



Sashi Deshpande and Her Women Protagonists- An Analysis

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ABSTRACT:- We believe that Women are neither inferior nor superior human beings but one half of the human race. We believe that women (and man as well) should not be straitjacketed into roles that wrap their personalities, but should have options available to them. We can believe that Nature, when conferring its gifts on humans, did not differentiate between males and females, expect for the single purpose of procreation. Women's efforts to seek their independence and self-identity started as a revolution, the feminists and suffragists were condemned by the patriarchal society for adulterating the minds of women with the idea of liberation from their suppressed and encouraging them to eschew the blind subordination to the established traditional dogmas.

This paper analysis Sashi Deshpande's women protagonists and their struggle to prove their identity in society.

KEYWORDS:- Sashi Deshpande, Feminist Writing, Women's suffering, Women Identity

Shashi Deshpande has revealed the unique and lonely condition of Indian women whose rights as human beings are axed by the orthodox society. The orthodox society expects the women to be vassals, thus, their self-identity and individuality are always sidelined. Shashi Deshpande's feminism talks about emancipation of women not only legally but socially too. Women are not going to recuperate from their deprived state until they are socially acknowledged as human beings. Even the economically independent women find their lives torn as under between traditionalism and modernity. Being an Indian, Shashi Deshpande has meticulously and poignantly revealed the Indian social system and the conventional norms designed for its women.

She has portrayed the modern, educated; middle-class Indian women who want to attain their self-identity as well as restore their family ties. All her novels depict the female protagonists entangled in different complexities of marital life and relationships they pursue. There is a persistent urge in them to solve the labyrinth of their lives in an effective manner. Shashi Deshpande has portrayed different kinds of women. Her early novels project docile, passive, submissive and weak women like Saru in the Dark Holds No Terros, Sunitha, Cynthia, Shantha and Meera in If I Die today.

Shashi Deshpande states about her women characters in an interview to Vanamala Viswanatha:

"My characters take their own ways. I h've heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are. Most of the women I've known are like that- their decisions are made for them. Due to being over protected, they are people who think one way and do another.(235)"

Shashi Deshpande highlights in her novels that modern women are more assertive and confident yet they are unable to liberate themselves from the limitations associated with each role assigned to them.

Deshpande penetrates to the hearts of issues related with women and their lives. Deshpande defines feminism as a constructive force which in the patriarchal social set-up should emancipate women from their subordinate position without destabilising human relationships and family bonds. Her feministic ideology not only advocates the social emancipation of women by repudiating to submit to patriarchal oppression, but also suggests that women should realize their potential and assert their self identity. In her novels she has projected the modern, middle class Indian women who are struggling to overcome their subordinate position in the male -dominated society. Her women have an optimistic attitude towards life and hence solve the predicament of their lives with a hope for a better future. They do not negate the family life. Reaining their identities as wives, mothers and daughters, they finally restore their individuality and assert their true selves.

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Deshpande may or may not be a formal feminist, but her novel is both actual feminine writing and potential feminist writing. It is patently the work of a woman on the life of a woman in India. It is also an attempt flashback to psychoanalyze the woman, till she reaches the self-knowledge necessary to enable her to answer the question the novel enunciates.(1991:116). Many female writers such as George Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Dorris Lessing, Anitha Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Dalip Kaur Tiwana, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobhaa De and many others, and a few male writers like Thomas Hardy, Mulk Raj Anand and R.k, Narayan, in their many writings, have analyzed the female psyche, the inner turmoil of women, the culture and context-specific problems of women and have expressed the need for a transformation in the age-old negative attitudes of the society towards women.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonists' place in it.(2002;42) Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it.(2002.42)

Roots and shadows (1983) is Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel. Indu, the struggler, represents the educated, middle class women. The story of the novel is about the struggle of the protagonist who has a lot of obstacles to cross and achieve freedom. Being smothered in an oppressive male-ag and tradition-bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality. "...Indu, a rebel, often wished to be free and unrestrained. Thus, she is presented as a model against women belonging to the older generation".

Indu, the protagonist in *Roots and Shadows* shares the fate of Sisyphus. Her crime is to reveal long hidden inner world of women in general and Indian in particular. In an article, G.D. Barche opines; "She is suffering in our world and her suffering is deeper and deadlier than Sisyphus' as he was to roll up only one stone, while she is rolling up many, viz. The ideal of Independence and completeness, the concepts of self, sin, love the ideal of detachment and freedom, and so on.(1989;48)"

Indu comes back to her parental home after a gap of eleven years, to attend her cousin Mini's marriage being performed in the traditional manner in their ancestral home. She had left home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loved. She represents new generation and reviews everything with reason and new visions. In his article "Image of Women in Shashi Deshpande Novel *Roots and Shadows*; A Critical study," Ramesh Kumar Gupta aptly remarks:

"She explains the ideal of detachment and liberation and tries to achieve them. She tries only to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. But unfortunately, she fails, culture and tradition, or fear of stigma, or timidity, or all these combined together(2002;43). *Roots and Shadows* depict the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and traditional-bound society."

That Long Silence (1988) presents the suffocated life story of Jaya who plays the role of a wife and mother, despite her every sacrifice, she finds herself lonely and estranged. The protagonist realizes that she has been unjust to herself and her career as a writer. The quest for an authentic selfhood by the protagonist finds an artistic expression through her rebellion against the patriarchal dominance in the society. Jaya is an unsuccessful writer. Her creative urge and artistic selfhood by the protagonist finds an artistic expression through her rebellion against the patriarchal dominance in the society. Jaya is an unsuccessful writer. Her creative urge and artistic zeal free her from her cramped domestic and societal roles. She resolves to assert her individuality by breaking that long silence by recording on paper which she had suppressed for seventeen years.

The Binding vine (1992) deals with the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmil to focus attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira. Urmil, the protagonist, has just recovered from her personal sufferings than she got involved in the disclosure of an accused who had raped Kalpana brutally. She further reads the poem of Mira, her mother-in-law. Rape has always been a horrible indignity heaped on woman by man. This violence becomes bad to worse when it occurs in the sanctity of a marriage. Mira's poetry is all about it. In spite of her over-solicitous mother, Inni and skeptical friend Vanna, Urmil is determined to have these poems published. Throughout the novel, the novelist voices the injustices meted out to women particularly in the matter of sexual exploitation. The most striking fact in this novel, unlike previous ones, is the co-operation she extends to the women of other families. The novel ends with Urmil recollecting the bonds of love that provides the "spring of life" to human existence.

Small Remedies (2002) is the latest novel by Shashi Deshpande. Her protagonist is still the urban, middle-aged and educated woman, but her canvas has broadened to encompass a cross section of people who belong to different communities, professions and a level of society. Madhu Saptarishi is not much different from her counterparts Indu, Sarita, Jaya, Urmil and Sumi in age, education and family background. Madhu Saptarishi, the protagonist, has been commissioned by a publisher to write a biography of a famous classical singer, Savitribai Indorekar, doyenne of Gwalior Gharana who had led the most unconventional of lives. Consequently she had to undergo great mental trauma due to opposition by the society which practices double standards- one for men and other for women. Besides it, Madhu narrates her own life story and also those of her aunt Leela and Savitribai's daughter, Munni.

Through her portrayal of the Indian middle –classwoman’s existence In India, Deshpande not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. By tradition she means those values of security and harmony that symbolizes the Indian way of life, while modernity essentially refers to the assertion of the independence, individual self. Her protagonists, at the beginning of their quest, find that they have passively accepted their socially ordained roles. Deshpande advocates that to realize herself, the woman must be true to her own self. The sacrifice and nobility that is expected of the woman is a stereotype that only bogs down the woman in a mire of negation and suppression. The woman needs to venture out of the familial framework, to discover her potential as an individual and give expression to her inner space and self. At the same time, she need not repudiate her marriage or family.

Eventhough Deshpande’s primary focus is the man – woman relationship in Indian marriages she also concerns about the exploration of various human relationships within the family- for example , the relationship between mother-daughter, father-daughter, sibling etc.

Deshpande looks at constructions of womanhood especially in the context of the social and cultural conditions that exist in India- the oral tradition of telling stories based on our epics and puranas, plays, dances, songs, poems, jokes, movies and tele –serials. She sees myths as a referral point in our lives, internalized and part of our psyche, ”part of our personal, religious and Indian identity”:

How we see ourselves collectively or individually, it depends on our tradition. They are part of the human psyche, part of our cultural histories. The myths present role models and images that women are expected to adhere to:’ to be as pure as sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annaporna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga – these are all the ultimate role models we cannot entirely dismissthe example are it seems held out only to women. It seems odd that it took us women so long to realize this truth, to understand why this is so.

Deshpande locates the notion of feminism in her specific context: ‘feminism, I read somewhere, is a movement that has grown out of and built upon prevailing social needs. I can see how true this is in India, where it has grown out of our own society, out of local specific issues and has addressed them directly.

Women –centred narratives in her novels have led many interviews to ask her as to what extent does she consider herself a feminist. Shashi Deshpande says;

“I now have no doubts at all in saying that Iam a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it.

A possessive and mutual study of Shashi Deshpande’s novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian women, who feel smothered and fettered, in a tradition- bound, male dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their faith, hopes, desires, 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.

Deshpande’s women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later wives. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them, and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and 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. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, the protagonist undergoes great mental trauma in her childhood and in marriage due to her husband Jayant’s double standards. Ostensibly educated and liberal, he is intolerant about any deviation on her part from the traditional role of a wife. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a telling example of men who are intolerant about playing a second –fiddle role in marriage, and how their manhood gets hurt when their wives gain a superior status in society. In that long silence, Jaya’s troubles in marriage stem from her husband’s intolerance towards any deviation from her role of a subservient life. In *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande raises the issues of hitherto untouched issue of marital rape. Women like Mira, Urmi’s mother –in –law has to bear the nightly sexual assault by their husband silently. *A Matter of Time* is yet another novel where in the husband walks out on his family comprising the wife and three daughters. Sumi, the protagonist, is so shocked that she lapses into complete silence but, apparently tries hard to keep things normal for her daughters. Her desertion is a cause for great humiliation and mental trauma for her as it’s not only a matter of great shame and disgrace but a bitter realization of being unwanted. Words of sympathy from relations fail to console her.

Deshpande’s work may then be situated in the context of the complexities in the construction of, a Indian womanhood as reflected in the specific historical conditions of the women’s struggle in India and the way women were represented, a texts, the significance of the threshold for example, Deshpande’s interviews and essays discussing the conflict of the urban woman structured by tradition and modernity.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are a realistic depiction of the anguish and conflict of the modern educated middle class women. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and independence on the other, her protagonists feel themselves as a human being. Deshpande's concern and sympathy are essentially for the woman. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. Besides revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self respect and self-identity, the author lays bare the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression. Deshpande's primary concern for the woman makes her a feminist writer.

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