



Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract: Shashi Deshpande is one of the renowned Indian writers in English. Her writings focus on the lives of women who are suffering under the patriarchal construct. Women in India since ages are suffering in the male-dominated social structure of the society. They are suffering physically, emotionally, financially and privileges, but not able to get their rights as par men. Many hurdles and restrictions are coming up, refraining and socially in their diverse ways of life.

But with the passage of time women started to achieve the light of education. They are now started struggling and fighting for their rights them in their cry and voices against the discriminatory social set up. Even though they are educated and even become the bread earner, they are dominated in one way or the other by the male-oriented Indian society. The study has been undertaken in the light of this theme, analyzing the life of women as depicted by Shashi Deshpande in her novels.

Women in Shashi Deshpande's novels

For centuries women have not been given a proper place of their own, denying their rights and privileges. This resulted in the failure of their own individual development which leads to the lack of responsibility in most of the cultures. They have been treated as a class of oppressed people whose problems and voices have been unheard, while they remain subjugated and marginalized due to gender discrimination following the patriarchal construction of high and low, superiority and inferiority, self and other and so on.

Generally speaking, women's silent suffering becomes real rather than metaphysical in a patriarchal society. They survive only under the impositions of men and are still treated as a second sex. The long oppression of men makes them weak and they refrain themselves from coming out in open conflict with the society. The case is more complicated in modern India where women have been caught between tradition and nature. Despite modern opportunities open to women, their role becomes subservient to the existing male formed ideas and assumptions. Thus, they are the victims of social exploitation, gender discrimination, that appear in various forms of oppression – social, political, economic, sexual, cultural and psychological. Shashi Deshpande makes an unstarling labor to explicate this state of women in her novels in its diverse aspects concentrating on the discrimination of woman as a gender class and or the other liberated women.

True, Indian women are treated as a class of oppressed people, a separate section who are marginalized and subjugated under gender discrimination and patriarchal construct. As a result women's subversive ideology, socially, politically, sexually and at economical level comes out challenging the male centered ideas and gender based society. This becomes an intricate issue before us. Gender, which is the social construct that divides male and female as oppositional categories with unequal social values, is something that hinders the life and living of every woman in the society. It is not necessarily indicative of the sexual differences between male and female but

it is a politically set rules with numerous mechanisms of expressions and impositions by one sex over the other. And in this game of power men controls women. He is 'self' and she is 'other'. What Showalter says may not be missed:

...gender is not a question of difference, but which assumes that the sexes are separate and equal; but of power since in looking at the history of gender relations we find gender asymmetry, inequality, and male dominance in every known society .1

Hence women's demand for just laws and for empowerment of women is a threat to the entrenched power positions. Thus women have to fight against this schematization by men, and intensify their struggle for their basic rights to life and self-dignity. It might be true that in our country today PATIVRATA NARI (dedicated to her husband) days are numbered. But the truth is that man still rules the roost, and Indian women find it hard to apply to the ideas of the western feminist in a more radical way. In general the tradition-bound, and husband-wife bond is respected to a great extent. However any treatment of women by means as sub-human species is strongly opposed to the women. Sexual equality and equal treatment should be the birthrights of women in India. Thus Shashi Deshpande remarks to an interview by Geeta Gangadharan which says:

..I have a strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been look upon as 'breeding animals' . They had no other roles in life; I have a strong objection to treating any human being in the names....²

History shows that there had been quite a long time in which women were subjugated. Social and cultural laws were framed for complete suppression of women. It was not until the early part of the 19th century that in many parts of India Sati was not banned, as for example. Women could not celebrate their achievements, and voiced their hopes and aspirations. It is only when Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the Indian behind the revolutionary reform for women sets the foot for the women's place in the society. Roy which fights away 'Sati' later preached ascetic widowhood for women, in the name of religion .Then came Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar who launched a crusade for remarriage of widows and female literacy. He not only fights the rigid conservative contentions in favor of child marriage, polygamy and purdah, but Roy's previous assertion that widows ought to live a life of religion and renunciation. And though the remarriage act was passed in the mid 50's, it failed to produce much effect. Women's education was still a far cry. Students mostly from the upper class of the society trickled into ones and twos to the handful school for girls. The female form was yet to emerge out of centuries of incarceration. And condemn the repressive male, declaring her own preference and take charge of her own life.

Roy and Vidyasagar's reform movement were yet to move to masses. Moreover, they were yet to apply to touch a chord in the intelligentsia and inspire it to regard women as a being in her. It needed a visionary to give her a voice. To demolish the age old myth that was formed to serve father, husband, son and so on. Further it is to paint an impending reality where she could love and yet again, with an abandon to swept away all established sanctions morality. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was a visionary, the first Indian feminist, rebel poet and playwright. His campaign of the underdog would take it upon himself to uphold the most backward, most oppressed section of the society and he did just that. Dutt's 'Berangana Kabya'(1862) was dedicated to Vidyasagar , the great crusade for female literacy and widow remarriage . The book was one of the first to celebrate the value of women. The title itself marked the emergence of the female voice, women who questioned their men and breaking the social order fearlessly. Heroism in the traditional sense is not the intrepid transgression of the limits and customs of the society. It was one thing to champion the cause of women's emancipation, a section of the intelligentsia was at the helm of it all. But it was quite another thing altogether to think of her as a flesh and blood person. One who was not battered daily beyond any consciousness of her own, voice her own doubts. Seeta of 'Seeta Banarbas' was hardly an embodiment of the Renaissance Woman. The women are still unquestioning in reverence of their husband. Their allegations do not stem from the everyday difference of domesticity. Rather these women bring a showdown before an audience. They bring their personal feelings and experience out in the open. And give not only their discontentment merely, but also voiced the demands of their rights.

In a manner of following their footsteps, Many Indian women feminist voiced their perils and predicaments. Mention may be made of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Athia Hossain, Shashi Deshpande and Shantha Rama Rau etc. who thought and write similarly reflecting the Indian Women's

conflicts and problems. This made R.S.Pathak comments:

Their chief contribution consists of their exploring the methods and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of their women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and achieve a new harmony of relationships with themselves and their surroundings.³

Thus it is to be made clear that Shashi Deshpande approaches contemporary Indian novelists with an open mind presenting the life of the middle-class Indian women, educated with the real sense of the world. Probably, the light of education awakened her women characters to struggle for independence.

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad, Karnataka, India. She was born to a renowned writer and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar, popularly known as Sriranga. He was a person who wrote many plays of ideas. Shashi Deshpande is an intellectual person who won degrees in Economics, Law and English and a diploma in journalism. She has acquired the intellect and scholarly mind from her father who loves reading and writing poems and plays. Besides she got the encouragement from her husband who was a commonwealth scholar.

Deshpande's writings got the attention and applause of the reading public; a widely read person even though she doesn't belong to any section or group of writers. She read many books and more interested in the works of Somerset Maugham, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy. She was further influenced by the Bronte Sisters, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing and Erica Jong. She got the inspiration and influence of her writings from Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer. Even though she got many inspiration from the Victorian and Modern works Shashi Deshpande can be term as a writer of her own. For the first time she got her works made to be published through her father to the 'Deccan Herald'.

Thereafter she started publishing her works with her collection of short Stories called The Legacy and other stories. Her other collection of short stories are It Was Dark, The Miracle, It was the Nightingale and The Intrusion and Other Stories. In these short stories she had started unfolding the life of woman and their Problems and prospects. She depicts the life of the contemporary Indian middle – Class society with woman to find and preserve their identity as mother, wife, sister, and daughter and after all as human beings.

Then she put her hand on the writings of fiction with The Dark Holds No Terror (1980), If I Die Today (1982), Come Up and Be Dead (1983), Roots and Shadows (1983), A Matter of Time (1992), That Long Silence (1988), The Binding Vine (1992), A matter of Time (1996). In addition to this Shashi Deshpande wrote many other books for children and is still writing and publishing books contributing a whole lot to the book lovers of the world as well as for social reformation. Among her books she was awarded the Thirumathi Rangammal best Indian novel 1982 – 1983, for her novel Roots and Shadows. She begs the Sahitya Academy Award in 1991 with her fiction That Long Silence. She is not fully satisfied with her writings so far and is still finding for the green pastures.

Shashi Deshpande created female characters of flesh and blood but not harsh enough as compared to other female characters created by other writers on woman. Her women are characters with their own strength, challenging hostilities under the male-dominated culture and society. They have got strong personalities that cannot be crushed and destroyed by the authoritative patriarchy. Shashi Deshpande, in her novels gives a clear reflection about women's struggle and achievement through her works. Her writings provides a clear vision to bring out the revolt of women for equality and liberation against the traditional voices and different assumptions about women. Her writings focus on the images of oppressed women as seen in the patriarchal Indian society and on the other hand the rise of the new women, liberated and conscious, who are capable of deciding their own destiny and of self-determination on the hand. Shashi Deshpande is concern with being women on the basis of their potentiality. Women, then have to struggle to deconstruct the socially imposed gender roles to bring forth their identity and importance in this masculine world.

Significantly, in her novel, The Dark Holds No Terror, she explores the social taboo of women and their perception in the lower status and women's economic independence with Saru as the main protagonist breaking the patriarchal construct. Saru deconstruct the traditional way education and becomes a medical practitioner by going against the wishes of her traditional parents. She fights back the brother-fixation that has been haunting since childhood. She even promotes inter-caste marriage by marrying Manu (Manohar) of the lower class.

Here again the novelist brings forth the problems faced by women when entered in the marital core that are under the strict patriarchal authority of the husband. Thus Saru (Sarita) who is a successful woman outside as a

doctor but a victim at home at her husband's hand. Hence the writer seeks to be recognized as a person rather than as a woman with an independent social image. Thus the novel perfectly breaks the social conventions and patriarchal ideology that subordinate women to men in familial religious political, economic, social, legal and artistic domains which hampers the socialization of women sections.

In 'If I Die Today' there is the reflection of the women's condition in the domestic and married life. There is the presentation of the fractured marital relationships occurred where education, economic independence and motherhood disturb the existing equation. There is the picture of the traditional Hindu male who longs for a son; the sole heir of the family and property. Even the educated Dr. Kulkarni in the quest for a son silently torture the wife; without words, making his wife fully dependent on him. Admittedly, in Come Up and Be Dead the activities of women are exhibited with their problems and perils out of their presence in the society as a female sex. There is the exposure of violence against women where murder is employed by men as an instrument of oppressing women. Besides, the novelist gives the representation of females being suffered under the tradition-oriented parents. Thus with Kshama, Deshpande fights for women's independence from the stronghold of female domination; became economically independent and frees herself from the marriage institution; which itself is the way for women's total submission to men.

'Indu' in Roots and Shadows is presented rejecting the dominating roles assigned to women to serve men's purpose. She is undergoing a journey towards deconstructing the gender and sexual differences to break the traditional male autonomy enforced by the masculine world. Her fights and protest are against the injustice done to women under essentialism and biologism. Indu is the character of Deshpande who can muster her ability and coverage against patriarchy without any fear.

Similarly in That Long Silence, the novelist is protesting against the treatment of women in our culture through her protagonist 'Jaya'. Hers is a futile search of a woman's true self inside the bonds and purview of the middle-class respectability. She is a self-conscious, sensitive and creative. She is undergoing an introspective psychological journey towards self-actualization. But due to the devastating effects and long suppression of her personality makes her psychologically ill and, nervous and schizophrenic. It is thus a protest in the form of questions pertaining to gender issues and Indian women's position. Besides it is the character's attempt to give another version of history from the women's point of view.

Likewise in The Binding Vine the novelist shows women who are deprived of love and happiness in this male-dominated society. The novel gives the direct account of rape within and outside marriage; with Mira suffering under marital rape and Kalpana being rape by her uncle when she refuse to marry him. Economic deprivations and rape becomes the main instrument used to curb the spontaneous growth of women in the novel. It is here that Shashi Deshpande brings out the protagonist Urmila (Urmi) to fight against such oppressions; recreating the experiences of her dead mother-in-law, Mira. Therefore the novel is an educated, career-conscious women's search for the role changes in this strange world under the changing circumstances. It is the novelist's struggle to assert the issues of equality, freedom and equal rights against female oppression.

Again in another novel A Matter Of Time Shashi Deshpande highlight the issues of rape, death and decay. Here three generations are put forward to express the bitter of marriage and married life as against the original sanctity and compatibility. Here Aru is the main protagonist who fights against certain differences that reside in the male-female relationships. With her Deshpande is reflecting the present stage which is the point of culmination between tradition and modernity. Aru herself is the bridge between the old and the new. Thus Shashi Deshpande is deconstructing such tradition of oppression, creating a combined women voice of protest. She is de romanticizing the image created by men along with the way of using her anger and resentment towards a positive end.

Admittedly, Shashi Deshpande moves towards the theory of feminism but is unlike the hard-core feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir or Kate Millette while solving the women's problems under the Indian context. Probably, feminist heroin is recognized to move from Jane Austen, through Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir to Kate Millette and Elaine Showalter. But there is no exact definition of feminism as it is according to different culture and society. In the western countries it is settled issue but in the third world countries it is confliction and discussion. This made Chaman Nahal express that feminism is the mode of existence in which the women is free of dependence syndrome of the father, husband, community, religions community and political

community . Once people are free from the dependence syndrome, all will be equal. Feminism beside is a doctrine of equal rights and equal opportunities, sexism and sexual autonomy. It is a political movement to throw away sexual suppression. Because of patriarchy women are suffering and are thus related to the conscious raising group. This makes Feminism a literary theory.

It is in this manner that the novelist, Shashi Deshpande exposes the lives of women, mainly Indian women in general, who are suffering under the harsh rules of patriarchy. Thus in her novels, the novelist created her female protagonists reconstructs women's experience to voice for their oppressive living. She is struggling to free the women from their trapped female psyche, and transcend her boundaries. Hers is the projection of female domination and their resistance from the patriarchal ideologies.

The projection of the predicaments of the middle-class women, their conflicts and quest for identity marks the feminist ideology of Shashi Deshpande. She could make her protagonists such as Urmito speak up and help Kalpana at the end encompassing the strategy of womanhood through love and women emancipation. It has been made in such a way that shows the craving of the new women to assert her individual-self and the realization of her sexual demands.

With Shashi Deshpande's protagonists there is the shift from the earlier observation of sex to have sustain the man- woman relationship to woman sexual emancipation of the modern time t Indeed all her novels deal with women issue The change is an explication of the multiple difference and desires of women; an exploration of border in the history of women. In fact it is an achievement of Shashi Deshpande's struggle for women sexual emancipation, freedom in the various stages of politics, social, education and in economics, which becomes true in the modern Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande juxtaposes her educated, strong-willed, questioning and career oriented protagonists with the whole lot of self-negative 'feminine' characters and achieves the desired effect. The main protagonists' personal experience with the accumulated knowledge leads to self-analysis and here we see the progression of the female psyche through the phases of limitation, protest and self-discovering.

Shashi Deshpande brings out the Indian women of our time who are neither demi-goddess nor strong-minded super-heroines. She portrayed a world of evil dealing with death, mystery and mischief with the characters enduring and interesting. They are educated middle-class women, but vulnerable consequently because of an inalienable bond of tradition. They continue their life, returning to the society but with an achieved personhood, self-realization and a voice of their own. It is with a strong motive and desire to create an ordered society out of the perplexity in the surroundings.

Her novels are the proof of her comprehensive understanding of the woman's reality and plight in India from the grass root level. Besides she even questions the gender issues and woman's position within the bounds of the middle-class respectability. Her protagonists adopt the life of a middle path (ie) let themselves live on their own and allow others to live. She does not resist women to dream of their own to assert their own ways and voices. Beyond the numberless anguish, pain and sufferings she allows their women to overcome their own sense of loss and despair and rise above all sense of misunderstandings.

Unhesitatingly, Deshpande's highlighting of the modern educated young woman through her novels against the centuries of slavery, sufferings and suppressions brings about a great revolution in the history of woman. This changed new woman has become conscious their destination. She realized her dreams of liberating herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs forced on her by the male dominance. She has been able to shake off the old aged fear- fear of unloved, misjudged, misunderstood and failure that had been haunting her throughout ages. Shashi Deshpande thus fruitfully makes the woman conscious of her own rights and responsibilities, distress and destination.

Besides Shashi Deshpande's women refused to be crushed and destroyed under the strong threat of hostile male-domination. Her women rebel against the sexist discrimination and questions the man's double standards and dual morality. She is striking against the sexist stereotypes of the male authority thus seeking freedom not in social and economic spheres but also of their emotions, as well as body and mind. All her novels amplify male's use of physical strength strengthened by patriarchy in the female sexual subordination. Therefore she explores rape that has been employing since time immemorial to dump woman physically, emotionally and psychologically is deconstructed. Through her works she clarifies rape within marriage as a crime and the means to curb the

spontaneous growth of women.

Shashi Deshpande is consequently re-examining the women's place in the society seeking her identity in the process. It is the existential struggle of a sensitive soul against the oppressive dual standards adopted by the male chauvinistic society. Her women professes self-respect thus protesting against intimidation and humiliation meted out to them. Her female characters refused to be crushed and bowed down before the male authority. Such is Deshpande's feminine sensibility and introspection that imparts a human touch and psychological depth to women of the world.

Her women are those that strive for self-expression and achieve self-fulfillment within the code of their own surroundings. Such extensive exploration of the existential struggle of these hypersensitive and highly individualistic women clearly signifies her feminist concept and as a feminist writer even though she cannot be compared to the hard core western feminist.

Admittedly, it can be seen from her novels that the women are passing through a transitional period. Her expression in the novel *Roots and Shadows* gives the looks of the change and a message to the modern women which say – "Assert yourself. Don't suppress it. Let it go and flourish never mind how many things it destroys in the bargain."(115). She further gives the idea that the equality and liberty between man-woman relationship can be brought not by the constitution and law alone but through love, respect, mutual understanding and by the erasing of the inflated egos.

Deshpande further made it is remarkable that gender is only a concept of power. It is the social construct that divides man and woman into two sections with man as the superior and woman as the 'other' and man as the subject and woman as the object. The novelist here confirms and exposed that the difference is only biologically hence the division is man-made. It is with this newly accepted rules and forms that the women have generally changed; psychologically and emotionally. She made her characters leave their place of disillusionment giving a space to make them conscious and realizes them. This consequently brings transformation at the domestic space and all that relates to their living. It is thus mostly the man who needs to change and left the others to woman.

Significantly, today's gender roles have been reversed. Instead of challenging and discarding sexist stereotypes of male aggression and destruction, it is reversing and justifying them as expression of our social behavior. Generations have changes, resulting to the drastic and immediate changes socially, politically, economically and psychologically. It is a symbol of protest against the centuries old male oppressions. It is not only to liberate woman but to establish a just man-woman relationship.

In all ways Shashi Deshpande is a representative Indian women novelist depicting the Indian life, culture and tradition; a writer who strives for woman's liberation through literature. Her works provides a realistic insight into the female personality development, their perception and inter-personal relationships. She is delving into the life of the Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity; the burden of the past and aspirations of the future. As a woman writer she visualizes womanhood with their own sensibilities and unlimited confidence in the power of human intelligence for achieving order and equality in the dilemma-ridden situation of the conservative Indian tradition. Successfully, at the end Shashi Deshpande could allow the woman emerge with a subtle growth of confidence and self-assertion after a process of catharsis.

Now more women are working today than there was a generation ago, more girls going to schools and more women seen protesting in streets, squares and in homes. Their looks have not changed, their manner has. Individually they have gained a name, collectively an identity. Their new power was not imposed on them but already existed, enclosed within walls.

Power has now been stirred out into the open, with new strength from their defining personalities. They step out of an enclosed reality into one that is large and more diverse and mobile. Women are no longer fragile, withdrawn, muted or delicate- toned thread in the strong aggressive colors that crossed and re crossed to weave the background tapestry of her life. Violence and aggressive in her writings thus reveals the various subtle forms of violence against women and their reaction to it. Her novels project the cherished ideals of the women's incorruptibility and independence of mind.

She is making the common mass to act against violence even though it is not easy to shake off the social and cultured conditioning which requires women to be passive victims and men to be victimizers, it can still be done, and their silence can be broken.

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