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Social Vision of Shashi Deshpande in her Novels

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande, with all her efforts, is a well known serious Indian writer in English. Her collections of short stories and novels published till date deal with oppression, exploitation and subjection of women in middle class Indian society. In her novels Shashi Deshpande exposes mainly Indian society, Indian culture and Indian environment. She says that her novels are just about Indian people who believe an ideal woman means self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering and complexities of their lives. Her novels present a social world of many complex relationships. She does not dwell on social issue but goes deep into the forces that conditions the growth of a female in patriarchal, male dominated Indian family. She sees social reality from the psychological point of view, but does not look into it as a social reformers would do it.

The aim of this paper is to present social vision of Shashi Deshpande especially with the predicament of educated middle-class families because she thought these women were most sensitive to the problems of women in different roles of a mother, wife, sister, daughter and mother-in-law etc. and how they strive to be independent in socio-economic matters.

Keywords: Recognition of women, changing socio-economic milieu, educated, career woman in relation to society, social taboos and economic dependence, independent.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most distinguished and an award winning Indian English Novelist of global repute who has generally dealt with familial, domestic, social and political themes in her fictional works. She is the second daughter of the renowned Sanskrit scholar, Adya Rangacharya (better known as Sriranga) who was also a great Kannada

dramatist. She was born in, 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka. She has inherited some of the good qualities of heart and mind from her father who though, was “somewhat detached” from her family. She also acquired love for reading and scholarship from her father. Subsequently winning her degree in Economics, Law and English from Bombay and Bangalore, and a diploma in journalism from Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan, she exhibited her talents.

Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and the shortcomings of the age-old rituals and conventions which contribute to make woman a secondary creature, ‘Adoor- mat’ a slave and a servant to man and social reality as it is experienced by women. ‘Roots and Shadows’ her first novel, depicts the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in male dominated and tradition-bound society ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’ her second novel, talks about Sarita, a renowned doctor during the daytime and getting insulted and injured at night as if paying back. Shashi Deshpande in ‘That Long Silence’ her third novel, shows an unforgettable tale of an Indian house wife Jaya who is disheartened by her marriage and after life. In ‘The Binding Vine’ her fourth novel, deals with suffering of Mira, Urmi and Kalpana who suffer rape, neglect, pain and even crimes in isolation, silence and submission. ‘A Matter of Time’ her fifth novel is about three women’s life Kalyani, Sumi and her daughter Aru from three generations from same family and how they cope with tagedies in their lives. Small Remedies, her next novel, is about Savitribai Indorekar, who avoids marriage and home and has undergone great mental trauma due to double standards followed by oppressive male-dominated and tradition-bound society –one for man and other for women. A deep analysis of Shashi Deshpande’s novels leaves no space about her serious concern for women. Shashi Deshpande’s novels are good epitomes in determining the personality of a girl child in regards to her social position, reality, self-identity and psychological development.

Somerset Maugham and Jane Austen too influenced her writings. Salman Rushdie, according to her, is a path-breaker. She likes Anita Desai’s and Amitav Gosh’s books. As regards her writing career, she began with short stories in year 1970. Thereafter she took to her fictive adventure and came out in her mission. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978. She is a winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award for English for the year 1990 for her best known novel That Long Silence. Shashi Deshpande also bagged the ‘Thrumathi Rangmmal Prize’ for the best Indian novel of 1982-83 for her first novel, Root and Shadows. The Dark Holds No Terrors which was published in 1980 earned Naniangud Thirumalamba in the year 1991.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of many complex relationships. Her collection of short stories and novels published till date deal with the predicament of the vast majority of the middle class Indian women struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world. She has also attempted to explore the moral and psychic dilemmas of and their repercussions on women protagonists who struggle hard for their identity. She has tried to expose to the world the obstacles and hardships women face and suffer in the orthodox Hindu society. The plight of the working woman, her attachment with the family, her problem of marital adjustment, her subjection and exploitation-all have been treated with great skill.

A woman as a person is an integral part of a society. To imagine a society devoid of woman is not possible. In other words no society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Butan Indian traditional society has for long ignored her importance. As such society and history has never appreciated the role she plays in building the society. On the other hand, society has always tried to mould her personality as per its norms. Sarabjit Sandhu says:

Society characterized women as ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. Family life and work patterns convey the idea that women should be subordinate to and dependent on man. She is the mother of man who subsequently rules over her and wants to protect her and keep her under his control.¹

Deshpande holds the view that woman should be socially and economically independent. She should be allowed to enjoy as much freedom as a man does. She should be allowed to work in various fields of human activity as she is equal to man in her mental status. She should be honored as man's equal partner. She does not seem to find favors with the view of Manu who recommends a number of restrictions on her movements. She refutes what Manu, the Hindu law-giver, says regarding woman's position in society.

Day and night woman must be kept in subordination to the male of the family, in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons.... Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God.²

Shashi Deshpande has especially dealt with the predicament of educated middle-class families because she thought these women were most sensitive to the problems of women in different roles. Education and social reform movements launched from time to time in human history brought new age of brightness for Indian women who were educated and belonged to middle-class families. The introduction of English education was instrumental in bringing significant changes in the middle-class life-style. Srabjit Sandhu supports this view saying:

*Some girls, after reading English novels, got the idea of romantic love and they yearned for it in their Indian surroundings, which became the subject for the Indian writers, especially for women writers.*³

Deshpande believes that the social context has much to do with the perspectives from which people observe the society. One can observe a woman playing the roles of a mother, wife, sister, daughter and mother-in-law etc. She may be found and understood by her father in one way, her son and daughter in another way, her husband in some other way. She is treated by each of them in different ways. Women are apt to understand the relationship more easily. Also women writers may depict this relationship more analytically than Man. S. K. Sandhu remarks:

*The opinion of each of the perceivers depends on his/her interaction with her indifferent situation. So, the writers, especially women writers, having experienced different phases of women in different roles, have reflected the same in their fiction resulting in feminine form.*⁴

Deshpande is shocked to the backbone to notice the miserable plight of women in Indian traditional society. They are treated at par with men while both of them are complementary to one another. In an interview to Geetha Gangadharan, she gives experience to their views regarding position of women in Indian society and says:

*..... I have a very strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been looked upon just as 'breeding animals'. They had no other role in life. I have a strong objection to treating any human being in that manner...I could see that female life had no value at all.*⁵

Most of Shashi Deshpande's fictional works are associated with native themes. In her treatment of the Indian social issues, her Indian sensibility is perceptible. Other women

writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhavbala ,Anita Desai etc. have created European characters but Shashi Deshpande's characters are Indian and rooted in India's cultural heritage. She is very much conscious of the dimensions of her fiction. She writes:

*I am different from other Indians who write in English, my background is very family there .I was never educated abroad. My Novels don't have any Westerners, for example, they are just about Indian people and complexities of our lives, our inner lives and our outer lives and the reconciliation between them. My English is as we use it, I don't make it easier for anyone really. If I make any Changes, it because I think the novel needs it, not because the reader needs it?*⁶

The earlier novel written by several women novelist highlights the traditional concept of women.

With the change of time the tendencies in treating with feminism have undergone changes. Now in the post Rushdie novels the woman has been projected as a conflicting figure against traditional values and advancing toward modernity. Whereas, the novelists like Anita Desai and NayantaraSahgal, Shobha De and Namita Gokhale have treated urban theme and the plights and predicaments of educated women as well as challenges they have to face. But Shashi Deshpande deals with the social problem of Indian women who represent the whole middle class of Indian Society.

In her short stories as well as her novels, Shashi Deshpande writes mainly about Indian Society, Indian culture and Indian environment. She does not simplify India but presents it as it is, without any embellishment to her readers. She herself says that her novels are just about Indian people and complexity of their lives. A close scrutiny of her work reveals the importance to women- a neglected class of society.

Shashi Deshpande thinks of improvement in the life style of women as human beings. She is an upholder of their honour and freedom to as large an extent as men's. In the interview to Geetha Gangadharan, who asks her "would you like to call yourself a feminist?" She replies:

*Yes ,I would,I am a feminist in the sense of that ,I think we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings There is no superior or inferior , we are two halves of one species ... I think that'smy idea of feminism.*⁷

Deshpande agrees with the sociologists who assert that woman suffers due to her emotional attachment with her family. The woman is emotional by nature. She attaches great value to her relationship. She is not easily prepared to break off her relationship. She cannot bear the pain of being away from home as a wife and mother. However, education has nurtured her sense of selfhood and so she does not want to remain a passive figure in her married life. Promilla Kapur has observed a change in women's status and says:

*With a change in women's personal status and social status has come a change in her way of thinking and feelings and the past halfcenturyhaswitnessgreat changes in her attitude towards sex, love and marriage.*⁸

Deshpande holds the view that centuries of tradition have made Indian women so patient that they take pride in suffering and submitting. Though Indian culture has undergone changes from time to time yet women's position has been secondary. They have experienced conflicts of values but they have not been able to combine the two roles thrust upon them—the performance of households duties and as workers. Deshpande wanted to describe in her novels the changed society. She felt the pulse of the contemporary women, society and India. As such she has attempted to project the image of modern woman in her novels.

Economics conditions have changed. Naturally, the attitudes of educated women have changed .They feel the need to work and earn money. They crave for economic independence. But the working women have to face the problems of martial adjustment. They are confronted with humiliation and disgrace at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. The superego of the husband is hurt if his wife earns more than he. Like a bruised animal he tries to dominate her will assaulting her physically or sexually. Deshpande has highlighted such issues in her novels. She seeks to trace out the trauma and tension in which the Indian woman is caught. These and many other problems arise in a society in transition. Nirmal Prakash writes:

*A sensitive and conscious woman writer like Shashi Deshpande seems to grapple with the identity crisis of the contemporary woman in her works... She bemoans the popular media-generated cultural which presents only "Weepy woman."*⁹

Apparently, Shashi Deshpande has great sympathy for women, particularly for educated, middle-class working women. She depicts their agony realistically because she has a firsthand experience of a middle-class family. However her writings transcend the limits of gender and sex. Humanity is her concern and human issues attract her attention. But she hails from a middle-class family. Her women represent a larger part of the modern society. Sarabjit Sandhu observes:

The woman she portrays is undeniably a forerunner of the “deemed female” of modern India. The portrayal is quite unique, i.e. she neither represents the old, orthodox image, nor modern Westernized woman, she is the “every woman” of the middle class society, who tries hard to rise above tradition but is involuntarily adapted into it.”¹⁰

Deshpande has sought to show the Indian women despite her being educated employed and financially independent cannot resist the social taboos and even if she could she wanted to submit herself to the conventional roles.

Family, marriage and social norm keep her in chain. The so called ideal relationship between men in the Indian context is so strong that even most advanced man does not screw up courage to see his wife in term of quality. Deshpande tries to create an atmosphere of freedom and in favour of women. This arises feeling of revolt in the female protagonists' mind but ultimately they endeavor to adjust themselves to submit to their tradition roles. In Deshpande's novels woman is initially unconventional. She ultimately realizes the wisdom of the traditional ways at the moment of crisis. Sandhu remarks:

Ultimately she is an appendage to man or family. Though economically independent she is emotionally dependent on her husband.¹¹

It is a fact that Indian English writing have been influenced by the ideology and movement of feminism Indian, it seem, cannot overthrow or disown and the patriarchal or male dominate set up and society but there is always hope for the woman. It is only through the process of self- examination and self- analysis, courage and boldness that woman can change her position from tears to laughter, despair to hope, slavery to freedom thus she becomes a symbol of hope to the oppressed woman.

Conclusion:

A socio-economic study of Shashi Deshpande's novels offers a detailed observation of the position of middle class educated women in modern India. On social grounds, it talks of the societal status a woman is given despite her complete devotion to family, society and country. Throughout her life a woman dedicates herself to her family and husband but when it comes to responding to her devotion, all she gets is humiliation, inequality, torture and trauma. Still she keeps herself strong and fights for her identity and self respect in the society and home.

The novelist gives a threadbare analysis of variegated dimensions of crudities and injustice done to them. As a woman novelist, she shows her concern with the travails of educated, women who are aware of their merits and competence but find themselves stifling under the tyranny of the established social set up, male-dominance and sexual sadism. No doubt she writes mainly about women, but she presents them as human beings who are lonely, though not alone.

However, struggling and combating they come out successful, sometimes coming back to the rut. Their socio-economic standing, sometimes, becomes an obstacle in their way. Thus, we observe that Shashi Deshpande highlights the trauma and empathy of Indian women belonging to traditional middle class families.

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