

THE FEMINIST CONCERNS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande does not reject the truths, the myths about women in Indian society but gives them a meaningful and creative reinterpretation so that women can revision their ideas about themselves and discover what is important for them. Her writing comes out of a deep involvement with the society she lives in, it is a kind of an archeological exploration out of which new discoveries emerge. She rejects stereotypes and in each novel, she is questioning the attitudes that have shaped the image of women.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Dilemma, Conflict, Traumas, Agonies, oppression, victimization, Fragmented, Disintegration, Existential, Absurdity, Subjugation, Domination, Marginalization.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande, born in 1938, is a committed and conscientious writer. Her plots are derived from traditional patriarchal middle-class society. Deshpande's main effort is to find a space for women to stand in patriarchal society. Her real contribution lies in the reflection of conditions and situations of middle-class Indian women.

Her novels are generally centered on family relationships like mother-daughter, husband-wife, brother-sister, father-daughter relationship and their emerging dilemmas and conflicts. Her writings grow out of her experiences as a daughter, and most importantly a woman whose life has more meanings than all these roles that the male-dominated Indian society imposes on a woman. Deshpande calls for equal status for women. No one is inferior or superior in her eyes and being a social writer, she imagines an ideal man-woman relationship in the family.

Deshpande explores the traumas and agonies of being a woman. She concentrates on woman's quest for self-definition. The strength of Deshpande's work is her awareness of gender-disparity, sexual division of labor which begin at home and which are deeply rooted in the public and private lives.

She analyses various patterns through which urban women try to empower themselves. In many cases external sources of financial support, and women's entry in social and political system supplements their courage and confidence. Some of them have tried to sustain strength and confidence. Sociologists argue that in spite of the constitutional provisions for women in India, problems like female infanticide, widespread harassment of brides, rape, eve-teasing, molestation and increasing violence against women speak clearly of women's oppression, deprivation and suffering. Deshpande points out the 'scarcity-syndrome' experienced by a large number of working and non-working women who fail to procure a share in property, material aspects of family and control over their earning and above all their contribution in the decision-making process of the family and society as well.

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Deshpande delineates working women both as a subject of victimization as well as agents of change. Working women appear in her novels not merely as the passive victims of an oppressive ideology but also as active agents of their own positive constructs. She also recognizes 'difference' in the understanding of gender-issues, which have specific roots in linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, political, sexual and psychological grounds. She deconstructs the misnomer of unified subjectivity by delving deep into fragmented subject problems. With the dissolution of unitary subjects, it becomes easier for Deshpande to facilitate feminism with a difference. One step in this - direction is her construction of women subjects within their social positions which is evident in her treatment of middle-class working women. She imparts plentiful details on the interplay between individual lives and particular social structures.

Her protagonists go through three different stages - the balanced general routine of life, struggle for self and state of wisdom. Shashi Deshpande perceives and depicts the entire situation in three stages at once individualized and interdependent. The first stage in this threefold process of progress of the protagonists is leading to realization. In fact, self-awareness and acceptance of the idea is described as down right pure, unsullied form of life. In the second stage the protagonist gets caught in a state of terribly discouraging conflicts when they come to lose sight of all values that are good, abiding, and constructive and for this reason conducive to life. Finally, in the third stage the protagonists attain positive realization of their potentialities which had been hitherto subdued and overshadowed. Thus emerges the truth about absurdities of life and consequently a steady wisdom of life. It expresses Shashi Deshpande's concept of belief in the ultimate soundness of life.

Her own upbringing in cities like Bombay and Bangalore provided her the necessary background to present the lives of her protagonists against the backdrop of metropolitan cities. Ever since her early days she evinced avidity for sober studies in hours of seclusion and found remarkable comfort and companionship in books. Later on, Shashi Deshpande's intellect came to be matured by the trail-blazing ideas of great writers like Virginia Woolf, D.H.Lawrence, Raja Rao and Anita Desai. Her reading of these writers had a great impact on her creative sensibilities. This influence gave tone and direction to her mind by awakening her to deep psychological concerns of an individual caught in a trap-like situation. Her preoccupation with such new themes is an evidence of her departure from the preceding modes of fiction writing in India. She is not bound by any specific school or circumscribed by a particular tradition. Shashi Deshpande is more interested in portraying the response of sensitive mind enveloped by the world.

Shashi Deshpande was greatly impacted upon by the atmosphere of her age of ferment that was virtually governed by a state of uncertainties, doubts and changing social values. A comprehensive study of that time reveals a state of disintegration in various walks of life in the post-independence era. The social factors conditioning human life, that witnesses a partial transformation of social reality and values, have significantly helped Shashi Deshpande to think and evolve a possibility in terms of order in the face of chaos. There has been an alarming change in social reality and values after independence. Being bewildered by the confusion of traditional and modern outlook towards life and for that matter towards the world, the individual finds himself standing between the two worlds. She is confused with the existential dilemma only to find her in a dark pandemonium of absurdity.

A writer for whom Somerset Maugham was a beginner's fancy and Jane Austin a lasting influence, Shashi Deshpande considered herself as a writer apart, neither in syn with Indian women writers of before or after. She, unlike Kamala Markandya, locates her female protagonists in urban spaces who have grown up in educated, middle-class milieu; and unlike the women in Anita Desai's fiction her protagonists are 'Indian'. Although Shashi Deshpande, applauds Salman Rushdie for his brilliance yet finds him, at times, incomprehensible, and Vikram Seth cumbersome. She considers *A Suitable Boy* to have a fine novel concealed in it but it is smothered by excess baggage. What this means is what G.S. Amur in his preface to Shashi Deshpande, *The Legacy & Other Stories* (1978) so rightly describes as Shashi Deshpande's forte: "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being..." (10). Neither is she a path breaker, nor does she strive to create people larger than life; neither does she take up issues of marginalization nor is she overwhelmed with the postcolonial phenomena. She is down to earth, earthy weaving stories out of the everyday affairs of common, next-door neighbour people. She depicts Indian womanhood in its essence but disapproves of the use of "Indian - consciousness perched on top like a cherry on a wobbling pile of ice-cream" as she says in a *Times of India* column (11 August 1996).

Shashi Deshpande is primarily a self-taught writer beginning her career rather late in life. She tells Vanamala Viswanatha in an interview (*Literature Alive*, 13 December, 1987) how she accompanied her husband, a commonwealth scholar, to England and there began writing her experiences in a journal lest she forgot them. Those experiences were published in *Deccan Herald* through her father. It was there that she joined *The Onlooker* as a sub-editor. On the suggestion of a colleague she penned her first story. That was the beginning and since then there has been no stopping. Her first collection of short stories, *The Legacy and Other Stories* came out in 1978 to be followed by *It was Dark*, *The Miracle*, *It was the Nightingale* and *Intrusion and Other Stories*. In between the novels took shape: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *In a Country of Deceit* (2008), *Ships That Pass* (2012), *Shadow Play* (2013) *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015).

Besides, she has also written four children's book, a Memoir, *Listen to Me* and a book of collected Essays, *Writing from The Margin and Other Essays* (2003). *Roots and Shadows* was awarded the Thiruvananthapuram Rangammal prize in 1982-83 and *That Long Silence* received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1991. However, as she voiced her angst to Geetha Gangadharan: "None of my books has so far realised my dream of a good novel. I wish I will one day be able to write one such book which will survive the test of time. My best book is yet to come" (Indian Communicator 20 November 1994, ii).

Her major works are women centered and revolve round complex relationships. She looks at women of different ages, classes and in various gendered roles but what draws her attention most is the man-woman relationship especially bound together in marriage. Within such a togetherness she explores the myriad distancings that cause rifts and which create unpalatable wounds. As Deshpande probes into the fractures and fissures of womanhood she lays bare the quest for self-definition that underlines the germ of all conflict. Positioned in an old-world order, the women in her novels strive to create a new-world for themselves. Her women rebel, they rise up against being taken for granted, they revolt against the prescribed norms of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Her protagonists cannot be silent sufferers as women are wont to be in a patriarchal society. She depicts the neglected and ignored Sarita of *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, the Jaya of *That Long Silence* who is forced to speak out for herself, the Mira of *Binding Vine* who hates the way her mother had surrendered to the whims and fancies of her father. Her novels portray women in various stages of being overcome by the pressures of a male-dominated society. Reading her novels is like taking a journey through middle class Indian society replete with their constraining value systems that deter women from breaking the insular parochial chains and rising to free themselves of the shackles of bondage. Her protagonists live blank, ordinary lives and it is this that fills the reader with outrage of how this can be acceptable in this century. It is their concerns and anxieties that glue us to her stories as to how the unstated entrapments will be overcome. Her female narrators seem to echo what Simone de Beauvoir proclaimed, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one." However the personal is political and Shashi Deshpande very subtly unties the binding vine over a matter of time with small remedies till the dark holds no terrors and women break out after their long silence.

The three things that have been the making of Shashi Deshpande are that she was the daughter of a writer, that she had the best education and that she was born a female (*Of Concerns* 107). It is these that determine her life and feed her writings. She therefore took up the cause of educated women and portrayed their agony against subjugation. YS. Sunita Reddy is perceptive enough to uncover in these three makings of the writer her concerns. Reddy says, "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" (146). However, it is significant that though it is her aim to reveal the sufferings of her women protagonists, Shashi Deshpande does not portray her men as culprits or her women as sufferers. It is the way the society is structured that inequalities appear and destiny tries to manipulate the course of lives, yet the women protagonists subvert domination and emerge victorious in their attempts to turn the wheel of fate and fortune. Of course, the path taken to redeem themselves is neither strident nor rebellious as their western counterparts would have it, but within their cultural specifics they try to change in their own way. They adjust, accommodate and even so succeed in having it their own way. Shashi Deshpande understands the larger scope of her women's' being and within that compass consolidates their inner spaces. The innumerable disappointments and frustrations that they suffer gives them further spur to come into their own. No straitjacketed role of a wife, playing a second fiddle to their male counterparts for Deshpande; neither is the adverse cynical or nihilistic turn acceptable, what she believes in is a gradual coming of age of both the sexes in order to ease out the furrows created by tradition.

Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists are products of a constrained 'cultural' history who endeavor against all odds to discover themselves and reclaim their lost selfhood. They have come to loathe their marginalization because education has raised their awareness. But they are no superwomen. They live simple lives and seek to change their predicament not be rebellious but by understanding and courage to stand their own ground. As Urmila in *Binding Vine* says, "I am not going to break" (19). Shashi Deshpande believes in healing not breaking be it the self or society. In a telling interviews with Geetha Gangadharan (1994) she outlines her feminism thus:

I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species... I think the fact that we are human is much more important than our being men and women.(4)

Her feminism to not narrow, it is not man vs woman, she is mirroring felt experience. As she acknowledges to Lakshmi Holmstrom in *Wasafiri* (1993): "my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings" (25). When it comes to her women protagonists, they are indeed feminists of a Deshpande brand trying to come to terms with their lives, clearing their minds of the cowebs and undoing knots that society has created. She believes in wifehood, in motherhood, these roles are not imposed upon woman, they come naturally to her but what these roles demand is a balance and not a one-sided onus on women alone. These roles that women play are a part of human relationship and must be viewed relationally, with relative participation, s to say. Indeed these relationships are not one sided, neither are there clear demarcations of who and how these relationships are to be carried out. They are satisfying, they are complex as they are intriguing and fascination. When they get entagled there is no one way to release their ends. Shashi Deshpande gives the various entanglements that can happen in human relationships and in each of her novels depicts one way to resolve the crisis. Each one of her novels is a part of the whole way of living life together. Thus, she is more of a humanist than a feminist in the way she tackles the dilemmas of life. Also, these are no patented solutions that she arrives at, for each relationship is a novel one and its misadjustents call for a unique resolution. Each story is a different mirror and each reflects a different story that gets refracted into myriad hues.

Shashi Deshpande, perhaps, puts her own philosophy of womanhood in the mouth of Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983). "This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself" (34). Jayant, her husband, is her counterpart, her other half, together they make a whole. But when the other half does not simultaneously acknowledge this equation there is bound to be a collapse of The scaffolding that marriage provides. The relationship becomes a facade, an illusion. As Manju in *If I Die Today* (1982) summarises: "In marriage you start expecting so many things. And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off..." it is then the situation that "two people who have shut themselves off in two glass jars" are thrown together, "who can see each other but can't communicate" (24). And when communication ceases there ensues a long silence that stretches itself out like eternity without hope or release. One feel trapped like Saru does in *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980). She is not her grandmother who never complained or her mother who accepted her plight as her 'luck', for those generations gone by the question of a room of one's own was beyond their ken, and silence had become a habit. But for Saru, she must find a way out of the labyrinth and attest her identity. In the words of Sakutai from *The Binding Vine* why get a gold *mangalsutra* made when "the man himself is so worthless" (110). Marriage ceases to be the culminating event of a lifetime for there is no sancticity and compatibility left in it.

Thus we see that women in Shashi Deshpande's novels are not victims of circumstance, of family, of society. They have come into their own as self-assured, self-empowered articulate counterparts who have overcome their limitations. In the process they have been psychologically wounded but have acquired a will to cross barriers and leave behind conventional norms of subalternity. The progression of liberation can be seen in the chronology of the titles of her novels from *A Matter of Time* (1996) to *Small Remedies* (2000) to *Moving On* (2004) to *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015) there is a continuous unfolding of the self. In *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) the protagonist even enters into a relationship with a married man. This progression seems to be a "culmination of a voyage that began within myself and went on to the ocean of women's place in the world" comments Shashi Deshpande in *Writing from the Margins* (2003, 83) and she goes further to disclose her agenda, "I have no doubt at all that it is the women's movement which has made it possible for an increasing number of women to have more space to breathe." (*Writing* 83)

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