
Feminism and Literature: Some Observations With Special Reference to Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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Abstract

A close study or evaluation of the origin and evolution of feminism i.e. woman's voice and agitation against injustice and inequality, seems to unfold the fact that feminism is the result and the outburst of the ages old established socio-cultural structure framed, formed and governed by men to suit and satisfy their needs and interests irrespective of women's basic interests, needs and happiness. Shashi Deshpande, one of the leading women novelists of India, through her women protagonists seems to raise voice against the male-centred and male-controlled social and domestic structure of conventional Indian cultural system. Her women are tolerant, obedient and submissive at the same time a feminist awakening and upsurge can easily be noted in their feelings and conduct.

Keywords--- Feminism, sexuality, upsurge, conventional, revolt, identity, liberty.

Introduction

Lord Tennyson the most representative of the Victorians seems to follow the patriarchal way of society in his *Princes* (1847) where he suggests the distribution of duties between Man and Woman:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:

Man for the sword and for the needle she:

Man to command and woman to obey:

All else confusion! (Tennyson, 78)

It seems to be this mental set-up of the male dominated society that might have given air to the suppressed liberty, dignity and equality of womankind to revolt against befitting the needs and interests of man. But now the scene is quite different. The modern woman, in no way, is going to accept the ages old formula of society. Kamala Das, the noted Indian poetess, represents this protest of the modern woman rebelliously:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. I shall someday take
Wings, fly around.... (Kamala Das, 52)

If we go through an acute observation of the genesis of feminism, i.e., woman's voice against injustice and inequality, it aims at unfolding the fact that feminism is the inevitable consequence of the social and cultural setup completely formulated and regulated by men with the object to satisfy their needs and interests being absolutely negligent of the honour, the happiness and the rights women deserve to receive as the equal share holder of the human world. No doubt the term feminism may be believed to become in existence for the first time in the eighteenth century, but we can assume that feminist feeling is as old as the human race. Eve, the first woman of the world, can be trusted to be the first icon of feminist movement in the world because she defied the male ruler of the universe, i.e., God, by tasting the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden to come out of the prison of total ignorance and step into the open-air world of knowledge without caring for the severe punishment she has to face consequently.

There is a thinking today that feminism has almost been successful in its objects by achieving equality for women on social, political and economic fronts and that's why feminism appears to reach its end. "(F)eminism is said to have won all its battles. Women, we are told, have already gained the opportunities for social and economic power they were seeking, so there is no longer any need for feminist movement." ("The Argument", VII) But the fact is quite different. The feminist movement is still on all over the world with an expectation of becoming stronger tomorrow.

It was not a matter of chance that feminism emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century as an outburst throughout the world, it was rather the result of struggle for the rights of women suppressed, ignored and exploited for centuries. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft is the first landmark in the history of feminist movement. It can be regarded as the manifesto of modern feminism. The other significant works that can be treated as milestones on the path of emancipation and empowerment of modern women are *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) by Margaret Fuller and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill. Virginia Woolf seems to be the first avowed leader of feminist movement in the twentieth century. In her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Women and Writing*, collection of essays, she attacks the patriarchal society, because, in her point of view, it is the root cause of women's educational, economic, cultural, social and political

backwardness that hampers their growth and stature. At the end of the first half of the twentieth century there came a radical book *The Second Sex* (1949) by French woman writer, Simone de Beauvoir. This book can be regarded as the genuine foundation of modern feminism because it brought about a revolution in the advanced western society.

The traits of feminism can be traced deeply rooted in the tradition beginning from old civilization. It comprehensively depicts the problems of society, the issues of domestic atmosphere, gender discrimination and sexual exploitation. In the modern times the novelists of the eighties seem to pay attention to the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class urban Indian woman. They are found to make efforts to reconstruct Indian womanhood, which has been characterized as gentle, submissive and grown up with the concept that they deserve only to be kept in subordination of males of the family especially husband. The following Sanskrit *shloka* will define an ideal woman according to the Indian cultural society:

Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi

Rupecha Lakshmi, kshamayaa dharitri

Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayentu Rambha

Shat karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni (Acharya , 351)

It denotes that as a duty towards her husband a woman should act as a minister while counseling, by her looks she should be as goddess Lakshmi, like the earth in forbearance, as a mother like feeding and in bed, she must be like the celestial beauty. If a woman obeys all these she is supposed to be honoured by society. But the contemporary trend in Indian English fiction delineates the psyche of modern woman, her suffocation, and exposes her plight to come out of the shackles of the false social and domestic relations which she has been supposed to carry with full devotion.

It will not be an exaggeration if we call Shashi Deshpande a rhapsodist in prose. As in the works of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai, we can find the same enthusiastic expression of feeling, the same ecstatic and elative outburst of sentiments and emotions representing and expressing the human consciousness in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. In her novels she seems to represent the ego of a woman or we should say her self-respect swinging or undulating under the pressure of complex human situations, moreover, she seems to focus on her struggle of an identity in maze of culturally and emotionally stressed Indian society. As Shashi Deshpande emerges from her roots in Indian middle class society, she seems to have closely watched and observed and experienced too the social, domestic and

sexual expectations of Indian social structure from a woman. As she observes, “Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my ideas of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman all this makes my writing very clearly woman’s writing.”(Shashi Deshpande, 107) But M.K. Naik has a different point of view about her being a feminist writer, as he says, “It would not be correct to term her a feminist because there is nothing doctrinaire about her fiction; she simply portrays, in depth the meaning of being a woman in modern india.”(M.K.Naik, 88) Shashi Deshpande, too, observes, “But these gender related experiences are a part of human experience. And as a writer I deal with these experiences the same way any writer does with experience. I expected such writing to be of interest to all human beings.” (Shashi Deshpande, 107)

It can be said that in all her fictional works Shashi Deshpande focuses on the women characters, that have been trapped up in a conflict between their traditional social atmosphere and their modern way of thinking and desiring to lead a life following their so called modern vision. Further, the relationship between a man and a woman and the tension and conflict within that relationship; and the oppression or sexual exploitation of a woman’s body by her own husband has been emphatically exposed in Shashi Deshpande’s fictional writings. In all her works Shashi Deshpande appears to be trying to represent the modern woman rejecting the established hierarchical and patriarchal social system and, moreover, denying the ages old established and supposed supremacy or dominance of masculine power and authority.

In her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Shashi Deshpande represents a suppressed woman Sarita, familiarly known as Saru, as the protagonist of the novel. The novel deals with the theme of rape in marital relations primarily; but not only this, Saru has to face so many other social and domestic restrictions and discriminations also. From the beginning of her life she has been constantly reminded by her mother that she is a “woman”, and therefore she should follow certain dos and don’ts for a flawless and smooth life. But Sarita with an awakened mindset and modern vision of life is not ready to follow these suppressing doctrines. She raises her voice against the already established social rules and against the will of her parents she marries Manohar, a boy belonging to a different caste that of theirs. The problem starts when she rises in her profession as a doctor yet Manohar, her husband, is an underpaid fellow. This financial ascendance of Sarita’s makes Manohar jealous of her and as a result

of this to prove his manhood he turns into a rapist and inflicts sexual assaults on his wife. Tired of Manohar, Sarita leaves him and has relations with Boozie and Padmakar Rao. Here, we find that Shashi Deshpande talks explicitly about female sexuality. She liberates her women characters from sticking to one particular partner. Here, Shashi Deshpande seems to make a bold attempt against the set norms of contemporary society following the traditional way of living.

In almost all her novels Shashi Deshpande has dealt with the problem of being a woman through her protagonists. In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Indu bears the pain of being a woman because right from the childhood she has constantly been reminded by the women members of the family that she is a “female”, and that’s why she has certain restrictions which she must follow:

“As a child they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive.” (158)

Here too the same social and domestic dilemma has been represented by Deshpande. Indu marries Jayant against the will of her family. But after ten years of marriage she finds herself caught up in marital tension and to come out of this dilemma she leaves Jayant only to be engaged with his childhood friend, Naren, both physically and mentally. In her novel *Moving On* (2004) Deshpande portrays the protagonist Manjari’s sexuality explicitly and boldly. Like Deshpande’s other protagonist, Manjari, too, is a bold and steadfast character. She decides to marry Shyam against the denial by her parents to do so; she even takes another bold decision to give up studying medicine. But very soon the situation becomes problematic and turns into a predicament when Manjari’s sister Malu is diagnosed to bear a baby in her womb by Shyam. Malu dies after delivery; and Shyam commits suicide as regret. Who cannot understand the amount of mental agony Manjari goes through after all this happens. She constantly tries to come out of this traumatic situation and the frustration of her husband’s betrayal and his illicit relationship with her sister. On the other hand, her long detachment with a male body arouses her libido. As a result, she indulges in physical relations with her tenant who is much younger than her. It is all because of her physical desire; heart does not matter here at all. As Manjari herself admits it, “Only the body, his body, only my body, and my starved body. No thoughts, no feelings, only sensations.” (257)

The male-female rivalry is the theme that Shashi Deshpande focuses on in her novel *That Long Silence* (1989). The egocentric vein in the temperament of the protagonist Jaya does not let her total fusion of the identity with her husband, Mohan. She craves for a life with her own identity and with her

own individuality. Jaya's inner self is torn between her identity as a wife and her autonomy as a creative writer. Shashi Deshpande portrays Jaya as an icon of patience, forbearance, endurance, devotion, integrity on the one hand and rebellion, defiance and disobedience too on the other hand.

To conclude, it can be said that almost in all her novels Shashi Deshpande seems to be trying to raise her voice for the ages old conventional and orthodox norms of the socio-cultural atmosphere of Indian society through her awakened, bold, courageous and revolutionary female characters. Sarita, Indu, Jaya, Manjari and other protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are not simply victims of their adverse circumstances, of orthodox and traditional family system and male dominating social structure. They have been portrayed constantly fighting and raising voice for their rights. They have proved themselves as self-assured, self-empowered and strengthened personalities.

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