

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S VIEWS ON FEMINISM

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's ideas of feminism include her views on liberation. A study of her novels shows Shashi Deshpande's, attempt to pinpoint Indian feminism as reflected in Indian fiction. She writes about the Indian middle class women, not as a champion of her protagonist's predicaments but as their articulator. Her focus is on Indian women suffering in silence from century old tradition. Shashi Deshpande registers her protest against the class as women's writing. She has a grudge that writings of women writers are driven out of the main stream. The major concern of Shashi Deshpande is how the women in Indian society are to get an honourable adjustment within the frame work of marriage. Shashi Deshpande views on feminism are not a carbon copy of Western feminism. Shashi Deshpande wants the society to look at a woman as a human, not segregating her as a woman.

Keywords: *relentlessness, susceptible, delineated, rebellious, inherent faith, estrangement.*

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande shines by contrast from women novelists like Anita Desai, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala is concerned with the travails of the white people in India. Nayantara Sahgal restructures her study of the elite clan. Shashi Deshpande portrays Indian Women more sensitively, authentically and with empathy because, unlike other writers, she was born and brought up in India, and she had her education in India. Shashi Deshpande's approach differs from that all of other feminists.

VIEWS ON FEMINISM

Shashi Deshpande portrays the endless torture committed upon the female fold for centuries leading them to patient suffering and passive resignation. But she demonstrates how the women revolt against it and try to reach their ideals in the unfriendly world of male chauvinism. The freedom for the Indian women lies with the Indian socio-cultured values. There is no out rejection of the cultural and social background but there is the realization for the need to live within family and achieve identity and independence with in the paradigms of marriage. No doubt, the three writers referred to, ventured into the area of woman's psyche but none has pursued it with single mindedness and relentlessness as Shashi Deshpande has done. She has "never sworn allegiance to what we normally think of as feminist theories of the novel and yet or maybe because of the absence of this overt avowal, she has succeeded in providing her readers with a perspective which is simultaneously,true, individualistic and feminine" (Qtd. in Reddy, Sunita Y.S, 159).

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Shashi Deshpande places her writings within feminist frame work:

My own writing comes out of a deep involvement with the society I live in, especially with women. My novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society. I rejected stereotypes and requisitioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women, in this country. In a way, through my writing, I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country. (Interview with *The Times of India*, 22nd July 2001).

Shashi Deshpande's ideas of feminism include her views on liberation. In her Interview with PrasannaSree, she says, " ... Liberation never means doing without the family. No, no, no. To me, Liberation does not mean leaving your marriage. We need all these ties..."(In Conversation with Shashi Deshpande, 147). She also adds, "Liberation means you refuse to be oppressed, you go refuse to give up your individuality, you refuse to do things which go against your conscience ... this is liberation and does not mean doing away with all ties"(In Conversation with Shashi Deshpande, 147).

Shashi Deshpande is a writer with feminist concerns seeking independent existence of women within the ambit of marriage. A study of her novels shows Shashi Deshpande's, attempt to pinpoint Indian feminism as reflected in Indian fiction. She writes about the Indian middle class women, not as a champion of her protagonist's predicaments but as their articulator. Her focus is on Indian women suffering in silence from century old tradition.

The emotional turmoil suffered by the sophisticated Western educated Indian Women caught between tradition and modernity's susceptible to literary analysis from a feministic perspective. Her feminism is humanistic in its outlook. Shashi Deshpande's fiction should be valued against the background of Indian culture and tradition and should not be judged against the scales of Western feminist literature.

She says, "Indu and all those women had their roots in the same place. Life as I saw it in a small town as a child, as a growing girl. Life as I saw it in Bombay as a woman" (On the Writing of a Novel, *Indian Women Novelists*, 34).

In all her novels under discussion Shashi Deshpande has delineated the inner conflicts and confusions of the modern educated Indian woman. They are written from the point of view of the central character who is a middle class woman socially and economically above the large majority of her sisters but who nevertheless suffers emotionally and struggles hard to break out of her predefined role. Far from being a champion of women's causes, Shashi Deshpande gives a realistic portrayal of women as she saw them. In these novels one can see a feministic trend in the protest against sex-discrimination and the questioning of the age old beliefs about love, romance and marriage. The protagonists also find an outlet in extramarital relations. But their outlook shows considerable difference from the rebellious attitude of the Western feminists who clamour for total sexual freedom and fulfillment as complete autonomous human beings. Shashi Deshpande herself denies that she is a feminist probably because the terms 'women's liberation' shrunk to 'women's lib' and feminism have connotations of extremism. Shashi Deshpande's heroines are not active feminists who demonstrate their protest and fury in public but passive sufferers forced to bear the injustice under a veneer of respectability. Saru and Indu defy their families and marry men of a different caste but when they make the shocking discovery that they have only exchanged one kind of bondage for another, all the three accept the subordination not out of love or a desire to avoid conflict but to show the world they are happy. There is also similarity in their attempt for freedom. Saru and Indu get a chance to return to the family they had discarded and Jaya to return to the Dadar flat, away from the hectic pace of her city life there is not a militant feminism. Their lack of hostility towards men as well as their sympathetic understanding of their egoistic spouses set them apart from the Western feminists. They emerge from the bitter experience of their marital life not as victims or victors but as persons courageous enough to seek fulfillment in married life with

greater understanding and tolerance. The conclusions of these novels thus reflect the social reality and Indianness of the protagonists. Deshpande is, however, especially concerned with the problems of the educated and sensitive middle class women like herself who becomes the protagonists of her novels. Shashi Deshpande registers her protest against the class as women's writing. She has a grudge that writings of women writers are driven out of the main stream. She strongly feels such a restriction based on gender will deprive literature of its importance. To quote Shashi Deshpande,

Women's writing has become a category which is separated from the rest of literature, and women writers are always spoken of in the context of other women writers, never of writers in general; their writing is put in the context of women's writing, never of literature in general (Deshpande : Margin 150).

There is a tripartite classification of women characters in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. To the first type belongs the traditional woman who believes that her place is with her family. This is seen in Jaya's mother (*That Long Silence*), Indu's Mother (*Roots and Shadows*) Saru's mother (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*). The mother, though in trouble, does not leave her husband. She strives for a working relationship with the husband. They are mostly the heroine's mother. To second type belongs the rebellious woman who is the opposite of the traditional type. They are mostly heroine's friends and class-mates, Saru's friend Nalu (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*). To the third type belongs the woman who is neither traditional nor radical in her views and ways. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* walks out of her home in protest against her suffering but gradually realizes that her walking out offers no solution to her problems. She desires to face her husband and not to run away. (Binod Kumar Roy 18)

The novels of Shashi Deshpande are the heart-beats of the women protagonists because the voice that speaks it's real. In novel after novel, Shashi Deshpande dwells achingly on the women's inner fevers and furies, and on the longings and protests of the unappeased hearts. The major concern of Shashi Deshpande is how the women in Indian society are to get an honourable adjustment within the frame work of marriage. Shashi Deshpande views on feminism are not a carbon copy of Western feminism. Western concept of feminism allows the women independence to live without husbands and even without marriage. Shashi Deshpande is against her protagonists crossing the sacred bond of marriage. She likes to maintain a balance between tradition and modernity. The sanctity of marriage must be presented but not at the extreme of victimization in the suppression of women. She is not against marriage as a solution to the problem into the marriage by a meaningful life.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are written within the frame work of Indian culture. The characters are all drawn from the Indian society, and are given Indian names. The women protagonists in her fictional corpus long to have an independent identity but their efforts are doomed to failure due to their attachment to home and family and their inherent faith in an ideal wife - husband relation.

To quote Suman Bala" In her novels, Shashi Deshpande has depicted different aspects of middle-class woman's life. Instead of fighting against the patriarchal society and male domination, she has taken a balanced view of life from a woman's point of view."(16). She advocates a middle part -- a golden mean-- a better relationship of man and woman.

In *Moving On*, Manjari carries the impressions of the unfriendly relationship with her mother. Shashi Deshpande presents the mother figure as a symbol of maternal authority. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Saru's relationship with her mother remains hostile throughout the novel. She even develops a loathsome attitude to all traditional practices. Shashi Deshpande gives a voice to the voiceless protagonists, who are victims of sex hungry loveless husbands and of gender discrimination first as daughters and later as wives.

To Shashi Deshpande, a woman ceases to be an entity classified under the feminine gender. Man's tendency is to draw an invidious distinction between the problems faced by woman and those by man. Shashi Deshpande wants the society to look at a woman as a human, not segregating her as a woman. Through the lens of humanistic feminism, the novelist analyses the humiliation and neglect suffered by the protagonist, first as a child and after marriage as a wife in the novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*.

The protagonist in *That Long Silence*, undergoes estrangement and alienation with no word of protest to the treatment meted to her in sheer fear of incurring the displeasure of her husband. These are the issues not peculiar to women but they belong to the sphere of men also. Shashi Deshpande's sympathetic identification with the voiceless women, Jaya and Mohan's mother and her articulation of the silence maintained by both arise from her humanistic outlook.

CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande speaks in the voice of women rather than in a pseudo male or neuter voice ---a voice that is open, intimate, involved and committed. It is the voice that speaks as a woman. Her contribution to Indian fiction lies in adding a new dimension to it by the use of the critical tool of humanistic feminism in her analysis of the issues of women in her novels and she emerges as a humanist rather than as a feminist.

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