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JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Journey towards Self Identity in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract – Feminism and its crusade against a male dominated society is of special importance in the Indian context. 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. The words which are always associated with the concept of an ideal woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. But with the rise of feminism, woman became aware of the fact that her inferiority is not ordained in heaven, that gender is neither natural nor immutable, because it is a creation of patriarchy and patriarchy is not given. It is a construct which can be deconstructed.

Shashi Deshpande attacks patriarchy, enables matriarchy to emerge as a powerful structure encompassing that ever-widening chasm in a male-female relationship. She criticizes both male and female chauvinism and dislikes Western feminist formulations to avoid proper tenor of feminine discourse in India. She advocates certainly a healthy and mature version of feminism which demands not emancipation for woman but a far better role for her, complementing each other by means of healthy adjustments and true happiness.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism in Indian English literature, though initially was influenced by the Western feminist movement, yet it has its roots and very origin in Indian flavour because we have different ethos, different forms of social stratification and patriarchal domination in general. It has also got sustenance from our freedom struggle under the dynamic humanitarianism of Mahatma Gandhi, independence, spread of education, employment opportunities and law of women's rights.

Shashi Deshpande focuses on the inner world of Indian women. All her novels are concerned with a woman's inward journey. She presents a deep study of a woman's psyche. In other words she has laid bare those inner most feelings, yearnings, aspirations, hopes and longings fears and frustrations which are peculiar to women and which have never been given full vent in literature so far. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. As 'The Dark Holds no Terrors' the novel reveals the life of Sarita, who is always neglected and ignored in favour of her brother, she is not given any importance. In 'Root and Shadows' she explores the inner self of Indu, who symbolizes the new woman, who is educated and married to Jayant but her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed and Mini inculcates in her all the traditional feminine qualities since her childhood. Akka got married to a man who is much older than her. She has to tolerate the scathing and bestial sexual advances of her husband. Considering the woman as weak and dependent the Indian tradition had empowered the male members to

take control of her life. In 'The Binding Vine', Mira, is one such woman who becomes a victim of such traditions. A budding poet and an eager student, Mira loses her right to education because a man decides to marry her. With an obsessive love the man plots to get married to her, leaving her with no choice. Mira's unwillingness to marry and her interest in studies have no significance for the man, who nourishes the dream to possess her. Fearful that they may not get a better match, Mira's parents decide to marry her to a man much older to her in age, instead of letting her discover her poetic talents or pursue studies. Her fear of marriage and the right it grants to a man over a woman's body is expressed in her verse:

But tell me friend did Laxmi too

Twist brocade tassels round her fingers

And tremble, fearing the coming

Of the dark-clouded, engulfing night (P.66).

She writes about the situation of women and their failure in the fast changing socio-economic milieu of India and about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in middle class society. There are tremendous familial and cultural pressures on the heroines not to speak out the truths, but Urmi and Jaya ultimately succeed in telling the story of these invisible and silent women. In the novel 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' all the characters are inextricably blended in Saru who represents a reaction of society. Saru is brought up in a traditional

atmosphere but the education she received makes her a changed person with a rebellious attitude towards tradition. In 'The Binding Vine' the person in whose predicament Urmi gets involved is Kalpana or rather Kalpana's mother Shakutai. Shakutai hails from the lower stratum of society- the class of mill-workers & domestic servants who flock to Bombay from the rural areas of Maharashtra- particularly Konkan- looking for the means of livelihood. The women of this class are often abused and ill-treated by their husbands. However the traditional values are so ingrained in these women that they look upon the suffering and miseries inflicted by their men as belonging to the natural order of things or a matter of their fate. Shakutai's husband has deserted her for another woman. This story also reveals the duality of society which expects a woman to keep her marriage even if the husband is good for nothing whereas allows a man to walk out for no reason.

The social stigma attached to rape is highlighted through Kalpana's case. Shakutai urges the doctor to repress the fact that Kalpana has been raped, because her argument is "Who'll marry the girl, we're decent people" (P.58) In the case of a rape the social stigma gets attached to the girl and her people, and not to the male culprit.

The dominant oppressive male ideology is highlighted through Venu in Mira's story. Mira, who represents the woman of the past generation, does not have the courage to rebel against the male domination. She tried to realise her own 'self' through her writing. She was a budding poet but she was not allowed to develop her poetic talent first because she was a woman. Deshpande very skillfully throws light upon an important dark aspect of malechauvinistic society where man tries to suppress the artistic talent of woman and discourages her growth as an artist. Venu Gopal, a promising poet himself tries to strangle her voice saying: "Why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. This is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men" (P.127).

According to traditional Indian belief, the only redemption for a woman is her achievement of motherhood. She should not aspire to anything beyond her wifely and motherly roles. In this context the epigraph to the novel which is taken from Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" assumes significance: "What was the use of my creation, If I was entirely contained here". Being a mother, wife, or daughter or sister is important a woman. Deshpande does not deny that? But that is not or should not be the whole story about a woman.

A woman in the contemporary era has developed the urge to create milieus for the full expression of her emotional and moral self and what is important to her the craving to be accepted as an individual, a person in her own right enjoying the same status as man has always enjoyed. So she indulges herself in search of her real self-image. Mira, in the novel 'The Binding

Vine', also exhibits awareness of her position. She is portrayed as a sensitive and creative person who does not want anyone to intrude into her privacy. Even in her books she writes, "this book is mine as all can tell, if you steal it you will go to hell" (P.40). The appropriation of woman's bodies and minds is initiated at the time of marriage with the change in name; the survival of past traditions in today's India is made plain when we see Jaya, in "That Long Silence", renamed. Mira is rechristened Nirmala, the name even Urmi had known her by before she discovered her as Mira.

Who is this? None but I

my name hence, bestowed upon me.

Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still.

Do you build a new without razing the old?

A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold

Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira (P.101).

The changing dynamics of female bond in mother-daughter relationship is also highlighted through Deshpande's fiction. She does not give much credence to the image of mother as an angel or goddess who is valorized in our culture. Her mothers are human and therefore fallible- as her women are human. A number of mothers or mother-figures have that patriarchal ideology so ingrained in them that they treated their daughters as second class citizens and this often leads to bitterness and estrangement between mother and the daughter. Most of the female protagonists of Deshpande reject their mother as role model because the latter represents to them limited options and a narrow outlook on life. As Mira in one of her poems stated:

To make myself in your image

Was never the goal I sought (P.124).

The rejection of mother in a way is necessary for the assertion and development of a daughter's personality. Awareness of the self along with the awareness of alternate ways of life and means to achieve that life can foster a change in the role, image and status of women. Awareness of one, without the other only aggravates the suffering of women.

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly the most significant of the contemporary Indian women novelists in English. Women who constitute a half of the world's population, are paradoxically not treated on par with men in all spheres of human activity. They are confined to their homes, oppressed and marginalised in the matter of sharing the available opportunities for fulfillment of their lives. Even in the modern, changed ambience, her position is still inevitable as she stands on threshold of social change, intensely aware of her exploitation – socially, economically and politically- by man, she attempt to voice her bitter feelings of protest, but in doing so, she has to reckon with the prospect of social

ostracism for questioning the sanctity of time honoured and time tested tradition.

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