

THE ELEMENT OF FEMINISM IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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'Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable case of being a woman-wife- mother..... A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of motherhood otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to traditional Indian views- Indian women don't appear to have their independent role in society.'

—Clara Nubile in The danger of Gender

Feminism in commonwealth literature has developed an immense potential in the women community of the region. It has awakened the women community to break the strong chain of patriarchal society and to enjoy the same status like men. Today the female community is giving tough competition to the male community in every walk of life. The tradition of worshipping the male haws become an old fashion and now women have started to live a life of her own choice. With the growth of education the numbers of female writers have been increasing day by day. The last quarter of this century saw the emergence of many fresh but dynamic feminist writers in the Indian subcontinent. Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahagel, Bapsi Sidhwa are some major novelists who questioned the status of woman in a patriarchal set up.

The female quest for identity is one of the most important global phenomena today. However the socio-cultural-psychic disparities caused by their respective traditions could result in subtle variations within the nature and ways of the women's struggle from place to place. Whether we talk about sexual harassment, female foeticide, honour killing of women, dowry exploitation or early child marriage they all come out of the concept of the gender disparity.

Generally the heroine in the novels of Shashi Deshpande is the narrator while the author employs a sort of stream-of-consciousness technique making the narrative move back and forth in time thus enabling the narrator to describe events with the benefit of hindsight. The novelist uses alternating first person/third person voice to present a continuous interplay and overlap. This device occurs in all her novels. Her characters have strong psychological dimensions. She uses interior monologue, flashbacks into the past and dreams to bring out the inherent fear, frustration, anguish and suppressed desires lying in the inner recesses of the mind of the characters. All Deshpande's protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hypersensitive women who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life. Infact her fictional forte happens to be the exploration of the psyche of her women characters of all age groups.

Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence'(1989), which won her the Shitya Akademi Award for 1990 is an intriguing story of Jaya, an Indian housewife who stoically maintained silence throughout her life in the face of acute hardships that repeatedly threatened to break it. Jaya is married to Mohan and has lived with him at different places. They have two children Rahul and Rati while the third was aborted. Mohan has to go away for a short period to clear himself of charges of business malpractice. During his absence Jaya recollects her married life nostalgically. Being a journalist Jaya tries to write about herself and her family in an attempt to break the "long silence". As she recapitulates her past married life she realizes the frustration, alienation and an overall emotional trauma she had undergone with several of her adolescent dreams being irretrievably shattered. Jaya, the silent victim, prefers to live like a traditional Indian wife. Ironically enough Jaya rejects the image of traditional women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi as exemplified in the ancient texts. She prefers the image of the yoked bullocks. She says:

No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself.

The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together..... (pp11-12)

'According to the author husbands don't pay attention to wives emotions, likes and dislikes. The author expresses the emotion with vivid details like that of lovemaking, relationship with children, tec. She reflects her lifestyle, her role clarity whether she is living for her or for someone else, etc. Throughout the story she is engaged in searching her identity as an individual. In this story one situation arises when husband and wife's relation was given an offbeat. Two individuals though very intimate couldn't relate each other in terms of feelings or understanding. Many married women might find some instances similar in their everyday lives after reading the story. Author has done a good job in expressing intimacy. Sexual feelings are expressed in its natural tone.

As in **That Long Silence**, in **The Binding Vine** (1993) too, she considers various relationships to be the vine that binds human beings together. The emotional attachments created within relationships help one to enjoy the beauty of life and to surmount the problems as well. In this novel Shashi Deshpande portrays strong women characters who refuse to run away from the problems of life; in fact they face the existential crisis boldly and successfully.

The plot of the novel hovers around the character of Urmila a college lecturer facing a great emotional crisis due to the unexpected death of her daughter Anu. Urmila fails to compromise with the loss of the baby even as several years roll by. The vacuity always seems to enlarge adding to her frustration and emptiness. She has other children but the bondage between mother and daughter is too strong to be snapped merely by physical absence of the child.

The concept of frustrated motherhood is further exemplified in the depiction of Shakutai whose daughter Kalpana is brutally raped and admitted in hospital in a state of coma. Urmila happens to meet Shakutai. Though there are no relations between the two women as such, but instantly a binding vine develops in that both are emotionally disturbed women. It is humanitarianism that brings the two together. Urmila does her utmost to give emotional support to Shakutai who is poor, uneducated, is afraid of disgrace and dishonour in society. Shakutai is a reflection of millions of women in India who are torn between genuine love for their children and the ever present sceptre of family honour. Shakutai pleads with Urmila not to report the case to the police. It is only when the hospital authorities want to discharge Kalpana in a state of coma that a press correspondent is brought by Urmila. The news is published, Shakutai is too embarrassed but Kalpana's stay in the hospital is allowed. Sulu, the wife of Prabhakar who raped Kalpana is so shocked at the heinous act that she commits suicide.

Mira, the mother-in-law of Urmila is yet another example of a suffering woman who is torn between the desire to live a peaceful life and her state of torturous living. Mira wrote,
 Just as the utter futility of living overwhelms me, I am terrified by the thought of dying, of ceasing to be.(p.31).

Like all human beings Mira has the urge to survive and is forever in search of the spring of life. In a disturbed mental state one always searches for love, for support from others. Mira was the second wife of Urmilla's father-in-law. Her married life was unhappy which she had mentioned in her various writings and poems. Poetry was a means of escape from the sense of isolation and emptiness in her life; it was not only a source of solace but also a way to protest against the way society works.

After marriage, as was customary Mira's name was changed to Nirmala. For her it was a complete loss of identity. In one of her poetic creations she wrote:

Nirmala, they call, I stand statur-still
 Do you build the new without razing the old?
 A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold
 Can they make me Nirmala, I am Mira. (p.60).

Marriage meant that she was a new self and the past had to be buried deep. This was near to impossible for her. Mira symbolises the relationship between daughters and mothers all over the world. She always wanted to ask her mother a question which she could never ask: *Mother, why do you want me to repeat your history when you despair of you own.* (p.65)

Obviously, the status and plight of a woman whether educated or undedicated remains the same. History must repeat itself and it is a history of despair, sorrow and suffering. Urmila could never imagine that her mother-in-law too had suffered so much emotionally and though her lips were silent her pen spoke just like Jaya in **That Long Silence**. Urmila longs for the emotional pleasures of home and family which are so evasive. Kishore, her husband works elsewhere, comes home for brief periods and their love is only physical not emotional. She is in a dilemma when Dr. Bhasker Jain proposes to her knowing her marital status. She was aware that she had already entered the Chakravyuha from where it was difficult to escape. Urmila realizes:

(One) can never opt out; (one) can never lay it down, the burden of belonging to the human race. There is only one way out of this Chakravyuha. Abhimanyu had to die; there is no other way he could get out. (p.102).

Yet, in spite of all difficulties, physical and emotional a woman has to survive. Shashi Deshpande has portrayed an essential woman's world where men are present only by the power they wield over their wives and daughters. Hers is a world where women suffer numerous losses but cope up with each crisis with the passage of time. Women have the aptitude for survival. In fact, suffering and pain are sometimes necessary to develop one's self and one's individuality in particular. **The Binding Vine** is the only novel in which Shashi Deshpande has used poems to narrate the tragic tale of marital discord. Mira's poems are lyrical in nature. The poems also paint a graphic picture of tradition bound Indian society. It is a fine means of raising one's voice in protest against some age old social norms. About the novel Gur Pyari Jandial has aptly stated:

The Binding Vine is Deshpande's strongest statement regarding sexual violence against women. The novel touches on the delicate issue of marital rape and a woman's helplessness after marriage to a man she does not love. The Binding Vine is a tremendously powerful portrayal of women's fight to survive in a terrible, violent world where there is no easy way out.

The patience, stoical courage coupled with the calms tenacity of passive resistance is the forte of Deshpande's women characters. Perhaps, these are also features which give them a distinguished place in a world dominated by male aggressiveness.

In **Come Up and Be Dead** (1983) Shashi Deshpande takes the Indian reading public by surprise as it is a crime fiction where the murder mystery has been so framed as to please the Indian milieu. The title has been derived from Charles Dickens' novel **Our Mutual Friend, Come Up and Be Dead**. The most interesting and captivating aspect of Deshpande's novel is that reality of life is seen through the eyes of an average Indian woman and as is typical of the author it explores the predicament of middle-class men and women. Once again, like in her other novels, she writes of silence of women in their various roles: silence of a mother, a daughter, a sister or a wife. She affirms the fact that silence is more vocal and expressive than words. Silence enables a woman to delve deep within to know herself, to quest for her own space and voice, and ultimately to come to terms with life.

Indu, at her maternal home, indulges in self-introspecting and analyses her relationship with Jayant. Here she meets her childhood friend Naresh with whom she had sexual relationship. In her sexual relationship with Jayant she was always uncomfortable for Jayant believed that a woman could never have sexual desires, which Indu had suffered silently. Shashi Deshpande portrays a few other women in the novel who suffer a similar plight. Akka undergoes the physical trauma of rape in marriage but prefers to remain silent. Her troubles are short lived for her husband dies soon. Atya a poor childless widow returns to her maternal home where Akka, the rich lady gives her shelter. Atya realises that she has lost all her rights as a childless widow and now she must compromise with a life of silence and dependence. Mini suffers silently after getting married to an illiterate uncouth man. Her dreams of a happy married life are shattered with only frustrations left.

While women like Akka, Atya and Mini are resigned to a life of silence and passive acceptance of the situation Indu refuses to surrender to male dominance also determining to make her marriage work but on her own terms. She spends the money inherited from Akka according to her own wishes. It is her own decision to return to Jayant to save her principles in life. At work too, she decides to pursue the kind of writing she wants for which she readily resigns her present job. Indu is not blind to her faults with Jayant. Indu emerges as a determined new woman who compromises with the positive role of woman in society.

Shashi Deshpande in her first novel **The Dark Holds No Terrors** (1980) portrays the protagonist Sarita in relationship to her parents, to her younger brother, to her husband and her children. The novel is a brilliant narration of the writer's distinctive feminism. The novelist renders a clinical analysis of the psyche of the heroine, her trial and tribulations, her chequered experiences of life vis-à-vis social forces. The novelist reveals an existential perspective in the novel. She sought to emphasize on the nexus between social institutions and individual development. She categorically stresses that the institutions of family, marriage, education are far from perfect. They are arbitrarily designed by the male-dominated society as an instrument for the maintenance of the masculine hegemony through the oppression, exploitation and marginalization of women. Sarita, Saru to her friends was a well read, well informed competent doctor who had married Manohar (Manu), an aspiring poet belonging to a lower caste. Hers was a run away marriage leading to a strained relationship with her parents. However, when she gets the news of her mother's death she goes to visit her father. This occasion gives her an excuse to get away from Manu for a while and also to think about her past. Sarita does not have pleasant memories of her childhood recollecting that she was a neglected child more so because she was a

girl. She often remembered how her younger brother Dhruva was pampered because he was a male child. Unfortunately, when she was twelve years old Dhruva got drowned in a pond and died; Saru was blamed for this. Her mother's words haunted her throughout life:

You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive when he is dead?
(p.191).

Sarita resented the discriminatory treatment meted out to her by her orthodox mother. Time and again her mother, Kamala, referred to her as a burden and a responsibility. Kamala often reminded her that she was dark and ugly to look at.

*Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.
Who cares?
We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.*

Sarita's profound sense of the failure of marriage in society is what the novelist considers responsible for the sad plight of women. Marriage is no longer a sacrament. It is a convenient arrangement to the disadvantage of woman. Marriage traps woman like animals. The novelist portrays the woman's painful lot.

Hungry for love and affection, the initial years of her married life are like heaven on earth. But gradually it dawns upon her that her freedom was being curtailed. Her success as a doctor and her economic independence shatters the peace at home. She observes that Manu asserts his masculinity and male dominance by forcibly having sexual relationship with her each night. It leaves her a terrified and humiliated woman.

When Sarita returns to her father's house after the death of her mother she begins to view things in a new light. Away from her family the wounds inflicted upon her begin to heal. The epigraph to the novel taken from The Dhammapada becomes meaningful:

*You are your own refuge;
There is no other refuge.
This refuge is hard to achieve.*

The words "you are your own refuge" reverberate in her mind. It is obvious she has to heal herself. All of a sudden she experiences great joy for she discovers her true self, her real identity. The entire novel attempts to unfold the arduous odyssey of the protagonist who is in search of shelter from her various nightmarish experiences realizing eventually that she does not have to flee from the terrors of life but must turn inwards for refuge. She readily accepts the truth.

Deshpande's writings are really the outcome of her consciousness of the conflict between her idea of herself as a human being and the idea that society frames of her as a woman. This consciousness leads Shashi Deshpande to speculate about the issues of gender inferring that gender is, perhaps, one of the most important factors in our lives. When a baby is born the first questions boy or girl? Human lives are invariably shaped by gender as all experiences are related to it. However, she is aware of the fact that in a man's world woman's writer, we never say 'male writer' or man writer. Shashi Deshpande was emphatic that literature ought not to be categorized on the basis of gender. In fact, a writer's race, class, caste, colour, gender etc. should not matter. A creative writer must be acknowledged as a voice of society and should be judged by the truth being narrated and not by any prejudicial judgments especially the gender-bias.

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