiences. The feminist reading has

targeted to certain features of social reality as intolerable and need to be rejected. The themes explored include patriarchy, sexual objectification and oppression. In literary theory, it challenges the patriarchal canons and the ‘third world feminism’ is explored.

FEMINISM IN INDIAN CONTEXT AS COMPARED WITH WEST

The feminist prospects and the feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women’s movements in developing countries like India. Unlike the western feminist movements, India’s movement was initiated by men and later joined by women. The efforts of this men included abolishing sati, which was a widows death by burning on her husband’s funeral pyres, abolishing the disfiguring of widows, banning the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows, the custom of child marriage, promoting women’s education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property and regulating the law to acknowledge women’s status by granting their basis rights in matters such as adoption, religious law and expectations or ‘personal laws’ enumerated by specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women legally should have.

However, the Indian women’s struggle for emancipation could not mimic its western counterpart for obvious reasons. Due to historical and cultural specificities of the region, the feminist movement in India had to think in terms of its own agendas and strategies. In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women’s emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman. The woman, in order to liberate herself and advance, needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject herself to patriarchal domination and control. The idea of women as ‘powerful’ is accommodated into patriarchal culture with traditional ‘cultural spaces’. Another consideration is that in the west the notion of ‘self’ rests in competitive individualism where women are described as ‘born free yet everywhere in chains’. By contrast in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of larger social collective, dependant for its survival upon co-operation and self-denial for the greater good. On the contrary, western feminist pay great attention to sexual life, sexual customs and the influence of sexual culture, there even appeared a trend of ‘sexualism’.

INDIAN FEMINISM AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN WRITING

In the Indian Feminist writing, the modern Indo-English writers have explored the human psyche,

inner climate and they distinctly unraveled the mystery of inner life in their woman characters. The contemporary Indian Women Writers have surpassed complexity of human relationship and the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate patriarchal conventions. Individualism is considered a western perversion and female individual space is unacceptable and inconceivable. Even today, strict emphasis is laid on social, cultural, domestic and personal aspects of life. In case a woman flaunts the rules and regulations of her family, she is blamed to ruin the honor and prestige of the family and is compelled to digest torture reluctantly.

The problems and predicaments peculiar to the Indian Women found artistic expression in the Indian Literature in English since 1970's. In the creative writing of contemporary writers like Kamala Markandaya, Kamala das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and many others started discussing openly the sexual problems of women and questioning the gender-role expectations. The female protagonists evince sufficient vigor and courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion and culture, but yet they refrain from taking the paths suggested by the western feminists, the custom of child marriage. They rather seek to find their own paths. Much reaction is evoked by such stereotyping as idealization of domesticity and passive roles for women alone. Sexualization and objectification of women as mere objects of males sexual, sadistic pleasure, humiliation and harassment of women both at home and at work place, sexual violence, crime and ill treatment done to women and male despotism can be traced out.

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S VIEWS ON FEMINISM

As The Study Attempts to Study Shashi Deshpande's women characters, her portrayal of women needs to be studied from a feminist angle. As an author of the '70s and 80s', she mirrors a realistic picture of the contemporary middle-class, educated, urban Indian woman. Her novels portray the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian woman and also analyze how their lot has not changed much even in the twentieth century.

Shashi Deshpande has made bold attempts at giving a voice to the disappointments and frustrations of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist. A look at her novels will reveal her treatment of major women characters and will show how the themes in them are related to women's problems.

Shashi Deshpande has exposed the gross gender discrimination and its fall-out in a male dominated society in her first novel *Roots and Shadows*. In the novel, she depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-

dominated and tradition bound society. She refuses to play the straitjacketed role of a wife imposed upon by society. Her quest for identity is tellingly expressed in the novel.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, her second novel, is about the traumatic experience the protagonist Saru undergoes as her husband refuses to play a second-fiddle role. Saru undergoes great 199 humiliation and neglect as a child and, after marriage, as a wife.

Deshpande discusses the blatant gender discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters and their desire to have a male child. After her marriage, as she gains a greater social status than her husband Manohar, all begins to fall apart.

Her husband's sense of inferiority complex and the humiliation he feels as a result of society's reaction to Saru's superior position develops sadism in him. Her husband Mann vents his frustration on Saru in the form of sexual sadism, which has been vividly portrayed by Deshpande.

That Long Silence, the third novel, is about Jaya who, despite having played the role of a wife and mother to perfection, finds herself lonely and estranged. Jaya realizes that she has been unjust to herself and her career as a writer, as she is afraid of inviting any displeasure from her husband. Her fear even discourages her from acknowledging her friendship with another man.

These three novels belong to her early phase and portray a mild form of feminism. *The Binding Vine*, her fourth novel, deals with the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmi to focus attention on the victims like Kalpana and Mira. Urmi narrates the pathetic tale of Mira, her mother-in-law, who is a victim of marital rape. Mira, in the solitude of her unhappy marriage, would write poems, which were posthumously translated and published by Urmi.

Urmi also narrates the tale of her acquaintance Shakutai, who had been deserted by her husband for another woman. The worst part of her tale is that Shakutai's elder daughter Kalpana is brutally raped by Prabhakar, her sister Sulu's husband. Urmi takes up cudgels on Kalpana's behalf and brings the culprit to book.

In *A Matter of Time*, her fifth novel, 200 Shashi Deshpande for the first time enters into the metaphysical world of philosophy. Basically, it is about three women from three generations of the same family and tells how they cope with the tragedies in their lives. Sumi is deserted by her husband Gopal, and she faces her humiliation with great courage and stoicism.

Deep inside, she is struck with immense grief, and tries to keep herself composed for the sake of her daughters. Sumi's mother Kalyani was married off

to her maternal uncle Shripati. When their four-year-old son gets lost at a railway station, Shripati sends Kalyani back to her parents' house with their two daughters. On his mother-in-law Manorama's request, when Shripati returns he maintains a stony silence for the rest of his life.

Kalyani's mother Manorama fails to beget a male heir to her husband, and fears lest he should take another wife for the same purpose. Manorama, to avoid the property getting passed on to another family, gets Kalyani married to her brother Shripati.

Thus, Deshpande has revealed to our gaze the fears, frustrations and compulsions of three women from three generations of the same family. *Small Remedies*, her latest novel, is about Savitribai Indorekar, the ageing doyenne of Hindustani music, who avoids marriage and a home to pursue her musical genius. She has led the most unconventional of lives, and undergoes great mental trauma due to the opposition by a society that practices double standards — one for men and the other for women.

VARIOUS OTHER ASPECTS OF HER NOVEL

During the survey of her novels various aspects and various dimensions of familial relationships emerge, there are mother daughter, father-daughter, brother-sister relationship with in-laws, but the much focused one is husband-wife relationship which is the foundation and base of family from where many new relations start taking shape and develop. The joint family of character is full of many more relationships uncle-aunt both paternal and maternal, their children and relation with them, the grand children's relation with their grandparents etc. But these relationships have been portrayed in a very realistic and transparent way, not always happy but full of sadness too. A family, has to live both with sorrow and happiness because it is inevitable, nobody can escape it an what kind of impact it leaves in the individual and his/her further life. Shashi Deshpande's writings hold a universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India - a society in which we breathe and a culture to which we belong. At the *Taj Krishna* where her latest novel *Moving On* was launched, the writer shared her feelings and perceptions with astuteness and creativity. With her uncanny insights into the nature of human relationships and an equally unerring eye for detail, Deshpande in her latest novel, ventures further than she ever has into the terrain of the mind, teasing out the nuances and exploding the structure of familial bonds. "A novel in two voices, *Moving On* was like an unexpected pregnancy. And like a late child it is filled with surprise." Deshpande's novels are specific, modernizing women even in their traditional milieu. Critics have said that *Moving On* will widen women's space. This is remarkable for this one time homemaker whose demeanor hardly betrays her strong convictions. These novels raise significant issues about the nature of reality, which is

never of the same kind. Writers have been criticized for their preoccupation with the real, and the unstated assumption is that creativity has to take us into higher zones of imagination. But the fictional world takes in many realms. Even as it works with history, memory and the past, even as it shapes nostalgia into a narrative, or projects the world into future time, it works with 'reality' and uses it in different ways such as experiential narratives, detailed description of landscapes, recreating visual memories reflecting concern with environment, coalescing several events together and integrating them, psychological realism which works with human emotions and responses, and at some point it also shifts into fantasy and other imaginary constructs, which do not fall into magic realism. Recurring dreams, psychological fears, even memory, which by its nature is selective and differently perceived by different people, are real enough in themselves, but nevertheless they disrupt the realistic narrative. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, we can find the variety of characters too. In Deshpande's literary world there are characters taken from almost all the sections of life. They are medical practitioners and writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and maidservants. Besides poverty, bereavement and such other common adversities, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering a woman has to undergo. Sometimes the suffering is attached to the social taboos, and sometimes the women are silenced in the name of family honor, and are compelled to digest torture.

CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande has presented in her novels modern Indian women's search for these definition about the self and society and the relationship that are central to women. Shashi Deshpande's novel deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship specially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence. The Indian woman has for years been a silent sufferer. While she has played different roles-as a wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. Shashi Deshpande's feminism is certainly not cynical or nihilistic. She analyses the universal significance of the woman's problem, thereby transcending the feminist perspective. She believes that feminism is "... very much an individual working out her problem." She is quite down to earth in her feminist approach to the woman's problem. For though she is aware of the seriousness of the Indian Woman's dilemma and the generation old struggles behind it, she also believes that a positive change in

women's social status cannot materialize without bringing about a change in woman's mindset first. The woman's increasing involvement rather than detachment in her predicament as expressed in her novels reveals the positive, humanistic side of Deshpande's feminism.

A close analysis of her novels leaves no doubt about her genuine concern for women. Her protagonists are acutely aware of their smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male-dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for identity within marriage. Deshpande's novels contain much that is feminist. The realistic delineation of women as wife, mother and daughter, their search for identity and sexuality as well, leaves the readers in no doubt where her real sympathies lie.

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