

SHASHI DESHPANDE: AN INDIAN FEMINIST

DR. TUKARAM S. SAWANT*

*Associate Professor, Tuljaram Chaturchand College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Baramati, Tal. Baramati, Dist. Pune, Baramati – 41310 2 (Maharashtra).

ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a well-known Indian woman novelist in English, has been concerned about the issues and problems of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy since she started writing. Her novels, to a large extent, are women-oriented. Her women protagonists find themselves to be the victims of beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, and traditions of a male-centric Indian society. Being a feminist, she does not want her women to be a mere shadow of their male-counterparts. She is basically concerned with the projection of emerging 'new' women ready to have their own ways remaining well within the boundaries of Indian family and society. She wants her women to be economically, ideologically, mentally, intellectually and emotionally free and strong. She wants them to be complete and independent human individuals equal to their male-counterparts. She wants her women not to remain passive and submissive but to emerge as strong, confident and assertive beings in their own way, attempting to and succeeding in striking a fine balance between traditional beliefs and individual needs. She wants them to be 'new' and 'modern' in the true sense of the term. Showing a psychological insight into the subtleties of the female mind, she makes her women emerge out of the crisis as strong women willing to deal with their lives with courage, confidence and determination. The present article attempts to critically examine Shashi Deshpande as an Indian feminist.

Key words: exploitation, feminism, heterosexuality, humanistic, patriarchy, replenishment.

Shashi Deshpande, a popular Indian woman novelist in English, has ten novels, two novellas and a large number of short stories to her credit. She is also the author of a non-fictional book entitled, *Writing from the Margin* and four books for children. Her women-oriented novels primarily deal with middle-class career-oriented Indian women with their sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, plight and predicament, suppression and exploitation in Indian patriarchal set-up. Anita Myles writes: "Shashi Deshpande, in all her novels, exhibits a

sharp psychological insight into the subtleties of the human mind and society. She focuses in detail on the working of the psyche of her women characters who plunge into periods of psychic disturbance due to traumatic experiences of life. Nevertheless, the suffering leads to a stage of self-introspection and later self-discovery which evinces a fresh perception of life. Ultimately her characters emerge out of the crisis as strong women willing to compromise with life as it comes. In her analysis of the post-modern dilemma of women, she concentrates on career women and the problems they face outside the threshold of their homes in a basically male-dominated social setup". (Myles 11). Being a sensitive feminist, she raises a voice of protest against injustice done to women in the name of patriarchy. She wants her women not to remain meek, submissive, silent, passive and tolerant but to be 'new' and 'modern' in the true sense of the term. The present article is an attempt to critically examine Shashi Deshpande, an Indian feminist who peeps deep into the inner psyche and consciousness of her protagonists ultimately emerging as 'new' women determined to move on with their lives on their own.

We need to understand meaning of the term 'feminism'. The term 'feminism', derived from the Latin word '*femina*', meaning women or having the qualities of women, had its origin in the west, which can be traced in the struggle for Women's Rights during the last decade of the 18th century. It is a movement that seeks to liberate women from male-ego and male-domination. It attempts to put an end to the problem of gender-discrimination. Its aim is to banish patriarchy and provide an opportunity to women to have free and fresh air. It guides them to behave and live as per their dreams, aspirations, beliefs and ideas. It is a kind of movement the object of which is to protect women's social, political, legal, moral rights and to provide them love, sympathy, respect, status, honour, equality and liberty. It raises a voice of protest against male-domination, male-centric society, male-created beliefs and ideologies. It intends to carry suppressed women towards liberation and self-realization.

There has been a struggle to free women from male oppression and domination since the beginning of civilization. Freedom for women implies freedom from male-created, male-controlled beliefs and norms. Feminism is, in a sense, a protest movement launched by women from the west for equal rights to be given to women. It is an anti-patriarchal movement of the women, by the women and for the women. It fights for the basic rights of women. According to Donna Hawxhurt and Sue Morrow, feminism is a dynamic and constantly changing ideology with different aspects such as the personal, the political and the philosophical. (Tuttle 65-66). Barbara Berg defines feminism as: "a broad movement embracing numerous phases of women's emancipation. It is a movement striving for the freedom from sex-determined roles, freedom from society's oppressive restrictions, freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action". (Hooks 65-66).

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is one of the significant works expressing concern for the search for and recognition of women's socio-cultural roles. It is truly a milestone in the field of literature produced to fight for the cause of women. It contains bold or rather dangerous demands, requirements and expectations now accepted as very ordinary and commonplace. She argues that women should be given a broader education for the business of life. She attacks Rousseau who was of the view that education given to women should always be relative to that given to men for they are specially made to please men. (Wollstonecraft 1791). She shows courage to give an expression to the female heart so far closed and confined in Indian patriarchy. She is of the view that the equal status should be given to the female in different walks of life. She uses her work as a tool to fight for the cause of the female. Kate Millett's book, *Sexual Politics*, provides a thorough theoretical examination of the oppression, suppression and exploitation of women, in one form or the other, with regard to the concept of patriarchy. Nancy Hartsock, in *Money, Sex and Power* (1985), argues that it is the restriction of the woman in the private sphere that accounts for male-domination over her. According to Chandra Mohanty, third world women are "imagined continuity of women with divergent histories and social locations woven together by the political threats of opposition to forms of domination". (Mohanty 4).

Feminism is a kind of movement the purpose of which is to secure women's social, political, legal, moral and other rights. It targets the inadequacy of male-created laws and ideologies, and strives for the economic, social, and racial equality of women. It is a movement that emerges as a protest against male-ego, male-domination and gender-discrimination. It is a movement that fights against unjust and unfair treatment given to the female members of our society. Feminism as a movement, which started in India late in the 1970's, has been influenced by western feminism. However, it is not a blind, mechanical and slavish imitation of western thoughts, ideologies and movements. As Uma Narayan, rightly, puts it: "Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of 'western agendas' in one and clear sense . . . Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women". (Weedon13). It is a movement which makes suppressed and exploited women aware of their rights and helps them to emerge as 'new' women.

A new woman is one who is bold and strong, rebellious and revolutionary, who has an open mind to accept new ideas, who believes in the principles of individuality, equality and freedom and who strongly and fearlessly reacts against orthodox norms and beliefs, customs and conventions which are in favour of men. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values . . . The emancipated woman wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides

herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal . . . Man, however, becomes indignant when he treats her as a free and independent being and then realizes that she is still a trap for him; if he gratifies and satisfies her in her posture as prey, he finds her claims to autonomy irritating; whatever he does, he feels tricked and she feels wronged". (Beauvoir 726-727). A 'new' woman is one who is conscious of herself as a free and independent individual willing to live with a heightened sense of dignity, status and individuality. She is a product of a new social and economic order in which she casts aside her passivity, silence and invisibility.

A new woman is one who struggles for achievements in social, economic and professional fields, and destroys the image of a meek, obedient, submissive, silent and tolerant human being. Simone de Beauvoir opines: "She is in a position of continual denial . . . she does not accept the destiny assigned to her by nature and by society; and yet she does not repudiate it completely; she is too much divided against herself to join battle with the world; she limits herself to a flight from reality or a symbolic struggle against it. Each of her desires has its corresponding anxiety: she is eager to come into possession of her future, but she dreads to break with her past; she wants to 'have' a man, but she does not want him to have her as his prey. And behind each fear lurks a desire; violation horrifies her, but she yearns towards passivity. She is thus doomed to insincerity and all its subterfuges; she is predisposed to all kinds of negative obsessions that express the ambivalence of anxiety and desire". (Beauvoir 375).

India belongs to man since time immemorial. Men treat women as their property which can be owned, controlled and disposed of the way they like. There has been a continuous movement to set the women free from the male authority, domination, suppression, oppression and exploitation right from the beginning of civilization. Thus the roots of feminism can be traced in the long history of human civilization. Indian feminism is nothing but an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment given to and injustice done to Indian women in the name of gender-discrimination. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Phule, Pandit Ramabai and others fought for the cause of women. Indian women have been resisting patriarchal oppression for more than 2000 years. It was Mahatma Gandhiji who gave a new direction and dimension to the feminist movement in India. He exerted to free women from exploitation, oppression and suppression in a male-centric society. Feminism, in the field of literature, refers to any kind of writing which raises a voice of protest against restrictions imposed on the basic and fundamental rights of women. It is concerned with the nature of the woman's struggle against patriarchy. The world of Indian English novels has spread a red carpet especially for women writers who are expressing their concerns and anxieties for the issues and problems related to the world of females controlled by the males.

With the rise of feminism in India, Indian women writers started using novel as a tool to express their bitter revolt against the masculine world in which the woman is a victimized creature. They have been dealing with the plight and predicament of Indian women, their problems, and their physical, mental, financial and emotional suppression and exploitation in various fields of life. Many female writers such as Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande and others with a few male writers like R. K. Narayan, Raj Rao and Mulk Raj Anand are concerned with the projection of the female psyche, female consciousness and the inner conflict going on in the minds of women. The novelists like Anita Desai and Nayantara Sehgal deal with the plight of the urban upper class Indian women while Deshpande deals with urban middle class Indian women.

Deshpande strongly protests against treating women merely as sexual objects and against prejudiced and patriarchal attitude towards women. She has shown her serious concern about women who are restless on account of the established norms, beliefs, customs and conventions deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. According to Ramesh Kumar Gupta, “Shashi Deshpande’s novels are concerned with women’s quest for self, an exploration into the human psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and protagonist’s place in it”. (Gupta 42). Being a woman herself, in an interview, Deshpande sympathizes with women and says: “If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done. It is because the world of women is like that and I am mirroring the world.” (Interview). Indian writers’ attempt to free Indian women from Indian patriarchy is, in a sense, Indian feminism. It is not as cynical and aggressive as western feminism.

Deshpande’s novels are open ended in the sense that all her protagonists emerge as ‘new’ women with new hopes, new dreams, new attitude to life, and with an urge, courage and confidence to start their life afresh. They are a projection of ‘new’ women with their sensibilities, dilemmas, efforts and their struggle to know themselves, to establish and preserve their identity as free and independent human beings in a tradition-bound society. Her women protagonists gradually learn to fight their own battle through self-effacing dependence, aggressive self-assertion, and iconoclastic rage. They have their own perception and interpretation of human bonds and relationships within and outside their families. They are well aware of the fact that their growth and development is possible in a family to which they belong. They struggle for peace, happiness, happiness and survival of their families.

Deshpande projects the emergence of a ‘new’ woman who refuses to be defeated in a male-oriented Indian society. She exhibits great strength, courage, confidence and determination to reject her traditional role models and dare to go through a process of introspection and emerge as a ‘new’ woman. Her determination to face and

accept her life gives her confidence to decide things for herself and leads her towards positive and meaningful detachment. Self-awareness and self-realization on her part leads her towards a deeper understanding of the root causes of her sorrows and sufferings. However, she is not a complete human being. She has her strengths and weaknesses. With virtues as well as vices in her, with her merits as well as demerits, she succeeds in emerging as a 'new' woman ready to face her life afresh. She, determined to live without fear, fear of being unloved, misjudged and misunderstood, proves herself a 'new' woman who is capable of self-analysis and self-examination.

Deshpande believes that the strength of the woman lies in the power of her feminine sensibility. She also believes that the woman's self-assertion, her awareness of the very strength of her feminine sensibility can save her from Indian patriarchy. Her women undertake a journey towards self-awareness, self-realization, self-assertion and self-discovery. According to Usha Bande, Shashi Deshpande makes her women protagonists move "towards self-awareness at various levels and finally to an assertion for autonomy and freedom. The picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive". Deshpande wants her female protagonists to be new and modern challenging and defying man-made customs and conventions. Her female protagonists undertake a psychological journey of self-realization with the purpose of making themselves free and independent individuals. They are capable enough to discover and assert their self, identity and individuality. They have a strong urge to make themselves bold and confident and to find space for themselves in order to grow and develop on their own. (Bande 14). Her women use their inner strength, their determination and confidence to fight against injustice done to them.

Deshpande's protagonists are educated, career-oriented and economically independent. They fight to prove themselves as individuals attempting to set themselves free from traditional, social and moral constraints and hoping to live their lives with status and dignity. They gradually learn to fight their own battle through self-effacing dependence, aggressive self-assertion, and iconoclastic rage. They emerge as 'new' women with new hopes and dreams, new attitude to life, and with an urge, courage and confidence to start their lives afresh. They are determined to live without fear, fear of being unloved, misjudged and misunderstood. They are typical Indian women with a strong desire to assert their self, identity and individuality. Hers are the women who struggle to find and preserve their identity as free human beings. They undertake a successful journey towards their intellectual, psychological and emotional growth and development. They are strong in the sense that they refuse to sacrifice their self and individuality and ultimately emerge as 'new' women ready to face their life with courage, confidence and determination.

Deshpande, being a feminist, feels that nature has really played a trick on women by making them dream of happiness only through a man. She comes forward with the message that the woman's self-assertion, her awareness of the very strength of her feminine sensibility can save her from Indian patriarchy. Her novel is the woman's journey towards self-awareness, self-realization, self-assertion and self-discovery, with the help of which she can emerge as a 'new' woman. Kelkar says: "One way to combat domestic violence in India would be to make women economically independent". (Kelkar 8). A 'new' woman is one who considers herself an individual, one who is free from traditional, social and moral constraints and one who is able to live with a sense of dignity and individuality. According to Usha Bande, Shashi Deshpande makes her women protagonists move "towards self-awareness at various levels and finally to an assertion for autonomy and freedom. The picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive". (Bande 14). Deshpande proves herself a feminist by making her women free and complete individuals remaining well within the boundfirs of Indian society.

Deshpande has admitted some influence of the western feminist writers on her. In an interview given to M. D. Riti, she said: "One never knows what influences one as a writer. I have read a lot of feminist novelists, and understand what they are trying to say easily. However, I began reading feminist writing only recently, while my writing has reflected feminist idea from the start". (1993). In an interview given to Laxmi Holmstrom, she said: "I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist in my own life, I mean, but not consciously as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experience and feelings. I started writing first, and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it". (28). Her feminism is typically Indian in the sense that it is rooted in Indian soil and context. It refers to her intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her concerns for the feminine issues and problems. Her intention is only to make the Indian woman realize her 'self', her inner strength and potentiality. It is neither aggressive nor cynical. She believes that her feminism is very much an individual working out her problem. A positive and humanistic aspect of her feminism makes her consider herself a humanist feminist. Her feminism is typically Indian in the sense that it is rooted in Indian soil and context. It is not a blind imitation of western feminism. Her feminism implies her intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her concern for the feminine issues and problems. Her feminism is neither aggressive nor cynical. She believes that feminism is very much an individual working out her problem. Her approach to feminism is natural, positive, optimistic and humanistic.

Deshpande depicts the woman's struggle for self-realization, self-assertion, self-expression and development of individuality and personality. Though she has repeatedly said that she writes about human beings

and not about women in relation to men, we cannot ignore the fact that most of her novels are women-oriented as they basically deal with the place and position of the Indian woman in her family and society. In an interview, she says: “. . . I want to reach a stage where I can write about human beings and not about women in relation to men. I don’t believe in having a protagonist or sexist purpose to my writing. If it presents such perspective, it is only a coincidence”. (Vishwanath 237). She does not consider herself a feminist writer. She says that she is a feminist, but she doesn’t write to propagate an ‘ism’. She feels that while she is a feminist, her novels are novels, works of art which are deeply and firmly rooted in Indian context. She hasn’t written her novels as a debating voice, to develop a thesis in a debate. She said in an interview to Lakshmi, “I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist in my own life . . . I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experience and feelings. I started writing first, and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it”. (Lakshmi). While expressing her views on feminism she said in an interview: “But to me feminism isn’t a matter of theory; it is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism among people here. They often think it is about burning brass or walking out on your husband, children etc. I always try to make the point anew about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it”. (Indian Communicator 2).

Deshpande wants to be known simply as a writer, not as a woman writer. She wants not to be assessed and evaluated by her gender. She, in her essay, *Why I am a feminist*, says: “It took me years to say even to myself, I am a feminist. It was the culmination of the voyage that began within myself, and went on to be the ocean of women’s place in the world. Today when I call myself a feminist I believe that the female as the species has the same right to be born and survive, to fulfil herself and shape her life according to her needs and the potential that lies within her, as the male has. I believe that women are neither inferior not subordinate human beings . . . I believe that Nature, when conferring its gifts on humans, did not differentiate between males and females; except for the single purpose of procreation”. (Deshpande 83). In an interview with ‘The Times of India’, she spoke about her works, about issues concerning women and various other subjects. Most of her characters are true to life and deal with problems most women would not want to talk about; such as rape in marriages, lust and breaking free from traditions and stereotypes. She insisted in an interview: “I am not a feminist, I am a human being and I write about other human beings who happen to be women . . . My work has helped to break the silence on a number of issues which were once a taboo to talk about”.

Deshpande's protagonists are educated, career-oriented and economically independent. They fight to prove themselves as individuals attempting to set themselves free from traditional, social and moral constraints and hoping to live their lives with status and dignity. They gradually learn to fight their own battle through self-effacing dependence, aggressive self-assertion, and iconoclastic rage. They emerge as 'new' women with new hopes and dreams, new attitude to life, and with an urge, courage and confidence to start their lives afresh. They are determined to live without fear, fear of being unloved, misjudged and misunderstood. They are typical Indian women with a strong desire to assert their self, identity and individuality. Hers are the women who struggle to find and preserve their identity as free human beings. They undertake a successful journey towards their intellectual, psychological and emotional growth and development. They are strong in the sense that they refuse to sacrifice their self and individuality and ultimately emerge as 'new' women ready to face their life with courage, confidence and determination.

Deshpande's women are determined to reject the age-old myth of femininity that makes the woman a typical Indian woman, a martyr, a heroine, just a stupid fool, to use Indu's words, a woman moving around her husband, living for her husband, submitting herself and individuality, and to live a life of a human being as a free and independent individual. Indu and Jaya, after self-realization on their part, decide to confront their husbands and live their life afresh. Instead of running away from the problems, they are determined to face them. They, thus, strike a balance between their total surrender to their husbands and their aggressive revolt against them. Indu and Jaya, hoping for happiness and peace in their life, decide to move on with their marital lives with renewed hope and confidence. They decide not to submit passively or cravenly to the circumstances around them, but with courage, confidence, determination, dignity and strength. Deshpande's women including Urmi, Madhu, Manjari, Aparna have been portrayed as human beings with their strengths and weaknesses, with their flaws and follies. They are certainly not perfect and complete human beings. However, with virtues as well as vices in them, they succeed in emerging as 'new' women ready to face their lives afresh.

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