

Feminism in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract—Feminism in Indian English literature is, of course, a by-product of western feminism. To a great extent it is like the feminism in literature of the other countries of the world. However, it cannot be called the replica of western feminist literature, women were denied the right to study the Vedas, and were treated no better than sinners and slaves. Shashi Deshpande has championed feminism in almost all her novels.

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There are several contemporary Indian English women writers like Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Kamala Karkandaya and others among whom Shashi Deshpande, as a novelist, has high honourable place. She belongs to a middle class Maharastriyan family. She came into prominence by 70s and 80s of the last century. She began her writing with short stories which later on developed into novel writing. Her first collection of short stories is *The Legacy* which was published in 1972. Other collections of her short stories are – *It Was Park*, *The Miracle* and *It was the Nightingale*. Besides that she has published six novels. Her first novel is *Roots and Shadows* which owned the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is her second novel which has been translated into German and Russian. Her third novel *That Long Silence* brought her into the limelight as it was published by British Feminist Publishing Virago. Her other novels are - *The Binding Vine*, *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*.

The literary world of the Indian English fiction has spread red carpet for women writers. Increasingly more and more women are articulating anxieties and concerns focussing on women's issues and creating a body of 'literature of their own'. Feminist issues transcend all limits of nationality, race, creed, etc. Women writers have been echoing the feelings of marginality and expressing their revolt against the purely masculine world. One of the major concerns of the contemporary literature all over the world has been to highlight the plight of women, their increasing problems, their physical, financial and emotional exploitation, and their mental anguish in the male-dominated society, in every sphere of life. The enforcement of the feminist movement, the establishment of various women studies centres, the formation of various women's welfare organizations, and the best sale in the market of writing dealing with women and their problems, are indications of the fact than the voice of women is being heard.

Many female writers such as George Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee and many others like Thomas Hardy, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, have analysed 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.

A name that tops the list of contemporary Indian feminist writers who have shown their serious concern with the depiction of women in literature and have expressed restlessness with the traditional positioning of women is that of Shashi Deshpande. In almost all her writings including *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), her concern with the social and cultural construction of gender, her open protest against the treatment of women as sexual object, her defiance of the stereotyped roles assigned to women, her bold efforts to project the prejudiced attitude of society towards women, are obvious. She has apparently injected a new consciousness, offering varied interpretation of imperishable Indian values as well as highlighting our cultural heritage. She has added a new dimension to Indian English feminist literature. Ramesh Kumar Gupta's remark in this context is worth mentioning:

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.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel, the protagonist represents the educated middle class women. The story of the novel is about the struggle of the protagonist who has a lot of hurdles to cross and achieves freedom. Being smothered in a oppressive male-dominated and tradition bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality. Indu, the protagonist of the novel 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 idea of independence and completeness, the concepts of self, sin, love the ideal of detachment and freedom and so on.

Indu struggles hard to experience the realities of life. She analyses the actual cause of her distorted married life. She holds Jayan, her husband, responsible for it. Whenever she tried to share the troubled feeling with him, he called it only 'nonsense' and nothing else. This becomes the cross of the problem. Jayant never bothers to understand what she really wanted. To be precise, we can say that there is no real communication between them. Finally he took the decision to

leave Jayant when she found that there was no mutual understanding between them. But the execution of this decision did not bring any relief to her. On the contrary when she went back to her parental home, she felt alienated though family comprised so many members. She felt void in her life in the absence of Jayant.

The predicament of Indu represents the larger predicament of women in contemporary India where the new concepts of western education, economic independence and globalization have completely shaken the roots of old Indian culture and social values. The novel ends with a positive note with the hope of a new dawn. The novel depicts the permanent mark carved on the psyche of women by traditions norms and conventions of the male- dominated society which prohibits them from exhibiting their true self. The mode and style of their development inculcates in them submissiveness, silence and passiveness which holds a strong hold on their psyche. The novel come to an end with a note of compromise rather than revolt and revenge which is the basic attribute of Indian feminism.

In her other novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, she presents the condition of the women in the Indian society and how different types of women play their roles with their silence. The protagonist Sarita alias Saru is an educated, economically independent, middle class lady. She has been very much conscious of her gender as a child and loveless relationship with her parents and strained relation with her husband. There incidents lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel begins with Saru's return to her parents' home after fifteen years of her marriage with the man she loved. Unfortunately, her relation with her husband Manu becomes unbearably strained and she comes back to her father's home for some solace.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, acclaimed masterpiece of feminist writing in Indo-Anglian fiction, is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian women. Many women writers have tried their hands at expressing the long silence which had turned woman into non-entities, but they

could only provide the psychological depths of their characters. They presented either the unreal sentimental romances or succumbed to the temptation of mouthing feminist ideology. But Shashi Deshpande's success lies in her representation of real life experience. This novel of hers highlights the image of the middle class women sandwiched between tradition and modernity.

Deshpande's novel *The Binding Vine* (1992) touches a chord in every woman as she responds to it with a recognition of her own doubts, complexes, fears, desires and suffering being mirrored in the narration of Urmila, the protagonist. In presenting women's point of view Deshpande is mainly interested in the clash of tradition and modernity, as reflected in the generation gap and conflict between women. This novel depicts the plight of Urmila, the protagonist, who is an educated middle class woman grieving over the death of her one-year old daughter, Anu. Her narrative comprises three tales- one about herself and the other about Sakuntala, a rape victim's mother and Urmila's mother-in-law, Mira, a victim of marital rape.

Some women writers being inspired by the feminist movements in the west, made a total switch over to the outside, seeking freedom from everything, even their own culture. Deshpande's protagonists find freedom not in the western sense but in conformity with the society they live in with drifting away from one's culture.

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