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Feminism, a Pet Theme in the Works of Shashi Desh Pande – A Study

Abstract

On par with Western novelists, Indian women writers have made a bench mark in creating an island of their own in voicing their views and perceptions about the pathetic plight of women in India. Ofcourse, Shshi Desh Pande is not exceptional because, in all her works feminism surfaces as a dominating theme one way or the other. The present paper mirrors her reflections for assertion of identity and crave for emancipation of women from the shackles of traditions and customs. So to say, in her novel, *Roots and Shadows*, the writer highlits the agony and suffering of the protagonist, Indu in male-dominated society. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, she touches upon male egoism and inferiority complex resulting in sexual sadism, as well the harrowing experience of Saru, the protagonist. In her magnumopus, *That Long Silence*, she speaks eloquently about the crisis in a middle class family leading to mental aberration of the protagonist, Jaya. In *The Binding Vine*, she discusses the man's lust and helplessness of woman in tradition bound societal order. On the other hand, in *A Matter of Time*, the writer liberates herself from the narrow confines of woman and her problems and focusses on the story of three women from three generations, ultimately producing a feel of metaphysical undertones in her narration. In other novels, sequel to earlier she articulates female-bonding and man-woman relationship in an animated style. On the whole, the paper evaluates the themes in the novels of Shashi Desh Pande laying much emphasis on her feminist perception.

Keywords

Western novelists, bench mark, pathetic plight, feminism, identity, traditions and customs, sexual sadism, middle class family, metaphysical undertones and female-bonding.

Introduction

Though not an avowed feminist, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Deshpande's creative talent and accomplishment have established her credentials as a worthy writer. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle. She, however, maintains that her novels are not intended to be read as feminist texts. This is evident from what she says: "A woman who writes of women's experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her, roused her strong feelings. I don't see why this has to be labelled feminist fiction."¹

While it may not have been Deshpande's intention to propound any particular theory, even a cursory reading of her novels displays a tremendous amount of sympathy for women. Most of her protagonists are educated and exposed to western ideas. As Ramamoorthy puts it, "Her heroines speak of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Betty Friedan and it becomes obvious that the women she has created are feminists if she is not one."² Moreover, the attitudes and reactions of her protagonists to various issues related to women who are caught between tradition and modernity do provide ample material for treatment from a feminist angle.

A reading of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals a deep understanding of the female psyche particularly that of the educated, urban, middle-class woman. Deshpande is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist with four volumes of short stories, four children's books and ten novels to her credit. She was born and brought up in Dharwad, Karnataka, and is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Sriranga, who is described as the Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre. Recounting the influences in her life, Shashi Deshpande says: "There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: That my father was writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female."³

A close study of Deshpande's novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. The relentless probing of man-woman relationship by the author

intrigues the reader enough to question her stand on feminism. Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian author who has made a bold attempt to give voice to the frustrations and disappointments of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist at the beginning of her career.

Roots and Shadows

Roots and Shadows is the first full length novel written by Deshpande though it was published after *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, her second novel. The novel highlights the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist, Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She finds herself alienated when she refuses to conform to the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings only disillusionment when she finds her educated and ostensibly progressive-minded husband no different from the average Indian male. She is even contemptuous of herself when she realises that she has all along been unconsciously aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. The novel gains its feminist stance from Indu's persistent exploration of herself as an individual. An extra-marital affair helps her to break free from the emotional bondage of matrimony and makes her aware of herself, and realise that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage. *Roots and Shadows* also offers us scope to observe meaningless rituals and customs all of which help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority. Seen through the novelist's eye, insignificant everyday details take on a new dimension and highlight the gross inequalities present in society.

The Dark Holds No Terrors

Deshpande's second novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, seeks to discuss the male ego which refuses to accept a secondary position in marriage. The novel narrates the harrowing experience of the protagonist, Saru, who enjoys a greater economic and social status than her husband Manohar. The trauma of being the victim of her husband's frustration which manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism is vividly portrayed. Deshpande also makes the readers aware of society's reaction to the superior status of the wife in a marriage, which leads the husband to develop an inferiority complex. The novel also seeks to discuss the blatant gender discrimination which is shown even by parents towards their daughters. Deshpande effectively conveys the craving by parents for a male child and the disastrous

effect it can have on a sensitive young girl. Denied of parental love and victim of her husband's frustrations, Saru undergoes an arduous journey into herself and liberates herself from guilt, shame and humiliation to emerge in full control over her life.

That Long Silence

Deshpande's third novel, *That Long Silence*, brought her into limelight as it was published by the British feminist publishing house Virago. The novel deals with the protagonist Jaya's passage through a maze of self-doubts and fears towards the affirmation of herself. A crisis in the middle-class family of the protagonist triggers off a chain of events which compel her to view her life in retrospection. What follows is an honest and frank account of Jaya's life. In her anxiety to play the role of wife and mother to perfection, Jaya realises that she does not do justice to her talents as a writer. Her constant fear of displeasing her husband and inviting the censure of society, not only make her give up writing but also discourage her from acknowledging her friendship with a man who is not her husband, brother or father.

Jaya is representative of the modern young woman—educated and aware—nevertheless unable to break free from the stranglehold of tradition. In the process of telling her story, she offers us a glimpse into the lives of ostensibly content housewives who are nevertheless suppressed under the weight of male dominance. Deshpande, however, avoids the facile solution of laying the blame on men alone and tries to view the man-woman relationship objectively. She observes through her novel that both men and women, being products of their culture, find it difficult to outgrow the images and roles allotted to them by society.

The Binding Vine

In her fourth novel, *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande uses the personal tragedy of the narrator/protagonist Urmi to focus attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira — victims of man's lust and woman's helplessness. The novelist makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape— a theme which perhaps has not been touched upon by any other Indian writer in English. Urmi tries to reconstruct the pathetic story of a bright and attractive girl, Mira, who wrote poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage to alleviate her suffering. Urmi also crusades for the cause of another victim, Kalpana, who is brutally raped and is on her death bed. The novelist deftly handles the juxtaposition of the two situations—rape committed within the precincts of marriage and outside it. The novelist gives a moving account of the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather

suffer in silence than be exposed to the humiliation involved in publicizing the event and that of married women whose bodies are violated by their legally wedded husbands but who would never dare reveal this to anyone. They would rather stifle their voice of protest for the sake of social and moral security. Deshpande, through the voice of Urmi, also offers us a glimpse into the lives of myriad other women, who are ostensibly more liberated than their predecessors but, who, nevertheless, are victims of some form of violence or deprivation.

A Matter of Time

In her fifth novel, *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande liberates herself from the narrow confines of women and their problems and enters into the metaphysical world of philosophy. The novel is essentially the story of three women from three generations from the same family and how they cope with the tragedy that overwhelms them. But in narrating their story a greater emphasis has been placed on Gopal, the perpetrator of this tragedy, and his view of life.

Small Remedies

Shashi Deshpande's sixth novel, *Small Remedies* is the most confident assertion of her strength as a novelist with her deliberate denial of sentimentality and her total control over the unwieldy material. Structured as a biography within a biography, it is about Savitribai Indorekar, the ageing doyenne of Hindustani music, who denies a marriage and a home with a view to pursuing her genius. It also tells the story of Leela, who gives up her respectability in order to gain love and unhappiness in equal measure. At the centre of this sprawling narrative is Madhu who, in telling the stories of Savitribai, Leela and Munni, hopes to find a way out of her own despair.

Moving On

Shashi Deshpande's seventh novel, *Moving On* is about the secret lives of men and women who love, hate, plot and debate with an intensity that will absorb every reader.

It is a story that begins, conventionally enough, with a woman's discovery of her father's diary. As Manjari unlocks the past through its pages, rescuing old memories and recasting events and responses, the present makes its own demands: a rebellious daughter, devious

property sharks and a lover who threatens to throw her life out of gear again. The ensuing struggle to reconcile nostalgia with reality and the fire of the body with the desire for companionship races to an unexpected resolution, twisting and turning through complex emotional landscapes.

In The Country of Deceit

In her novel, *In the Country of Deceit*, Shashi Deshpande delves deep in to the theme of love and goodness. Devayani is a young unmarried woman living alone in a small town in Karnataka called Rajnur. She is just recovering from the loss of her mother and starting life anew, symbolised by the demolition of her ancestral home and the building of a modern house. And with the modern house Devayani sheds her conservative outlook on life and her inhibitions. And this alteration comes with the arrival of Rani, a retired actress and Ashok, a police officer into Devayani's life. Devayani has a brush with the film industry given Rani's persistence as Rani makes a last ditch effort to court the camera. Devayani walks on the wildside with her relationship with Ashok and that is the pivot of the story. The novel peters out to a predictable end without much fuss.

Summing up

A comprehensive analysis of all her work leaves one in no doubt about where Deshpande's sympathies lie. It would be unfair to label her 'feminist' and categorise her with several other writers who differ from her in varying degrees. She can at best be called an articulator of women who are caught at the crossroads of change in a society which is undergoing the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. It is a difficult job, indeed, to give voice to women who themselves, are not sure of their own suffering and who stand in an unenviable position today. They are acutely aware of the injustices heaped on them but are condemned to live the life of suppression which was the lot of their predecessors. In many ways, their condition is even more pitiable than that of women of earlier generations who unquestioningly accepted their secondary position in society. Her novels contain so much that is the material of feminist thought—myriad roles of woman as mother/wife/daughter, identity crisis, female-bonding and women's sexuality—that all those who have interviewed her so far have inevitably asked her as to what extent she considers herself a feminist. She says:

I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist⁴...

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