

Feminist Voices in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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Abstract

Feminism is a movement aimed at liberation from oppression in a male dominated patriarchal society. It lays stress on social, economic and political rights of women. Feminist movement advocates equal rights and equal opportunities for women. Literature has always been a means of raising voice for the emancipation of women. Many writers have advocated for the equal rights of women. They have portrayed the pitiable and miserable life of women in their writings. They have depicted the female experience in various situations. These writers adopt feminist approach while writing and they raise feminist voices. Shashi Deshpande is a well known widely acclaimed Indian novelist who writes about women from a feminist approach. She presents a real picture of the contemporary middle- class, educated urban Indian women. She portrays the miserable plight of these women and analyses that their lot has not changed much even in the twentieth century. She writes about their disappointments and frustrations and deals with their problems. This paper deals with her three major novels- "The Dark Holds no Terrors" "Roots and Shadows" and "That Long Silence". An attempt has been made to study these three novels in the light of feminism.

Keywords:- Feminism, Isolation, Patriarchy, Gender discrimination, androcentrism

"Feminism" is a term which was first coined by French philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837. He used the word 'feminisme' for feminism to mean advocacy of women's rights. "Femin" is derived from the latin root word "Femina" meaning woman while "ism" is a suffix derived from the Greek "ismos" meaning a belief, practice or worldview. Feminism is a movement which aims at equal rights and opportunities for women. These are political, economic and social rights. They work for the liberation and emancipation of women in a male dominated society. They also work for the safety of girls and women in domestic situations as well as at workplaces and other public places. Feminism began in Europe as a socio- cultural movement. It campaigned for women's suffrage and legal and social equality. It worked to end gender discrimination. It is also concerned with the justice for women and opposition to sexual harassment and violence against women. Feminism also concerns itself with the oppression of women. It advocates social change to eliminate male supremacy. Feminism sought for political, social, economic and educational rights for women. Now-a-days, feminism is considered as a movement that seeks equality for people of any gender.

In literature, feminism refers to any mode that approaches a text for the nature of female experience. Writers like Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf pledge the equality of opportunity for

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women. Some works of literature have been regarded as key feminist texts. Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. "A Room of One's Own" (1929) by Virginia Woolf is another work noted in its arguments for both a literal and figural space for women writers. French writer Simon de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986) attacked the patriarchal hegemony in our society. In her famous treatise "The Second Sex" (1949), she hit hard at the andocentric customs and conventions, art and culture, philosophy and religion which have always assigned women the secondary or rather slavish position to men.

Feminism in Indian English literature is influenced by the western feminism but it is not the replica of the western feminist literature. Though all feminist writers from all the parts of the world share the basic paradigms of feminism, they have been conscious of maintaining their own national identities independent in their own respective ways. Women in India were denied liberty and equality. They were treated badly and they faced domestic violence. Many Indian women novelists have portrayed the condition of Indian women in their novels.

Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shoba De and Shashi Deshpande are the significant Indian feminist novelists. Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad, Karnataka in 1938. Her father Adya Rangacharya was a famous Kannada dramatist and writer. Her first novel "The Dark Holds No Terrors" was published in 1980. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel "That Long Silence" in 1990 and The Padma Shri Award in 2009. Her novel "Shadow Play" was shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize in 2014. She is one of the eminent novelists of contemporary Indian literature in English. Western readers align her with Anita Desai. The works of both these writers centre around women's lives in modern Indian society. Deshpande creates figures that take her readers through the social strata of urban society, but her interest comes to centre more and more on women of the middle and upper middle classes, well educated women who fight for their own space, for their place in the family and in their social and cultural setting. Deshpande's novels are family novels. Family is the groundwork of the novels. Women, in Deshpande's texts, are not simply victims of circumstances, of family and of society. They have come to stand out as self-assured, self-empowered, articulate personalities. They leave behind limits and limitations, hurt themselves against and cross barriers and conventional norms.

According to Shashi Deshpande three things were responsible for her development as an English writer. She says "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 female." This statement proves a feminist soul in her. Unlike the early feminist author who chose to portray the subjugation of women in ordinary life, she moved a step further and made educated women as the subject of her writings and voiced the agony of such women who have to depend on their male counterparts for the choices and decisions of their life. She presents 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. Neither her male characters are the culprit nor does her female character suffer. In fact, the female characters in her novels know their rights and they raise their voice against the male domination and women oppression. Through her novels she raises various issues related to

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women and her position in human society.

“The Dark Holds No Terrors” was published in 1980. This novel is about an independent educated woman’s search for her identity. Sarita also called Saru recollects her earliest memories which underlined the discrimination shown by her mother in favour of her brother. This birthday and other religious rituals related to him were given top priority and celebrated with much pomp and show whereas her birthdays were barely acknowledged. Saru’s problem is compounded when her brother accidentally dies by drowning. Her mother accused her of the death of her brother Dhruva. When her mother accuses her of murdering her brother, she does not deny or refute the charge. Her mother speaks out about Saru’s intentions and not the deed. Dhruva’s demise had always been her subconscious desire and there is a very high demarcation between her wish and its fulfilment. Saru’s mother’s obvious preference for her brother, Dhruva, creates a sense of alienation within her and precipitates a sense of rootlessness and insecurity. These experiences are common to all Indian girls. As a child Saru also witnessed the pitiable condition of her grandmother who was deserted by her husband and considered a burden to her own people. This prompts her to seek economic independence as an insurance against subordination or suppression. Saru is married to Manohar, a fellow student in her college. The initial years of marriage are sheer bliss when she thinks that she is the luckiest woman on earth. But soon this happiness becomes an illusion. Saru’s social and financial status grows far beyond that of her husband. She is a busy, successful doctor in contrast to Manu who is an underpaid lecturer in a third rate college. She established herself as a career woman and her profession satisfies her ego, but this brings her no happiness at home. Her husband’s sense of inferiority complex and humiliation is the result of society’s reaction to Saru’s superior position. It develops sadism in him.

Shashi Deshpande proves that in the institution of marriage, an economically independent woman is still bound in chains and must forever live in fear of hurting the ego of her husband. It is easy to identify the consequences of the shattering of the male ego. Saru’s bitter realization is that a woman must necessarily remain a step behind her husband. Saru undergoes great humiliation and neglect as a child and after marriage as a wife. Deshpande in the novel, discusses discrimination shown by parents towards their daughters and their desire to have a male child.

Her novel “Roots and Shadows” appeared in 1983. Shashi Deshpande dealt with the themes of marriage, joint-family system, infidelity, class and caste relations and modernism in this novel. In the novel, she depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male dominated and orthodox society. She refuses to play the fixed role of a wife imposed upon her by society. Her quest for identity is expressed in the novel. The novel exposes the hypocrisy of ostensible progressive- minded men like Jayant, Indu’s husband. The woman of today is aware of the injustice heaped on her and unlike her counterpart of generation ago, she does not believe that woman is an inferior being that must remain passive and submissive. Shashi Deshpande depicts this awakening of the woman’s consciousness. Indu is seen to be acting against dominance right from her childhood. She hated obedience and passivity as a girl child. She broke traditions by marrying Jayant who belongs to another caste. Deshpande portrayed Indu as an indomitable educated woman brushing

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aside all its narrow conventions. Indu's feeling of isolation is expressed in the words. "I am alone." Indu plays the role of an ideal housewife but it restricts her development. She is even denied the scope of giving free play to her artistic potential. Indu recognizes her displacement and marginalization as a woman. Patriarchy reduces woman to the state of an object. Indu's marriage with Jayant fails to give her freedom and happiness. She has killed her feelings, dreams, aspirations and her ambition of being a creative writer. Jayant not only suppresses the female voice of expression in his wife, but makes her life dull and mechanical. She can neither love nor hate but pretends to be happy. She finds herself a woman with no choice, no wants, no dreams, no identity and no individuality. The novel depicts the tragedy of a married woman with her physical harassment, mental torture and exploitation, inhuman and beastlike treatment. The meek, docile and humble Indu finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman.

Thus Deshpande in this novel, depicts Indian women's search for identity, aspirations, ambitions and freedom as well as frustrations, sufferings, isolation and exploitation in a male dominated society.

"That Long Silence" (1988) is the story of Jaya. Jaya is a housewife. She has two teenage children. Jaya's life is representative of any typical Indian housewife who suffers silently and compromises for family needs. In childhood Jaya was witty and had an inquisitive nature which made her grandmother say "Look at you- for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that." After marriage, Jaya keeps on challenging herself according to her husband's likes and dislikes. As a result she has no identity, no status of her own. She even changed her appearance in order to please her husband. She gets her haircut and wears dark glasses. Mohan renames Jaya as Suhasini. Jaya means 'Victory' and Suhasini means 'Soft', 'smiling' and motherly woman. She learns that silence is one of the many tricks to survive within marriage. So she silences her feelings as well as her physical desires. She longs for emotional communication between her and Mohan. But she gets only emptiness and the silence which results in her frustration. Her relationship with Mohan becomes mechanical and forced. The quotation from the novel is noteworthy here "I had learnt it at last – no question, no retorts, only silence." Jaya opposes the role assigned to a wife in India after her marriage due to which life becomes unbearable and monotonous. Because of the emptiness in her marital life, she gets drawn towards Kamat, a middle- aged intellectual. A married woman can not be a friend of another in Indian society. Her friends and neighbours like Mukta do not approve of their relationship and thus their friendship suffers due to this reason. "That Long Silence" is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian wife which has turned her into a non- entity.

From the above discussion of these novels, it is evident that Shashi Deshpande raises her strong voices of protest against androcentric society through the portrayal of her female protagonists. Deshpande's heroines are highly conscious of their predicament as victims of inequality in a patriarchal and orthodox society. Deshpande had dealt with the issues and problems of contemporary middle class educated Indian women. Her novels deal with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The Indian woman has been a silent sufferer for years. She has played different roles as a wife, mother, sister and daughter. She has never

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been able to claim her identity and individuality. Deshpande depicts the inner world of the Indian women. Most of her protagonists are educated, modern and exposed to western ideas. She is realistic in her feminist approach to the women's problems. She emphasizes on the change in a woman's mindset to bring about a positive change in women's social status. Her female characters are caught between tradition and modernity. Their search for identity and aspirations and ambitions for a free and independent life are beautifully portrayed in Deshpande's novels. Thus Deshpande emerges as an eminent feminist novelist who is sensitive to the issues and problems related to modern Indian women. These issues and problems find abundant places in her novels. In her novels, she raises voices against the gender discrimination, domestic violence, exploitation and suffering of women in an orthodox androcentric patriarchal Indian society.

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