

Cultural Values and Role of Tradition in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande: A feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most important Indian novelists writing in English, gifted with a literary bent of mind, she has matured with experience in life and reading. For her fictional concerns and art, she has made a niche for herself among Indian English novelists. Her real contribution lies in the portrayal of plights and problems, traits, and tribulation of the middleclass Indian society very well. There is no doubt that she has a keen eye on Indian middleclass women -her strength, her failings, frustrations, and aspiration in the world of haste. All her female protagonist is great follower of traditional values. Some of her women character accept their lot passively and they have neither sufficient awareness nor courage enough to struggle for a perceived status in society. Deshpande is concerned with Indian reality in respect of the lot of women, but she is not a strident and militant kind of feminist who sees the male as the sole cause of women problem. The present research paper is an attempt to show that in a society as traditionally male dominated as the Indian society is, women must try harder to find their identities. Shashi Deshpande is one of the best novelists and through her novels she present female's heart and mind who are living in the bounds of tradition and cultural values.

Keywords: cultural values, gender discrimination, female identity, compromise.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique position among contemporary Indian novelists in English. She emerged on the Indian fictional scene only in the seventies. She has created a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. She knows the mood of India and had seriously tried to bring forth in her novels the aspects of the changing Indian society. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle class educated woman who though financially independent, is still facing the problems of adjustment between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity, and between idealism and pragmatism.

A reading of Shashi Deshpande's Novels reveals a deep understanding of the female psyche particularly that of the educated, urban, middle-class women. She was born and brought-up in Dharwad, Karnataka and is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar, better known as Sriranga, a cerebral man who wrote plays of ideas. Talking about him, Shashi Deshpande told her interviewer Vanamala Viswanatha that, "He was dominating, never domineering. The only point that she is sure about is that he was "somewhat detached" from his family and "never guided" them. "Maybe if he has directed us at an early age, I could have done better," Shashi Deshpande adds.

Shashi Deshpande is a widely read person though she never identified herself with any particular group of writers, whether of India or abroad. She approaches contemporary Indian novelists with an open mind. Notwithstanding her reading and familiarity with works both traditional and modern, Shashi Deshpande is essentially a self-taught writer. She began writing career rather late. About what sparked it off, she told to an interviewer- "My husband was a common-wealth scholar and we went to England. We were there for a year. I thought it would be pity if I forget all our experiences there. So, I started writing them down and gave them to my father. He gave them to 'Deccan Herald'.. which published them promptly, so it began very accidentally. Then I was working for 'The onlooker' when one of the sub-editors said to me "Why don't you write a story? So, I wrote one for the first time, I thought it was very good, a somewhat Maughamish kind of story. And then I wrote on and on as though I was crazed. There was no thinking or worrying about the theme, technique, or publisher. I simply wrote.

Deshpande is probably incomparable for her portrayal of Indian middle women with their turmoil's, convulsions, frustrations, and that long silence which has been their lot for many centuries. In all her novels Deshpande shows her attitude towards tradition, and all her female protagonist are great follower of traditional values. In this hostile world, which belongs to men, a woman has never been treated as 'an equal'. The male mentality is shaped in such a way that they cannot believe in women being equally to them. Woman is always supposed as an accessory to man. She has always been suppressed and differentiated as inferior. Family life and work pattern convey the idea that woman should be subordinate and dependent on man. In a patriarchal set up women are suppressed physically, mentally, socially and are denied any individuality. As Rich argues that in this system, "men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, custom, education and the division of labour, determine what role women shall play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed the male".

Shashi Deshpande's novels explore the myth of man's superiority and myth of women being a Paragon of virtues. Her novels encapsulate the tensions underlying women's aspiration and their cultural identities. Their urge for self-definition culminates in the identification of the areas of conflict. They are encased and suffocated in the patterns of androcentric culture. There women are steeped in the conventions and customs of society which dislocates and alienated them from the process of being and becoming. Deshpande's novels are polemical attacks against the patriarchal world, where women are treated as a 'kind of non-man.' Like Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan, Deshpande also agrees that male assigned roles of wife and motherhood entrap women in the masculine plot of desire and there by marginalize them from one socio political and creative spheres of life.

Shashi Deshpande's novels taken us deep into women's world and highlight female endeavour in search of true identity. The strong point about Deshpande's novels is her delineation of the woman's inner world. She herself admitted to Geeta Gangadharan in an interview. "We know a lot about the physical and the organic world and the universe in general, but we still know very little about human relationships. It is the most mystifying thing as far as I am concerned. I will continue to wonder about it, puzzle over it and write about it. And still find it tremendously intriguing, fascinating".

The Novelist is pained to notice ways of subordinating women by male members of the society, what makes matters worse for Indian women is that there are no choices before them. Like marries, their decisions are made in heaven in their husband's mind. As Roots and Shadows puts it:

Millions of girls have asked this question millions of times in this country.... What choice do I have? Surely it is the fact, this fact that I can choose, that differentiate me from the animals. But years of blindfolding can obscure your vision so you no more see the choice. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so that you can no longer move out of your cage of choice.

This is a sad commentary on the incompatibility in and hypocrisy of married life, which the novelist has presented realistically. Traditionally, in the Hindu Marriage the position of husband and wife clearly defined. The husband is expected to be the authoritarian figure whose will should always dominate the life of the wife. The wife should regard him as her master and should serve faithfully. Thus, the traditional concept of superior husband and subordinate wife has been the guide line of Hindu marriage. The Indian tradition considers marriage ceremony as one in which the husband and wife become one however "that one is the husband." In an Indian marriage it is understood that the wife will merge her name, personality, life style and in fact, her entire life into that of the husband.

Through her novels Deshpande shows that it is in Indian tradition that a male child is always much more welcomed than a female child. "The uncommonly intense desire for a son among Hindus is well recognized. It is traditional attributed to the doctrine that unless his son performs the obsequies a man's soul cannot go to heaven." This fact lies at the base of the miseries of Indian women. In all levels of society, a son gets preference than a daughter. So Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is unwelcome. Indu's kaka in *Roots and Shadows*, who has only daughter feels ashamed of himself. Jaya's mother in *That long Silence* shows a marked preference for her sons. In the lower class, women learn not only to accept their secondary position, but to support the good for nothing males of their families, like Jeeja in *That long Silences*. In the same novel the sweeper girl Nayana says, "why give birth to a girl who'll only suffer because of men all her life?" Even Jaya accept that it was kinder custom to kill baby girls rather than make them suffer for years and years.

Deshpande's novels present at time a lonely and somber world. Reviewing *The Intrusion* and other stories, Muriel wasi points out that this collection of hers reflect "Unhappy realities of Indian life" and the women's "depressing melancholic, or claustrophobic world..." it is the time for Shashi Deshpande, she concludes", to open some of her windows and let the morning light fill her dark rooms". The realistic treatment of human predicament in Deshpande's fiction along with the contemporary angst in an existential manner might appear to be depressing. Significantly, her leading women characters learn in due courses how to arrive at a compromise and find a sense of balance in life. At the end of *The Dark Holds No Terror Saru*, for example, goes back home with:

... all those selves she had rejected so resolutely at first, and so passionately embraced later. The guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the unloving wife... All person spiked out guilt. Yes, she was all of them, they were not all of her. She was all these and much more.” Even Urmila in *The Binding Vine*, who thinks that human nature is the “hardest to bridge, the hardest to accept to live with,” does not remain unaffected by the healing touch of love. And, to cite one more case, Jaya, taking stock of her achievement in life, remarks in *That long Silence*, “But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible.”

Shashi Deshpande, however, proves that in the institution of marriage, an economically independent woman is still bound in the shackles and must forever live in fear of hurting the ego of her husband. Surprisingly enough, no less a person than John Ruskin holds a similar view: “A man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly, while a woman ought to know the same language or science only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband’s pleasure, and in those of his best friends.” Deshpande, in all her novels, has dealt with the problems of New Women. As a writer, she highlights the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation which is inevitable in an oppressively male dominated society. She gives up a peep into the state and condition of the present-day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism.

The novelist does not believe in offering readymade solutions. But the conviction that “We can always hope and that” life has always to be made possible” speaks of a genuinely positive attitude towards life. Deshpande’s protagonists finally try their best to conform to their races, and the novels end with an optimistic note with the possibility of some positive action in future.

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