

A Utilitarian Reading of Shashi Deshpande's "If I Die Today"

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Abstract:

A utilitarian reading of Deshpande's novel 'If I Die Today' might be a challenging task but the Indian society is deep rooted with the philosophies. The changing dynamics of the society can be seen in her novels too. This paper explores the utilitarian philosophy in the theme and the decisions taken by the characters particularly the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham which emphasizes on the maximization of happiness and minimization of the sufferings. Deshpande deliberately shows the creeping seeds of utilitarianism in Indian society. The key features to analyze this text is consequentialism, hedonism and utilitarianism. Qualitative textual analysis has been done in order to interpret moral and philosophical themes in the novel. This paper demonstrates how utilitarian themes influence narrative conflicts and character development. This paper concludes that *If I Die Today* showcases the limitations and tensions of utilitarianism within interpersonal relationships and social responsibilities.

Keywords: Utilitarianism, hedonism, consequentialism, empathy and inclusive concern, social impact, future oriented happiness.

Introduction-

This paper explores the utilitarian philosophy in Shashi Deshpande's novel "if I Die Today". Shashi Deshpande is one of the most distinguished novelists in Indian English Fiction. Her works are widely read on women's perspectives and female characters are widely dominated in her fiction but apart from the feministic view point her novels are rooted in Indian social system. The traces of globalization can be seen in the Indian literary horizon and the novels of Shashi Deshpande are no more exception. The novel *If I Die Today*, is comprised of several stories of dissimilar characters in distinct circumstances. The novel is declared crime novel which focuses on the lives of doctors, showing the several defects in them. *If I Die Today* echoes man's struggle to survive in the society. The plot of the novel revolves around the pleasure and pain principal. The novel weaves the stories of doctors' lives and their role in the society as a provider of collective happiness and we see how they fail to deliver what they are most expected to do. All the doctors espouse the modern ways and lead peaceful life. Their lives are running on the individual pleasure principle until the shadows of death hovers on the surface. With this novel, Deshpande foregrounds the life of doctor who has been assigned to spread happiness by providing their services among the people but in actual they are busy in facilitating themselves and working their own happiness and forgets the others but returns at the end of the novel to accept their folies. Jeremy Bentham says that actions are morally right if they as they promote overall happiness and utility. Utilitarianism is *an ethical philosophy in which the happiness of the greatest number of people in the society is considered the greatest good. According to this philosophy, an action is morally right if its consequences lead to happiness (absence of pain), and wrong if it ends in unhappiness (pain). Since the link between actions and their happy or unhappy outcomes depends on the circumstances, no moral principal is absolute or necessary in itself under utilitarianism.*(businessdictionary.com)

The narrator of the novel is a doctor named Prem's wife Manju, who is lecturer and is on her maternity leave. Like other characters in the novel, she too is felicitous in her life having everything what one can ask from God. But the arrival of a cancer patient, Guru, in Bombay hospital, who is congener of Meera and Ashok, disturbs the lives of the doctors and their family by watching over others and realizing them their faults. On one side there are murders, fear, disbelief, misunderstandings, death, ambition and love while on the other side Guru and his involvement in other's life make others to assume their faults done by them in their earlier life, run parallel in the novel while uncovering their utilitarian aspects.

Discussion-

Character analysis on utilitarian perspective- Through the characters of Deshpande we see the psyche of an Indian under the influence of utilitarianism. The study of the character of the Guru is pivotal in the discussion of the utilitarian philosophy. Life, we think, starts its journey from the birth, we desire to cease it after completion of a long span, seems happy ending but when it is realized that it is going to stop before what we desired, dreams, hopes, wishes of man collapse. Man forgets to plan the remaining short span of the life which is going to be swallowed by death. The demon of death each time hovers over them. While believing in inevitability of death humans wish to live through ages and escape to embrace death. Guru accepts the fact of his death because to run his remaining life on normalcy. He is a man who conquers his weaknesses having spread enough love to everyone to help them out of difficulty. His needs are restricted only to live abandoning every type of comfort from the life. His thoughts are linked with the collective happiness of the people around him. The novelist, in this novel, with great skill and perfection, has successfully managed to portray Guru as a utilitarian figure.

His empathy and inclusive concern bring comfort to everyone who talks with him. His charming nature and goodness are enough to attract others. Everyone is comfortable with him and discloses the secrets of heart before him separately. Deshpande imparts to Guru a unique hold over the characters. The conversation of Guru with other characters in the novel simply categories into two groups: a one which works on individual pleasure and the other one which favors the collective happiness. Guru and the Sethji are the people whose psyche work on collective pleasure principle while other characters like Dr. Kulkarni, Ashok, Prem, Shyam and other staff of the hospital in unison keeps the hedonistic base for their life. Guru awakens their conscience and due to this there is a kind of restlessness in their mind. They loosen up their control over their lives and it is very hard for them to tighten it up. His observation, stark comments, straightforwardness, moral sense, and future oriented happiness goals play havoc in other's life. Guru who was very adorable to all members of doctors' family now, he seems to them a catalyst who destroys their individual happiness: *It seems to me that Guru had begun to see himself as a spectator, above and different from all of us. That's when a man becomes dangerous. Yes, dangerous, because he imagines himself God and loses his touch with humanity.*¹⁷ Guru becomes the reason of pain in their lives. "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure" (Bentham, 1789/1996, p. 11).

Almost all the characters in unison are in pursuit of getting happiness by keeping aside utilitarian moral values. Dr. Kulkarni, Ashok, Prem, Shyam and other staff of the hospital know the real cause of Tambe's death but their lips were sealed because they wanted to save themselves from any harm until Guru provoked their soul by pointing out their mistake/ crime which took the life of an innocent one. In this way he makes a social impact on the lives of the people. *Guru was not a catalyst who changed us; maybe he just showed us up for what we really were. And yet the thought remains- if only he had left us alone. If only he had not interfered*".(If I Die Today-10) As Bentham describes "By the principle of utility is meant that

principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question” (Bentham, 1789/1996, p. 14).

Character of Manju in projecting social dimension- Manju is wonderstruck to go through into the past having everything she never realized happiness. She unleashes the human behavior of emphasis on happiness which is always believed the thing of past and future that one hardly feels it in present. Deshpande shows man's thirst for carrying out more and more. It minimizes his sense of his possessions and on this point, he erodes his happiness. Humans ensconced with the idea of their own happiness that they ignore the existence of other happiness. In the process of acquiring happiness, they commit mistakes and their life run on track until the faults, secrets are disclosed. The idea of achieving happiness of an individual at any cost becomes harmful to society when it minimizes the collective happiness of the society. An individual's emphasis on the his or her own happiness left society miserable. The character of Manju is a symbol of absolute soul who wanders in search of truth from one place to another and ultimately at the climax, she finds the true essence. She is curious to know about Tambe's death and tries to solve the mystery of his death by asking Prem but get nothing. She tries to accumulate all pieces through places but all is in vain. Amid all the happenings, Guru dies untimely and then Tony was found dead in a pond. The ambience is charged with disbelief, fear suspicion, grief, and helplessness. The lack of communication goes fathoms deep and creates the ditch between Prem and Manju.

Manju who is unconsciously utilitarian on the several grounds. Her psyche is befuddled to choose between the individual and collective principal of happiness. At one point she thinks Guru a dangerous person who has stolen their happiness on the other hand she believes in collective happiness. Manju creates distance from her husband but the same approach brings her close to Guru: *For the past few years, it seemed to me now, I had been longing for the*

perfect friend. And I had thought I had found him in Guru. A man who understood and sympathized with all my feelings; she would not have been as curious as Guru had been. (If I Die Today-100) Her own utilitarian principle compels Prem to hide every point of Tambe's death. He says, *"How could I? You were so- so bloody honest, so...so much against doing anything wrong."* (If I Die Today-109) But he breaks into pieces and discloses the secret of Tambe's death. Manju's concern towards Tambe's death her projection on social dimension of an individual happiness. An action cannot be morally good if it is not providing any collective happiness. Bentham writes, "The extent of a pleasure or pain means the number of persons to whom it extends" (Bentham, 1789/1996, p. 39).

The character of Prem - Prem confesses the real cause of Tambe's death was the negligence on the part of doctors. His speech signifies man's helplessness and cowardice disposition to escape from the bare facts: *"Sometimes one just can't understand how things happen."* (If I Die Today-106) He also admits that such negligence happens so often but this time it came into lime light because the deceased *"was the rare man, a man in million."*(If I Die Today-107) He was too close to workers because of his good nature. They devalued the life of a man and the worst thing that they were ready to compensate it: *"Murder was not just a frightening word any more. It was hateful, a cruel rejection of a man's humanity of his right to live."* (If I Die Today-115)

In one of her discords with Prem, Manju frightens when he shouted at her furiously. She realizes the values of masks; we wear- masks to hide our strong and worst emotions and consider them the armor of the civilized world or humanity: *Prem shouted, glaring at me as if he hated me. I had never seen him so furious. Without masks- is this how you want it to be, Guru? No, better to have them on. Far, far better.* (If I Die Today-47) Deshpande presents the dilemma of modern man. It is a clear picture of transforming psyche of an average Indian. The transformation is worthy and valuable when it removes the ills from the society and makes it

worth-living but when the cherished desires of humans overpower him; he forgets the well-being and tries to harm others by dehumanizing himself.

Although in her preface to the novel, Deshpande asserts that the novel is only the part of her imagination having no reality but the work of art can't be completely detached from the real world. After reading it we are bound to think about the workings of the doctors. It also throws light on the fact how it is easy for the doctors to wash their hands off from the sin and crime. Prem humanizes doctors by saying, "*Doctors are only human and they can also make mistakes.*" (If I Die Today-107) but his assertion shows readers that they should get punished for the wrongdoings like other humans. If doctors negligent becomes acceptable, society would suffer massive harm and collective happiness would sharply decrease. The novel is an instrument to show careless and unethical side of the human to whom life doesn't matter. Deshpande herself acknowledges that her fiction deals with choices and consequences, not ideal moral systems.

"I am interested in what people do when they are placed in situations where no choice is entirely right" (Deshpande, 2009, p. 38).

Other characters: Tony's speech makes readers feel that for crime the doctors have "*not a worry on their minds. Not a sin in their hearts... "You doctors- you think you have a license to kill?*" (If I Die Today-77) Through Vidya, Deshpande brilliantly discloses the treachery in human conduct. She also shows how ambitious the human heart is! In the grip of ambition, human heart involves in sin. A single ambition changes the life of others. The plot of the novel is not directly connected with Vidya and she doesn't acquire any specific attention and incidents in the plot until the end of the novel. At the end of the novel, it is disclosed that Vidya's unidentified love for her brother Dr. Agarwal destroy others happiness.

Dr. Agrawal in his guilt wants to leave his post of Dean and offers it to Prem but Prem in his expiation rejects the proposal. "Intentions may be good or bad, but it is only the consequences that render actions beneficial or pernicious." (Bentham, 1802/1988, p. 95).

Vidya, unaware of the fact, carries Manju, who is in her labor pain and Prem to an unidentified place and threatens him not to accept the proposal of the dean. There she accepts all the crimes that it is she who has murdered Guru and Tony: *"God, how I hated that man. / He was influencing Ram. What right did he have...?"* (If I Die Today- 144) She is too much attached with her brother that she tries to kill Manju. Despite all efforts of Prem to save Manju he fails. Manju almost believes to be killed by Vidya and she screamed aloud to help her from an omniscient power. *Human, we don't think of them enough. Ideas, principles, ideology, ambitions, success- so many other things come first. And there's our own ego- that heads the list of what matters to us. But it's wrong. It's people who matter most. Nothing should matter more than them.* (If I Die Today-117)

Guru's arrival changes the lives of the doctors making them realize that they are human first than anything else. A human being has power to overcome his ills, if a small effort is made. Dean realized his mistakes and resigned from his post and tried his best to absolve himself. Prem, *"he now knows the demons that made him agree to do what the Dean asked him to do, he trying to fight those demons."* (If I Die Today-151) Through Guru, Deshpande symbolizes the strength of a man who can change the world by his thoughts. According to Meena Belliappa, "Deshpande's protagonists negotiate morality not in abstract philosophical terms but through practical decisions that affect the well-being of others around them" (Belliappa, 2001, p. 74).

Conclusion- This study concludes that the impact of utilitarianism can be seen in the choices which character make during the course of their lives. The novel also highlights the characters' engagement in moral deliberations that causes troubles in others life. Tambe's death in the

hospital due to the negligence of the doctor is the ground on which entire story has been narrated. From negligence to acceptance of doctors show the moral duty of the utilitarianism. Narratives of the novel dramatizes utilitarian themes of pleasure, pain, hedonism, consequentialism. The novels of Shashi Deshpande never ground on the despair; reversal of happiness can be seen renewed each time. Doctors' belief alters at the end from hedonistic to community happiness. The perception of Prem and Dr. Agarwal's redemption demonstrate the consequentialism. The study results in the importance of considering collecting happiness and the transformative power of empathetic engagement.

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