

Quest for Equality and Emancipation in the Major Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

Feminism is a movement which advocates equal social, political and economic rights for women as men have . It also involves respect, honour and recognition to all women in the world. The present paper studies how Shashi Deshpande articulates her feministic approach in her major novels bringing to the fore an extremely important question of women's equality and emancipation with her male counterpart. The paper also attempts also to study how the heroines of Shashi Deshpande try to transfer their ensuing pain into radical new feminine consciousness by discarding traditional norms of patriarchy and its wider structure , which is very difficult to escape on the part of women in our Indian society.

Keywords: Feminism, Equality, Emancipation, Patriarchal Ideology, Gender Discrimination.

Patriarchal ideology and its wider structure have always dominated women in all relations and positions. Patriarchal dominance over female areas refer to the social structure and practices which not only subordinate but also oppress and exploit women. Women's productive power is controlled by men . Women are exploited in the name of household work, child bearing and and caring of the old people in their family etc. Secondly, their reproductive power and capacities are taken under control by patriarchal ideology. In many societies, it is up to men to take decision to whether she should consume contraceptive or not . Third area of women which is restricted by their counterpart is their mobility. Men take decisions if she should join job or not. Property rights of women are important area for their empowerment and emancipation. In fact , these are the reasons, why men or patriarchy suppresses female sexuality. The stabilization of property right and men's wish to pass on one's property to legitimate heirs stimulate men to put restriction on sexual behavior of women.

Feminism fights such discrimination meted out to women all over the world. Feminism is an ideology which gives women freedom to take decisions , it also gives women freedom to take decisions , it also gives freedom from sex determined roles, freedom from societal restrictions

imposed on them, freedom to express not only their thoughts but also their body and desires fully and convert them freely into implementation. As Sushila Singh quotes Donna Hawxhurst and Sue Morrow saying feminism is a dynamic ideology constantly changing with a number of aspect involving personal, the political and philosophical . “Feminism is a call to action . It can never be simply a belief system without action , feminism is merely empty rhetoric which cancels itself out ”(qtd.in Singh23).

An upliftment of women all over the world is the main goal of women’s liberation movement. In spite of the diversity of the feminisms, which have developed over the years, these movements fight against patriarchal hierarchisation and that is the thing of common interest of all feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is undoubtedly the classic example of Feminist theory, advocating women’s rights . Wollstonecraft argued that women should be treated with equal dignity and respect like men so far as paying attention to their education, socio-political and economic rights are concerned. According to her, women should be given education in a rational manner so that they shall have opportunity to contribute to society. John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher and political economist contributed widely to socio-political theory. He wrote *The Subjection of Women*. He wanted women’s entry in every field, trade and profession. He strongly gave emphasis on women’s rights to vote and practice arts.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is also major feminist work. This seminal book presents Simone de Beauvoir’s historical account of women’s disadvantaged position in society. The writer analyses various situation, roles, the adult women inhibits. She maintains that women’s situation is not the result of her character rather her character is a result of her situation. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have written *The Madwoman in Attic. No Man’s Land* is another important work by these authors focusing a more pluralist feminism rather than psycho-analytical model of mad woman. While Elaine Showalter’s *A Criticism of Her Own: Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro –American and Feminist Literary Theory* (1989) documents the differentiation between feminist critical practices and the theoretical movements they represents. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* gives account of wider patriarchal structure that is very difficult to evade on the part of women. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Frieden attacks the popular notion that women would be fulfilled from their household work, marriages, sexual lives and child bearing. According to Betty Frieden, women were not satisfied with these household chores.

Helen Cixous’ *The Newly Born Woman, Laugh of the Medusa, Speculum of the Other Woman* by Luce Irigaray and *The Sex Which is Not One* explore women’s issues. Other important books on feminism include *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) by Chris Weedon, *Money Sex Power* (1985) by Nancy Hartsock, *Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy*(1975), *Feminism and Post Feminism* by Kanwar Dinesh Singh , Nina Manasans’ *Women of Colour: Defining the Issues, Hearing the Voices*, Jasbir Jain’s *Feminist Theory:*

Intellectual Tradition of American Feminism, Women's Writing: Text and Context and Feminism: Theory, Criticism and Analysis by Sushila Singh. While Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) is considered as a very influential theoretical text of feminism

Impact of western feminist movements is obviously seen on Indian English writers. A number of post-independence Indian writers in English came out with their crusade against patriarchal ideology. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De voiced the frustration and suppression of Indian middle class woman. Shobha De was concerned with elite class or upper middle class woman working in the field of film and modeling. Namita Gokhale's women characters are from all walks of life. Shashi Deshpande has strong conviction about feminism. In Deshpande's opinion, women should overcome their weaknesses and show their potential and they should not surrender themselves to male's sense of superiority. Nayantara Sehgal who is known as political novelist has described a picture of India in 1975-76 in her novel *Rich Like Us* in 1985. Another important character Rose is shown very vibrantly receptive to life irrespective of race and colour. Although Sonali is rich, beautiful and educated she has to suffer a number of hardships. Sehgal has also written *Plans For Departure* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988). While Dina Mehta uses Mahatma Gandhi's mercy mission as the backdrop in her novels. Nina Sibal's *Yatra* (1987) belongs to both the groups of novels of "Magic Realism" and "Regional Novels". *The Dogs of Justice* (1988) depicts Shahnaz a rich and beautiful Kashmiri girl while Uma Vasudeva's *Shreya of Sonagarh* (1993) describes Shreya's rise to the political power. Shreya's attraction towards her neighbor Anand is realistically described and her rising to a Member of Parliament is also effectively presented by the novelist.

Shashi Deshpande has strong conviction about feminism. She has shown her heroines fighting against gender discrimination. Sarita in *Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) is frustrated by Hindu way of tradition which considers daughter merely a burden. Sarita joins medical field and flouts caste restrictions by marrying the man she loves. On being successful as a doctor which leads to disintegration of her family and relationship, she has to face humiliation from her husband. She becomes an innocent victim at the ending part of the novel.

Roots and Shadows (1983) has Indu as the protagonist who fights against her authoritarian and traditional joint family. Indu pursues her study in a metro-politan city and becomes a journalist. She is also of the opinion that it is she who will take decision of her marriage and marries the man of her own choice. Jaya is the narrator in Deshpande's fifth novel *The Long Silence* (1988). Jaya is shown as an upper middle class housewife in Bombay, but unfortunately, has to shift in a small apartment in a poorer locality as a result of her husband's business malpractice. Jaya wants to break that 'Long Silence' by writing about herself and family. She gradually emerges as a confident woman who in the beginning was taught that

husband is like a sheltering tree for woman . Later on Jaya refuses to hand over the key of her flat to her husband who does not care for family but only for his money and status.

Small Remedies (2000) is very successful novel of Shashi Deshpande. In this novel also the protagonist's determination to confront and accept the self is seen. This novel can be read as a study of motherhood. Madhu ,the protagonist, goes to a town place with the purpose to write a biography of Savitribai who is famous musician and who has sacrificed her life for the sake of music. Deshpande has shown how Savitribai was allowed to pursue music in those days, when music was profession of courtesan. Later on, she elopes with table-player and becomes "Savitribai Indorikar" . This incident reminds us of Gudiya's mother who elopes with harmonium player in *Gods Graves and Grandmother* by Namita Gokhale. Gudiya resents: "The harmonium –player proposed marriage to my mother. She consented, but they were both afraid of my grandmother and decided to elope. They left in a hired tonga, at the crack of dawn, but he gave her the slip at the Railway Station and decamped with her luggage and her jewellery. She waited there for two days, watching out for him from the Ladies Waiting Room, certain that he would return"(Gokhale 5-6).

Like Namita Gokhale, Deshpande uses a kind of stream of consciousness technique. The narrator describes the incident and events by going back and forth in time, which gives strength to the protagonist. Lila is another woman character presented in the novel who has broken the shackles of caste and tradition by marrying a Christian and devoting herself to trade union activities. Deshpande's next novel *The Binding Vine* (1993) is another important novel in which Shashi Deshpande has described predicament of middle class woman in Indian society. Urmi, the protagonist understands the lack of love and emotional support as a result of which Urmi many a times feels physically hungry and expresses her erotic feelings. She also fights for justice for Kalpana ,a teenage victim of rape, struggling to survive in a hospital. Deshpande has shown all the women characters driving themselves. The protagonist addresses her mother by her name and her widowed mother has " pink painted nails" which is quite unimaginable in a society where a widow's mobility, productive power and reproductive power are under control of patriarch.

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) is her third important novel depicting the predicament of four woman characters namely- Manorama , Kalyani, Sumitra and Arundhati. Deshpande raises her voice against gender discrimination in this novel, which is a study of feminine consciousness and human relationship. The writer also emphasizes feminist ideals like 'dignity', 'self-worth' and 'strength' on the basis of which heroines try to overcome scathing aspect of patriarchal structure and practices like family, marriage institution and orthodox expectations.

This is how, Shashi Deshpande writes about gender discrimination. All the heroines of Deshpande try to subvert patriarchal structure, perpetuating secondary status of women in Indian

society. We see various images of women in Deshpande's novels – be it traditional woman, modern woman, or new woman, she has voiced anxiety, fear, struggle for identity and problems in conjugal relationship. Deshpande never wants women to be passive beings, suffering silently but according to her women should realize their potential and capacities and use them all to acquire new identity. As Mary Warnock maintains : “ Authentic existence can begin only when we have realized and thoroughly understood what we are. Once we have grasped that, human reality is characterized by the fact that each human being is, uniquely himself and no one else, and that each of us has his own possibilities to fulfill” (Warnock 55).

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