

WOMEN PROTAGONISTS IN SELECTED NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE – A DISCUSSION

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Abstract

It's a well-known fact that the latter part of the twentieth century is a prelude to the feminist movements of the West. As a result of it, it spread all over the globe and has generated a special focus on women and their problems and issues to be addressed and redressed for their well-being. In this respect, women novelists in India have wielded their pens to expose the fluid situation of women in their respective family backgrounds and fields. Among the women writers of India, Shashi Deshpande is considered to be a prolific novelist of par excellence who has attempted to characterize women, especially her protagonists, who have struggled to identify themselves in a male-dominated society. The proposed paper endeavors to discuss some of the significant women characters namely Indu, Saru, Jaya etc., who are the victims of male ego, gender bias, marital discord, social alienation etc. On the other hand, the characters are analyzed how they realize their follies and foibles and how ultimately transform themselves as ideal women compromising to social standards to assert themselves as liberated women like their western counterparts. As well, the paper aims at evaluating the potentialities of the women characters tantamount to occupy enviable positions in society.

Keywords: Feminist movement, redressed, women, fluid, struggle, identity.

Introduction

The feminist movement, so to say, is a kind of revolution which has cropped up in a different way from time to time. Virtually speaking, it is of western origin that has triggered during the later part of the twentieth century. The prime purpose behind the movement is to assert women's individuality against the injustice meted out to them in society. Earlier writers have spelled out their fluid position as a sign of their agony in the male-dominated society. However, in course of time, the women writers have endeavored to bring about the emotional imbalances between sexes through their creative works to synergize women to ponder over the issues concerning their status, particularly in the family and society in general.

At first, the triumvirate – R.K.Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao also attempted to delineate women characters in their restricted circles, of course, to expose their contribution to family and their share in progressive society. In doing so, their women characters appear somewhat exemplary, but not conflict-ridden. But later generation, especially Kamala Markandeya, Anitha Desai, Shobha De and a host of other writers have presented women as a symbol of oppression and suppression. Sequel to them, Shashi Deshpande has also made a considerable benchmark in projecting women who are subjected to untold miseries such as oppression, suffering, frustration, and disappointments, ultimately urging for emancipation from the shackles of male ego and supremacy. The present paper, in consonance with the title, focuses on women protagonists in her selected works.

Indu in Roots and Shadows

Roots and shadows are the maiden novels of Shashi Deshpande. The novel deals primarily with the concept of autonomy of woman who confronts with the taboos of her family and the male world. Indu is the representative of modernity who defies the tradition. She belongs to an educated Brahmin family who has lost her mother at the time of her birth. As a consequence, she has to stay with her orthodox family, headed by Akka supposed to be a surrogate mother figure in the novel. In due course, an internal conflict arises in her mind and she leaves the family. After eleven years, when she rejoins her family, recollects the circumstances that have led to her returning to her parental home after a gap of eleven years.

Ironically, Indu recapitulates how things in life go differently against one's wishes, particularly woman. She marries Jayant of a different caste by exercising her choice defying the tradition. She expects more fulfillment and happiness in his company but soon realizes her enslavement even in married life. This happens unknowingly in her life, contrary to her tendency to experience completeness as she desires in her life. But, it results in futility. She dances to the tune of her husband much against her

whims and fancies. At first, she calls her husband by name flouting the tradition and tries to assert herself that she is beyond superstitions and irrational beliefs. However, her attempt to exhibit individuality and modernity in her life receives an ax blow and makes her an ordinary woman who is no way superior to other women. Her self-created ultra-human behavior shatters and eventually, she compromises with her lot and leads a life of resignation, despite constantly searching for an identity with the motive of autonomy, individuality, and life of her own design. Finally, she draws the inference that "Her own roots, breaking away and far from the family bonds only to discover that relationships are the roots of one's being and follow one like so many shadows that make life no more substantial than a shadow".¹

Saru in The Dark Holds No Terrors

If Indu flutters her delusive expectations in life, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* Sarita otherwise called Saru, makes the relentless quest for identity in her life to the core. It aroused in the wake of her mother's ruthless deportment in every stage of her life right from her childhood. Her mother takes no particular interest in her education and personal advancement and snubs her always due to her partisan attitude towards her son. Consequent upon, Saru develops a kind of disdain towards her mother for her discrimination. Further, she regrets her mother's attitude and rebels against her in a fit of fury and opposes her mother's appeals in her life. As well, she resents her mother's attitude toward gender bias. Once, Saru recalls her conversation with her mother:

"Don't go out in the sun. You'll get darker".

"Who cares"?

"We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married".

"I don't want to get married".

"Will you live with us all your life"?

"Why not"?

"You can't".

"And Dhruva"?

"He's different. He's a boy". 2(40)

Jaya in That Long Silence

That Long Silence is the magnum opus of Shashi Deshpande which has received tremendous acclaim and won her the Sahitya Academy Award. Unlike Indu and Saru, Jaya the protagonist leads a life of silence and breaks it later in her life of exile in Dadar flat. In fact, Jaya is an urban, educated middle-class woman gifted with creative talent and exposed to liberal western ideas. Yet, she is incapable of freeing herself from the clutches of male chauvinism. She marries Mohan and tries to lead a complacent married life with two male children. Unfortunately, Mohan involves in a shady financial transaction and attempts to escape temporarily. In doing so, they

moved to Dadar flat to hide from the catastrophe. There, she finds leisure to introspect about her existence as a woman, a victim of tradition, that induces her to break her self-imposed silence. She decides to come out of her reticence to demonstrate the emptiness of her married life besides unfolding the hard realities of her deplorable plight. In the opinion of Indira Bhatt," Shashi Deshpande unmasks both Jaya and Mohan when they face the crisis in their lives. They have run into stormy weather and their secured, sheltered life washes away like a watercolor in a rainstorm"³. Ironically, even her journey as a creative writer results in suppression of surging emotions, as Mohan reacts negatively under the impression of a revelation of his personal life being reflected in her works. So, to avoid the censure of her husband, she forcibly makes her characters docile and dormant without any anger and emotion, deprived of truth giving greater credence to her role as a wife than to herself as an individual. Kamat, her neighbor frankly tells her: "I can never imagine you writing this. This you, I mean, I can see the woman who writes this. She's plump, good-humored, pea-brained, but shrewd, devious, skimming over life"⁴(149).

However, later she starts writing humorous pieces on the problems and issues of middle-class women in a column titled "Seeta". For this, she receives the positive response from the public, editors, and readers. Furthermore, she gets a nod from her husband. Another facet of her life can be seen strikingly when she decides to change her style of physical appearance by cutting her hair and wearing black glasses under the garb of a modern woman only to appease Mohan. Nevertheless, she remains as she is in her heart of hearts as a timid, nervous and incompetent woman. This can be witnessed when she finds her friend Kamat dead in his flat as she behaves callously with fear of getting scandalized by a society which would endanger her relationship with Mohan. According to SarlaPalkar, "She perhaps does her role of wife to perfection, but fails as a human being".⁵ Though, she faces series of jolts to her carefully constructed edifice of life, in the process of her traumatic experience that upsets her mental equilibrium, finally she emerges victorious taking control of the whole situation.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the above discussion that the writer has had absolute command over modern women's despicable predicament in all walks of life. Though they are educated and economically independent, they are subjected to lacerating circumstances such as male domination, female subjugation, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, marital disharmony and social taboos prevailing in the ultra-modern Indian social milieu. Hence, most of Deshpande's women protagonists have waged a war against existing inequalities to assert their individuality as well, to establish their identity at par with western women who are considered to be the

pioneers of feminist ideology. However, the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande undergo the trials and tribulations of life with stoic resistance, at last redeeming themselves of their oppression, stand as a replica of liberated women with a realization that any freedom they devise must be within the boundaries of their obligations and responsibilities.

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