

A study on Shashi Deshpande's views on feminism

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Abstract

The term 'feminism' has its origin from the Latin word 'femina' meaning 'woman' (through French 'feminisme'). 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 term became popular from the early twentieth century struggles for securing women's suffrage or voting rights (the suffragette movement) in the western countries, and the later well-organized socio-political movement for women's emancipation from patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: Feminism, women, rights, society

Introduction

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 is feminity 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 'feminity' of woman.

It can be studied by taking into account the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of feminity 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'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.

Even as a child she was a victim of gross gender discrimination. Besides, Madhu the writer of her biography, narrates her own life story and also those of her aunt Leela and Savitribai's daughter, Munni.

Research Work

Shashi Deshpande's novels mainly portray women from the middle class. For her creative expression might be:

- (a) Her own background as she hails from a middleclass family,
- (b) She is pre-occupied with the social forces at work in society: the clash between the old and the new; between idealism and pragmatism: and
- (c) The middle-class woman in her works represents a larger part of the contemporary Indian society.

The woman she portrays is undeniably a forerunner of the "doomed female" of modern India. The portrayal is quite unique. Her protagonist neither represents the old, orthodox image, nor a modern westernized woman, and she is the 'every woman' of the Indian middle-class society, who tries hard to rise above tradition but is involuntarily adapted to it.

It is not difficult to agree with the view that in Shashi Deshpande's novels, we observe a change corresponding to the change in the contemporary society. We notice that the plot in

her novels begins with an unconventional marriage and later on deals with the problems of adjustment and conflicts in the minds of the female protagonists and ultimately portrays their endeavour to submit to the traditional roles.^o

Shashi Deshpande maintains a unique position among the contemporary, up-coming Indian writers in English. Many writers appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family.

Shashi Deshpande has minutely dealt with the phenomenon, arriving at the conclusion that women, after attaining all types of rights, are now struggling to adjust rather than to get free from the traditional world. She deals with the middle-class woman who represents the majority and covers a wide area in the modern society. She takes up women characters very carefully.

The female protagonists in her novels are:

- (1) Young girls who can be led astray. For example, in *Come Up and Be Dead*;
- (2) Married women who suffer silently. For example, *That Long Silence*; and
- (3) Working women who, most of the time, are out of the family and come in direct contact with society. For example, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*."

Woman in Shashi Deshpande's novels is initially an unconventional one. She willynilly submits herself to the tradition, perhaps realizing the wisdom of the traditional ways at this stirring moment of the transitional phase of society. Ultimately, she is an appendage to man or family. Though economically independent, she is emotionally dependent on her husband. In Shashi Deshpande's novels, the protagonist's growth towards an honest acknowledgement of responsibility for her own repressed state is shown in her earlier novels as well as her later novels.

Themes and Characters in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

Among Indian women writers Shashi Deshpande is specifically committed to the reorganization of female subjectivity. Her concerns related to the feminist questions are important in the interest of an Indian feminist-praxis. Her fiction holds a great promise and helps us in finding ways in which the historical location' of Indian women can be interpreted in terms of their subordination accentuated by law, sacred literature and practice.

Deshpande's feminist ideology stems from her belief in 'self-striven' approach towards women's empowerment or what S. L. Sharma terms as 'empowerment without antagonism' in her article of that title. She refuses to indulge in 'adversarial-orientation' or intemperate expressions towards men. She attributes profession to her protagonists as a 'strategic interest' which enables them to enter the prevailing and androcentric system and to dismantle their politics.

Deshpande's treatment of issues like Indian woman's autonomy, identity, space and desire may lead to an Indian model of feminism which will be workable, honest and more viable for indigenous condition. Instead of providing tales of female victimization she seems to be concerned with the idea of 'how women can live afresh?'

Deshpande provides a revised version of Indian women's world as her protagonists come out of the bedrooms, kitchens and attics to articulate and reconstitute their lives through their 'feminist awareness' and introspection. Deshpande's novels

record polyphonic voices behind every structure and relationship which have contributed to silent Indian women. Muted by society and patriarchy her protagonists feel crippled by a sense of inferiorization, non- entity and loss of 'self.'

Deshpande's novels encapsulate the tensions underlying women's aspirations and their cultural identities. Their urge for self-definition culminates in the identification of the areas of conflict. They are encased and suffocated in the patterns of androcentric culture and their desire to perform is taken over by the necessity to conform.

These women are steeped in the conventions and customs of a patrilineal society which dislocates and alienates them from the process of being and becoming. Deshpande's novels are polemical attacks against the patriarchal world, where women are treated as a 'kind of non-man.'

Like Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan, Deshpande also argues that male assigned roles of wife and motherhood entrap women in the masculine plot of desire and thereby marginalize them from other socio-political, economical and creative spheres of life.

Conclusion

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.

Shashi Deshpande was so fascinated by her women characters that she laid more emphasis on women. Shashi Deshpande says that she knows how the women feel and she knows the mood of India. It has been observed that the predominating issues and themes in her novels emerge from the situations that focus on women caught in the crisis of a transitional society where the shift is taking place from conventional to unconventional. She traces out the tensions in which the Indian woman is caught in a transitional world.'

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