

A STUDY ON THE FEMINISM IN THE WORKS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent figure in the Indian-English literary canon, was born on August 19, 1938, into a middle-class Brahmin family in Dharwad, a small town in the northwestern part of Karnataka. She writes that Dharwad was the center of education that destroyed knowledge systems and where girls' education was not unknown. Her father, Aadya Rangacharya, formerly known as R.V. Jagirdar, was an eminent Kannada playwright and Sanskrit scholar.

Deshpande writes of her father as being born in a very conservative family, yet opposed to orthodox beliefs and blind faith in superstition. However, Shashi Deshpande remembers his greatest gift as the provision of intellectual freedom. She writes, "There was never an attempt to impose an idea on us, no attempt was made to shape our thinking, no hard and fast rules for behavior."

INTRODUCTION

Even when raised in a Brahmin family, Shashi remained untouched by the generally observed rites and customs. Furthermore, it was because of her father's open mind that an English education and even her introduction to Western works at an early age had opened the door. When in high school, Shashi writes, she became aware of her love of language, love of words and stories. She also found herself vindictive towards the Sanskrit texts that her father had forced him to choose. However, she was always fascinated by English as a subject and read prose, poetry and drama in various genres. At school, Mr. Ezra, she recalls, introduced her to poems such as Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", Wordsworth's "Daffodils", Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes", "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy", Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier Who Almost Made Her Cry".

Reading became an obsession, an addiction. I read everything, not only books and magazines and little pamphlets, leaflets and magazines that my father got as a writer, but also labels on bottles, signs on shop boards, advertisements in papers, movie posters. Like an alcoholic who swears to drink on occasions, there were times, like before exams, when I found myself giving up reading. I thought the 'sacrifice' would give me some brownie points. But dieting was hard; No doubt, I was an addict. (41)

Thus it becomes clear that Deshpande was an extremely avid reader. She writes that fiction was her first and enduring love. She ate much of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, sentimental novels such as *The Rosary and East Lynn*, O'Henry and Mary Corelli's *Thelma* and Vendetta's short stories, which he counts among her great favorites. She was particularly fond of the works of Jane Austen and her fondness for classical English novels was initiated by Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

As a young girl, she was a frequent visitor to the school library from where she would buy books and read them with passion. However, it was her not so good academic performance that temporarily stopped her from borrowing any books from the library. A strict notice to this effect was served by her father to the school authorities which turned out to be an unreasonable ban on her. She found the act almost counterproductive as her father, who was himself a writer, thought of reading as a distraction or purely a waste of time. She remembers,

"I was not allowed to use the school library. I know it was academic excellence, rather than success, that mattered to him, he was also proud of her children's intelligence. And yet, how could he, himself a writer, think that the reading was wrong, how could he see my reading as a waste of time? (44)

In her interview to Vanmala Viswanath, she remarked about her father, "He was influential, never overbearing". From her father, she acquired an intellectual inclination of mind and love for learning and writing. She writes in her article 'Concerns of Anxiety' that "There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are:

that my father was a writer,

that I was educated exclusively in English

And that I was born a woman." (103)

She further speaks of the widespread influence that her father had not only through genetic factors, not through multiple conditioning or conscious shaping, but also through interaction with peers, intellectual interaction and discussion, play-reading and rehearsal.

This in turn created a world of words and thoughts in which Shashi happily drowned. She accepted many of her father's ideas and beliefs satisfactorily, which were not dictated by any orthodox system or came from blind faith. Her father valued logic and reason and strongly advocated liberal thinking. Despite being scholars of Sanskrit, he did not restrict her children to a particular area of the subject, but created opportunities to learn English thought, language and literature. A meticulous diary-keeper, he noted "events, commitments, meetings and lectures, as well as the expenses of each day." It was through writing that he recorded the passing, fleeting moments and in one particular instance was responsible for the darkest days of her life, faced with a sense of unemployment and foreboding death. She wrote in desperation, almost in grave concern for the future of her three children. After reading a few pages, Shashi explains:

"However, what struck me deeply was 'until my children are able to stand on their own feet'. Most parents at the time would have written, 'Until my daughters get married. But he put her three children, her two daughters as well as her son in the same category. She thought of her daughters the same way he thought of her son."

The house, she explains, was a harmonious mix of languages, as her father, who taught Sanskrit, wrote in Kannada and studied English, married a Marathi wife. Consequently, her education ranged from the works of Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Sivaramakarantha and Masti Venkatesh Iyengar to the works taught at the school of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Tennyson. Nevertheless, all her reading was in English.

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Shashi had a very liberal and well-mannered childhood in which she was never made to feel that she was a girl child to be restricted from many walks of life. As a result, we get to

see the same eclectic thinking in the creation of her characters and dialogues. Usually female protagonists try to break free from traditional ways of life and question their status in society at home. They confront the problems of everyday life, with an unresolved question of identity and oppression quietly woven into the routine. However, despite the challenges and hostility, they have their strengths and remain unscathed. Her narrative is full of characters who try to find an authentic self, even when realizing later in life, when they have already faced monotony, weakness, subordination in a setup that which is largely patriarchal. To an interviewer, she tells:

"My characters take their own way. I have heard people say that we should have strong female characters. But my writing is concerned with women as they are." (12)

At the age of fifteen, the Rangacharya family shifted to Delhi and Mumbai respectively. Her father moved to the national capital with her wife and son after working in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in Delhi.

Shashi shifted to Mumbai with her sister and obtained a bachelor's degree in economics from Elphinstone College. She studied law which earned her high academic recognition and was awarded a gold medal. Later, during her stay in Bangalore, she took membership of the British Council Library, which had just opened in Bangalore. Here, she talks about reading aloud several self-help books, dictionaries, and plays. Shashi Deshpande shifted to Mumbai and after the birth of two sons there, she did a journalism course at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Shashi writes in ther regard:

"I knew, as children grew older than infancy, they became deeply attached, although I was in my family, home, and children, it was not enough for me. I needed something more." (96)

Elsewhere, she writes:

"But this desire to earn enough to be independent has remained within me a pain, an itch, a desire over the years..." (115)

And finally, the culmination, as she writes:

“I knew that I needed something more, that this life of wife, mother and housewife, however satisfying, was not enough. I joined a journalism course.” (117)

As part of the curriculum, Shashi had to write well. She wrote one article on bank nationalization, another on amendment of the right to property in the constitution. In addition, she wrote a review of the musical Oliver and a thesis on the two leading women's magazines of the time.

At the end of the year, she emerged as the class topper and was awarded three gold medals including the Times of Indian Gold Medal. In relation to this she writes-

"It didn't mean what it once meant to me; but it assured me that I had come out of the walls that surrounded me, that I had found a way back into the world." (124)

Currently, Shashi Deshpande lives in Bangalore with her husband and children. She has seven published novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Wine* (1988) and *A Matter of Time* (1996) and a collection of stories: *It Was Dark, The Miracle, It's the Nightingale, Legacy and Other Stories* and *The Intrusion and Other Stories*. In addition, he wrote four books for children: *A Some-Adventure, The Only Witness, The Hidden Treasure* and *The Narayanpur Incident*.

Though widely read and having a vast knowledge of literary classics, Shashi Deshpande started writing at the age of 30. Her writings were largely influenced by Jane Austen's novels, with her heroines referring to Austen in conversations with other characters. She had a great liking for Somerset Maugham which lasted for a fleeting period. She also read Dickens and Tolstoy. A certain influence of the works of the Bronte Sisters, Jane Austen, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing and Erica Jong mark her own novel. In addition, Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer enhanced their writing at the same time.

Thus, writing for Shashi Deshpande was a way of reflecting on her own being, in her own right. She used it as a tool for self-interpretation, self-analysis and discovery. Her writing is the medium through which she seeks to know herself, identify her own personality and

discover an authentic self. And this in turn becomes the major concern of all her female characters. Her heroines, like Jane Austen, are in pursuit of self-knowledge.

"Self-publishing is a brutal process. The real picture, the real you, is never revealed. Finding it is as awe-inspiring as trying to figure out how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different Shows faces." (12)

Deshpande's autobiography '*Meri Baat Suno*' records the above events as well as her feminist concerns. She offers a glimpse into her personal life, her many achievements and failures, ideologies, life events, etc. in the autobiographical account. In the opening pages itself, Deshpande writes, "Writing about oneself is a disease of our times" and suggests how writing a personal account becomes almost a leisure activity for those who hold high positions and those who have "felt the touch of fame" (1).

Shashi Deshpande has raised serious concerns regarding harassment in the preface of her autobiography and "Women's Struggle Ki Baat". She writes about the role of memory and the resulting nostalgia that enriches autobiographies and autobiographies in general. In her writing of an autobiographical article, she recounts the struggle of seeing the past with all its sweet and bitter memories. She writes,

"Nevertheless, writing about oneself is part of the human desire to survive, to conquer death. It is to leave a kind of 'I was here' mark, like paintings in caves, writings on rocks, hearts and arrows on trees drawn by lovers, lines scratched in prison cells dug by prisoners. Without these marks, without writing, the past becomes an empty one, our lives as they never existed" (7).

Feminism in Indian literature became apparent in the 1920s and early 1930s. However, it was only after the post-independence period that the status of women and their role in society became the subject of scrutiny in literary texts. It called for a literary interpretation of the prescribed ideas of womanhood in a largely patriarchal society, concerns of oppression and exploitation, an ever-present theme in Indian literature.

The specific problems and sufferings of Indian women found artistic expression in English in Indian literature during the 1970s. Women writers such as Kamala Markandeya, Kamala

Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and others began to question gender-role expectations and women's sexual problems. Her female protagonists were full of vigor and courage to question the oppressive role of a largely patriarchal society as well as the traditional norms and culture that supported such displays of male dominance.

DISCUSSION

Shashi Deshpande in her novels raises concerns about the complexity of relationships between families and marriages. She places her characters on a routine basis, in the midst of a vibrant domestic life; Facing the problems of everyday life and struggling to keep one's personality intact. However, it is specifically her presentation of women's suffering and problems that points to her feminism. Feminism, again, is an ideology that advocates for women's rights based on equality of the sexes. According to Alice Jardine, feminism is a movement from the point of view of women and their dilemmas, while preserving their efforts to develop self-knowledge, bound by a tradition and a mother, wife, daughter and above all in a largely patriarchal society.

Virginia Woolf points out differences in male and female experiences that also govern their artistic/literary expressions. She says: "First of all, there is a clear and huge difference between experiences; But the basic difference lies in the fact that men did not describe wars and women the birth of children, but that each gender described itself. (21)

Deshpande does not like any division on the basis of gender in her novels, nor in her choice of novelists. She rejects the positions of a male writer or a female author, instead, taking on an author as a whole. Shashi Deshpande is highly concerned about discrimination among writers on the basis of their gender. When she writes and sends her short story to be published in a magazine, she tells of a 'free' suggestion,

"The editor rejected the story - it's fine, one gets used to it - but the suggestion that bothered me was the unnecessary advice given to me by the editor" Why don't you try it in a women's magazine.

She basically depicts the problems and sufferings of middle class women. She gives expression to worldly, everyday events and experiences, keeping women at her home center. A research scholar writes,

"Her feminism is distinctly Indian in the sense that it stems from the plight of Indian women situated between conflicting identities, tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature." (18)

Deshpande's feminism has its roots in the core environment, thriving by the simple and mundane. Her concerns stem from a domestic system that attempts to legitimize the woman's role as a 'housewife' and makes it relatively difficult for her to cross boundaries and find an authentic self. It is only in blindly fulfilling gender-related roles that their female heroines face the question of their own identity. Shashi Deshpande presents the plight of women through three types of victimized female characters who are traditional, radical and represent one between the two extremes.

Jaya's mother in '*That Long Silence*', Indu's mother in *Roots and Shadows* and Saru's mother in '*The Dark Holds No Terrors*' represent the traditional woman. These women do not oppose patriarchy in any case and blindly follow the ideals of womanhood despite the oppression of the society. They do not question nor oppose, unlike radical women, who are the opposite of the traditional kind. Here, the woman is self-sufficient, rebellious and dares to question gender-based discrimination. She is the opposite of Sita's version of womanhood, holds a strong feminist ideology and chooses to lead an independent life. Saru's friend Nalu in '*The Dark Holds No Terrors*' is one such woman. The third type lies in between the two extremes as it is neither traditional nor radical in its own way.

CONCLUSION

Most of the female characters of Shashi Deshpande belong to this category. These women know that getting out of a situation will not solve their problems and therefore, they chose to face the problem themselves. They are not the traditional type who blindly follow accepted ideals of womanhood, nor are they rebellious enough to get out of the situation altogether. Instead, these women lie somewhere between their responsibilities as 'housewives' and their awareness of women's plight. These women in Deshpande's novels

are in search of self-awareness and a constant urge to find their own identity. Faced with problems, they decide to live up to the challenge. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya and Indu in *Roots and Shadows* decide to confront their husbands and then arrive at solutions to their problems. Thus, the main content of feminist ideology in Deshpande's novels is; Female sexuality, gender roles, self-discovery, desires and disillusionment etc.

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