
Feminism and Works of Shashi Deshpande

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Paper Received on 25-10-2022, Accepted on 09-12-2022, Published on 11-12-22; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.4.34

Abstract

This paper attempts to bring a brief view of various stages of feminism and the reflection of feminist traits in the seven novels of Shashi Deshpande, a notable and distinguished post-colonial woman novelist of India. Shashi Deshpande chose to write about the middle-class women of post-independent India, trying to find their true identities and self in a traditional and male-dominated society. Although averse to being labeled as a feminist by critics, Deshpande gradually accepts her preoccupation with concerns for women. Nonetheless, her novels are also psychological probing into men's behavior, bringing out philosophical views about life. The seven novels are *Roots and Shadows*; *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On*, and *In the Country of Deceit*.

Keywords: discrimination, assertion, identity, integration

1.

Feminism in India gained momentum with the women's participation in the freedom movement of India with the great encouragement of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jotiba Phule, and Gandhiji. The changes and growth in the women's movement have been experienced by the whole world but no doubt with many variances. Indian feminism and western feminism had specific fundamental differences due to cultural backgrounds yet living in a global world, no country can claim complete exclusivity.

Historians claim that the publication of *A Vindication of Women's rights* marked the beginning of the First Wave Feminism. The First Wave Feminism focused on gaining political power, property rights, and economic independence for women, especially the right to vote. It aimed to make changes in the status quo of women. The Second Wave of Feminism dealt with the problem of how the cultural mindset of people led to political and sexual inequality. They aimed to help women realize their oppression so that latter could defy the patriarchal identity society superimposes on them. The Second Wave

Feminists wanted women to recognize that institutions like family and marriage execute male power concealingly. They talked about, delivered speeches, and discussed issues concerning women. Women formed study circles and read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir. One of their other significant issues was the right to abortion. In Montreal, women's emancipation meetings were conducted weekly, focusing mainly on abortion rights.

So, we can say that if the First Wave Feminism was out on the streets fighting for equal rights for women, the Second Wave Feminists rejected the male society and started to look for a different. This also proves Jasbir Jain right in writing about the two stages [waves] that "The first was a concern with the right to equality and political rights and the second with emphasis on alternative perspectives [...]" (82)¹. Moreover, both these waves relied on an essentialist definition of women. Rebecca Walker, in the introduction to the anthology, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995), blows the lid off the following observation about feminism:

Young women coming of age today wrestle with the term because we have a very different vantage point on the world than that of our foremothers ... For many of us, it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen and understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of

living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides [...]. (xxxiii)

In the postmodern world, reality is subjective. The meaning is not inherent in a sign; rather, the character is constituted by a signifier and a signified. The relationship between the latter two is merely the result of cultural conventions. The signified is the concept that the signifier stands for. But the signifier stands for the signified just by its difference from the other signifier; hence, as Derrida says, 'the meaning is never wholly known. It is constantly postponed. Reality also comes to us through language, and if the latter is not stable or unified, how can the former be objective? So, in a world without a unified objective reality, where nothing can be universalized, where everything is constantly in the process, the first two waves were busy forming a suitable social and cultural definition of feminist self, power, and freedom for women.

There is no doubt that feminism has always aimed to help women seek their identity and individuality. Yet, the demand for equality or the assertion of differences cannot attain freedom. The words 'equality' and 'assertion' seal that women are trying to achieve equality of a

gender identity that has been a cultural construct, the latter being a notion that feminism has always tried to eliminate. Neither demand for equality nor rejecting the mail order in the name of differences can attain human space for women or a world where human beings can reside in peace without any discrepancies. Jasbir Jain, in her essay "Positioning the 'Post' in Post," says: "Both of these [two waves of feminism] failed to destroy the binary oppositions" (83). We need a 'third stage,' defined as the post-feminist stage. She explains this stage in the following words:

The third stage, the post-feminist, is, at one level, an attempt to demolish these binary oppositions [man and woman in which the former is always good and is privileged over the latter part] and, at another, an effort to redefine power and freedom. It is an attempt to extend the area of women's roles and their questioning of relationships to drive home the point that the self does not exist in isolation. (83)

Post-feminism is being debated as something which either comes after or rejects the preceding feminism. Discussions have been going on now for more than a decade about whether it should be regarded as a hostile response towards earlier feminism or it is a continuous succession. Jasbir Jain's above words clearly state that post-

feminism does not discard feminism. In this paper, it will be seen how post-feminism is a progressive step where freedom does not simply mean being physically and mentally free from the clutches of patriarchy by going against them, overthrowing them and subverting the hierarchy, or isolating the self with differences. Women have rebelled and expressed their resentment against systems that undermine their identity. But it is time when they start analyzing and decoding these cultural traditions and institutions instead of aiming to change them. Reading these structures will make it easier for women to see and subvert the binary oppositions and efface them, preventing a new hierarchy. Here post-, feminism engages the post-structuralist concept. Jacques Derrida reveals that the two parts of binary- opponents cannot exist without each other; light as a presence can only be defined in the absence of darkness and vice-versa (48 and 52)². Thus, both parts are parts of each other. Deconstruction helps us to look at this truth, making the opposition lose its meaning.

The above-stated process in Deshpande's novels facilitates the women protagonists to explore the way patriarchy has set up their establishments, that is, their ideas encoded within them, thus simultaneously assisting women in deconstructing the essentialism that lay beneath the ideologies of patriarchy or reconstructing new meanings.

It also helps them to see how the gendered self is created and if this process of creation is unraveled, then destroying the binary oppositions will be a matter of will and not authority. To support this, Jasbir Jain, in "Positioning the 'Post' in Post," has appropriately said that post-feminism is also about 'redefining power and freedom.'

However, the 'self' has to be comprehended before the gendered self. The other two points, even Jain, dwell on are: self and relationships. What is the self? Jain beautifully distinguishes identity and self in the same essay, "Positioning the 'Post' in Post":

Though they are words often treated as synonyms, I would like to distinguish between them, *identity* being a characteristic or condition distinguishing a person and *self-being* the individual consciousness seat of subjective thoughts and action. The first is marked by external factors like class, caste, status, and the rest of it, while the second, *self*, depends upon body, mind, intellect, and emotions, in short in the control a person exercises over these. [...] body implies the right to be. Emotion is equally relevant, for it means the right to feel, respond, and relate. Intellect, the region of thought, presumes the right to know, think, have ideas, and mind

the right to make a decision, make a choice, and act. [84]

The essential things Jasbir Jain's definition brings into the light are the difference between identity and self and the latter being the result of our deeds. Identity is an exterior attribute, so to be free, women must strive for the freedom of the self, which is determined by multiple forces. For instance, conscious and unconscious, private and public realities constantly engage and interact to form individual selves. Before post-feminism, feminism was about collective identity, but now it is about redefining the self, which regulates our workings. Nonetheless, we cannot afford to forget that, according to Jain, the self cannot survive in seclusion. Women neither have to loom up to the center nor border the center; instead work to make themselves a valuable sprouting kernel because relations and institutions are not only based on the concept of knowledge and power, as explained by Michel Foucault.

2.

In Deshpande's novels, bonds bud from the desire to belong and to be attached. An alternative image of woman and self emerges when one shifts perspectives and views these concepts from the inside instead of the outside. This alternative image is post-feminist, where a woman's self is reworked beyond the boundaries of the conventional scaffold. Shashi Deshpande's women undertake this journey of understanding and redefining the 'self' to get away from

the burden of being wrapped up in loneliness. Both self and environment are alien to them.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Madhu in *Small Remedies* have been jerked out of their routine-based life, and now they are aware of the futility of their present existence, which is the first achievement in the advancement towards self-understanding. They come out of the pressures of false conventionality by reading the mysteries of others though the new onset does not cease the lasting significance of the association.

Urmi in *The Binding Vine*, Madhu in *Small Remedies* share the isolation of their children's death. Urmi's aloofness intensifies because there is a dissonance between her inner and outer life. She yields on the surface but has her yearnings underlying. From 'ceasing to be (203)³, she beautifully accepts the importance of survival. Madhu in *Small Remedies* suffers not only from non-communication with her dead son but with her husband, who was estranged from her. She is more aggravated by her sense of guilt. Writing the biography of the famous singer, Savitribai and her distant stay in Bhavanipur, away from her husband, along with her myriad experiences and memories relieve her and gives a new vision to understand herself and life.

A Matter of Time like *The Binding Vine* stresses the importance of female bonding to internalize the patriarchal values and their effects on

different women and their diverse ways of self-assertion. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi explores her mother-in-law's inner life and self-assertion through her poems and Kalpana's story of rape. Urmi's successful fight for justice for other women, despite facing extreme loneliness in her own married life due to the long absence of her husband, yet retaining her sincerity and genuine love for him, is a different example of a bold woman of Deshpande's fiction, for whom her adamant clinging to virtues and purity, despite many challenging situations, is the new way of her assertion.

In *A Matter of Time*, four generations of women, represented by Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi, and Aru, show the variants of romantic ideas within the same family. The novel depicts the gradual growth in the outlook and views and is also an effort to understand male psychology leading to a philosophical understanding of life. Kalyani's resistance against her mother and husband's ill-treatment represents a woman's strong will power to survive and overcome challenges.

Moving On displays the extraordinary courage of Manjari to lead her life on her own terms and resisting various kinds of pressures coming from different directions and persons. From the decision to stop her studies to marry a person of her choice to the challenges of the threat of the mafia underworld to sell her ancestral house, she displays her

unyielding strength to keep her integrity intact.

The writer's attack is on the ideological views that support the subservient roles of women. Through the postmodern deconstruction techniques, such patriarchal views are exposed, and their hollowness and ill effects are displayed. The defined roles prevent women from seeing their strengths and drawbacks that must be overcome. Without realizing their full potential, the self always conflicts with itself and others.

Post-feminism subverts the notion that women are mere victims. Sarita in the *The Dark Holds No Terror* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* are at odds with their own selves. But they cannot merely blame the accusations hurled at them in the past to be the reason for their incapability to reach out to their respective husbands and others in an emotional manner. By analyzing their past, Sarita and Jay understand that they are running away from the mistakes they had committed. They need to come out of the sense of victimization and communicate to let themselves enjoy freedom.

Mikhail Bakhtin in *Estetika Slovesnogo Tvorchestva* has said:

No nirvana is possible for a single consciousness. A single consciousness is a contradiction in terms...I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself to another, through another, and

with the help of another... *To* mean to *communicate*... To suggest to be another, and through the other, for oneself. (311-312)⁴

For Bakhtin self is always in the 'process of becoming,' which can only occur through communication.

Indu's loneliness in *Roots and Shadows* is mirrored in Naren's impossibility of communication with others. It seems that Indu has lost control over her life. She is trying to adjust herself in situations that are alienated from a sense of belongingness for her. She finds it hard to fit in the present yet discovers that 'relics' too have become hollow with time and thus embarks on a journey to discover a hidden source of strength. Similarly, we see the non-communication of Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Madhu in *Small Remedies*, leads to a feeling of alienation and numbness of senses.

In the end, as mentioned above, post-feminism is also about making one's position be the center rather than striving to reach the center. Manjari in *Moving On* jostles to learn this. Devayani in *In the Country of Deceit* undertakes an odyssey to accept the importance of cherishing the beautiful moments of love and relations to defeat loneliness.

So, we see in Deshpande's fiction that the protagonist's identity finds its true meaning only in relation to

others and the disintegration of the self is caused by the feeling of aloofness.

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How to cite this article?

Dr.Shruti Jain and Dr.Madhu Batta “ Feminism and Works of Shashi Deshpande ” Research Journal Of English(RJOE)7(4),PP:285-291,2022,
DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.4.32