

Indian Woman at the Cross Roads: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Heroines

MALA RENGANATHAN*

The feminist thought and the feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women's movements in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterpart. As Uma Narayan rightly puts it, "Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of 'western agendas' in one clear and simple sense— Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women." (Weeden'1997: 13) Although feminism as an organized movement made its appearance in India late in the 1970's, it existed in spirit long before even the western feminist movement had begun. One may here recall the 15th century story of Meera Bai and her struggle to remain faithful to her divine love. Besides the Indian women who actively participated in India's struggle for independence were also guided to a considerable extent by the feminist zeal. However, the Indian women's struggle for emancipation could not mimic its western counterpart for obvious reasons. Due to historical and cultural specificities of the region, the feminist movement in India had to think in terms of its own agendas and strategies. In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women's emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman. The woman, in order to liberate herself and advance, needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject herself to patriarchal domination and control.

The problems and predicaments peculiar to the Indian women found artistic expression in the Indian literature in English since the 1970s. In their creative writings, the women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and others started discussing openly the sexual problems of women and questioning the gender-role expectations. The female protagonists in their writings evince sufficient vigour and courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion and culture, but

* Reader, Department of English, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong (Meghalaya) Pin - 793022.

yet they refrain from taking the paths suggested by the western feminists. They rather seek to find their own paths.

The present paper reflecting on the three major novels of Shashi Deshpande, attempts to prove the point that Indian feminism as reflected in the Indian fiction is a unique phenomenon that has to be valued on its own scale and should not be weighed against the scales of the western feminist literature. For this purpose I have attempted a critique of the female protagonists in three of Shashi Deshpande's novels, namely *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence*. In all these novels, Shashi Deshpande objectifies new female subjective experiences with a gynocentric vision. She basically reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women. Her writings, rooted in the culture in which she lives, remain sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences, and they give artistic expression to something that is simple and mundane. Her feminism is peculiarly Indian in the sense that it is born out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature. Her art is intensely personal, not political. Her feminism rooted in the native environment tends to be humanistic and optimistic in its outlook.

The underlying theme in Shashi Deshpande's novels is human relationships, especially the ones that exist between father and daughter, husband and wife and also between mother and daughter. In all these relationships the woman occupies the central stage and significantly the narration shifts through her feminine/ feminist consciousness. Her novels reflect the lives of suffocated women in search of a refuge from suffering. Searching for a solution to their private problems, the female protagonists in her novels shift from their personal pains to the sufferings of the other women around.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels three types of suffering women characters recur with subtle changes. To the first type belongs the heroine's mother or the mother figure – the traditional woman who believes that her place is with her husband and family. Whatever be her troubles, she does not leave her husband; she strives for a working relationship with him at any cost. In a sense, she represents the traditional religious ethos and confirms to the Manu code that the woman should be under the control of the father in the maidenhood, the husband in her youth and the sons during her old age. Despite being the victims of patriarchy, some of these women hold power or control over other women in the family because of

their status as mothers or mothers-in-law. Jaya's mother (*That Long Silence*), Indu's (*Roots and Shadows*) and Saru's mother (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) belong to this type.

The second type of suffering women is the converse of the traditional type. Here, the woman is bolder, more self-reliant and rebellious. She cannot conform to the Sita's version of womanhood and is consciously inclined towards what could be designated as radical feminist ideology. Such Ibsenian Nora kind of women characters are very rare in Shashi Deshpande's novels. They are mostly the heroine's friends and classmates. Saru's friend Nalu (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) holds a feminist ideology to life for the sake of which she chooses to lead an independent life as spinster.

The third type of women characterizes the woman in between. Most of Deshpande's heroines belong to this category. This woman is neither traditional nor radical in her ideas and practice. She might walk out of her home in protest against her suffering, but gradually realizes that walking out does not solve her problems. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* broods over her agonies even after she escapes her marital home. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* leaves her husband to seek refuge in her ancestral home, but she is unable to accept her fate as any ordinary woman might do. These heroines suffer more because they are aware of the escape routes of two other types of women – the traditional and the radical – but hesitate to choose those options. Their initial position is one of remaining at the crossroads. It is towards the end of the novels, that Shashi Deshpande's female protagonist realizes herself and learns to live up to the challenge. Saru decides to face her husband and not run away. Indu and Jaya decide to confront their husbands and talk the matter out in order to arrive at a solution.

The female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are not representations of traditional 'Sita' images. They are the 'new women', who could be likened to the flooding rivers that find a pathway into crevices and holes. In the three novels subjected to study here, the heroines are initially fugitives who seek refuge to escape from domestic, professional and sexual traps in which they find themselves. But each refuge, whether it is love, marriage or sex, only turns out to be another trap wherein they further lose their freedom and identity.

Before their marriage, even in their parental homes, Deshpande's heroines find it difficult to adjust to the kind of family relationships that exist in the traditional middle class. They then experience

uneasiness or even hatred towards their mothers, whom they view as dominating and oppressive individuals. Against their mothers' wishes, they attempt to leave their parental homes in the name of education or marriage. The fathers of the heroines on the other hand, become the source of support or even inspiration for these women. The heroines like Saru and Jaya see marriage as an escape route made in order to liberate them from the suffocation they experience in their parents' home. Their act of marrying outside their community, as in the case of Indu can also be seen as their way of rebelling against patriarchal attitudes (with the mothers themselves becoming the tools of patriarchy) towards marriage.

However marriage proves to be no escape. The husbands accept their wives as working women but at the same time do not recognize or encourage the 'feminist self' in them. In all the three novels studied here the heroines are left without any sense of fulfilment – both physical and mental—because of their husbands' lack of understanding. The heroines who have children also sense a kind of uneasiness in their relationship with their siblings. They often wonder whether history repeats itself when it comes to the misunderstanding between the parent and the child. The uncaring husband and the demanding children become obstacles to achieving individuality. Hence the feeling of being trapped comes back to them after the marriage also. Their professions or social commitments sometimes come in conflict with the expectations of the husbands and create tensions within the family. Finding it difficult to cope with the tensions arising out of their professional roles and domestic expectations, the Deshpande women initially seek relief through abandonment of their professional roles. They quit their professions and try to seek peace by confining themselves to their familial roles as homemakers.

However, having moved away from the suffering traditional archetypal women long back, they find it difficult to remain as housewives. They soon find that their attempts to reconcile themselves to homemaking only add to their sufferings. When they find that giving up professional roles does not make them in anyway happy at home, the female protagonists seek to escape from their domestic roles as well. Relinquishing their roles as wives and mothers, they turn back to their parents' homes. The parental / ancestral homes become sanctuaries for their restless souls. There they begin their search for knowledge and for a solution for their private woes.

To Deshpande's women, relinquishing of roles as daughters,

wives, mothers, homemakers and professionals is a very painful process. When the female protagonists start living in their parental homes, they sense a relief in their new/ old shelter. They revert back to their elders' style of living, giving up the routines to which they got used to in their marital homes. Saru to her chagrin finds herself taking over efficiently all the chores that she administered dutifully day in and out at her marital home. Indu feels a curious sense of freedom and homecoming. She also finds herself resuming the role that her aunt played as the family head.

In assuming new roles or new attitudes towards old roles, they break the mental barriers, which they had initially built around themselves. They learn more about their mothers, and gradually overcome their feelings of alienation/ hatred / resentment towards them. In fact they tend to identify themselves with their elderly counterparts and assume the roles of their mothers or mother figures after they return home. With their contempt towards mothers deciphered, they tend to turn inward. Their stay at ancestral homes gives them the chance to recollect the past and re-evaluate their decisions and actions. Their parental homes do not provide them any permanent relief from their suffering. However, these transitory retreats help them to confront their real 'I' and understand themselves better. It is here that they explore the sexual and other causes that had led to their marital discords.

Dissatisfaction in the women's sex lives is cited as one of the important factors affecting the marital relations of the Deshpande protagonists. The three novels represent three types of sexual aberration. In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Saru explains her sexual relations with Manu, her husband, thus: "He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband." Saru finds in him a 'protean monster' at night and a 'dutiful husband' in the day. Their sexual life is reduced to machosadist acts inflicted on woman by man. She says: "We're on different planes. He chooses his level. And I ... try to choose the one he would like to be on. It humiliates me." (1980:90) Neither the woman nor the man in Deshpande's novels try to do something about their marital / sexual monotony. The women specially tend to ignore the sexual roots of their marital discord. Their assumed roles do not give total sustenance, as their sexual dissatisfaction raises its ugly head at times and disrupts the harmony of their patterned living. Hence they seek sexual gratification by resorting to extramarital relationships. Saru tries to justify her affairs with

Boozie (her boss) and Padmakar Rao (her college classmate) as the substitutes she had found for her unfulfilled marriage. Yet, such affairs do not give her total satisfaction. In the case of Indu's affair with Naren (her cousin), we see a woman-in-guilt. Like Indu and Saru, Jaya in *That Long Silence* feels guilty of her aborted affair with Kama, her neighbour.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists might be considered as sexual profligates as they go off the track of tradition. But their extra-marital refuge fails them because their sexual freedom does not pilot them out of their predicaments. Instead of helping them to confront the problem, they only postpone the problem. When their sexual escapades bounce back, they divulge their problems to their friends or relatives. For example, Saru confesses to her father about her marital crisis to save herself from it. Her father advises her not to run away but to face the problem.

The awareness of the self and the ultimate refuge in the self are inveterate experiences in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. The awareness of the self is nothing but the awakening of woman's consciousness. Elaine Showalter succinctly expresses how crucial this awakening is to feminism when she says, "How much easier, how less lonely it is not to awaken.... Yet we cannot will ourselves to go back to sleep." (1986: 179) The determination to confront and accept the self is seen in all the three female protagonists of Deshpande. The act of confrontation gives them the courage to decide things for themselves and increasingly leads them to a positivistic detachment from life. The refuge in the self guides them towards a deeper awareness of their predicament. According to Deshpande, the solution cannot be 'given,' because it is 'self-bound;' in other words, it depends on the individuals concerned – it depends on the fiber of their self. A deeper awareness of the self leads to the understanding of its true nature. Nevertheless, the heroines do not go to that extent. Their self-realization is psychological rather than metaphysical. Towards the end Saru refuses to call her predicament as 'fate' and would rather call it as something she 'had helped to happen.' (1980: 62) For blaming only the patriarchy or only certain external causes for her predicament, takes her away from the fact that she had also to be blamed for being weak and allowing her predicament to happen.

Ultimately the Deshpande's women choose to be themselves, accepting themselves in whatever forms they are. When the 'way out' fails them, then the 'way in' – their delving deep into the

interior resources of their selves - provides the necessary sustenance and strength to face their problems. Their determination to face the situation and their dependence only on the self show them the way to confront the crises in their lives. Although their problems remain unresolved, their attitude towards the problem undergoes change with their understanding of the 'self.' Once they start standing on their own legs, the protagonists of 'flight' decide to stop running away from one refuge to another. They accept all that is fractured in their self and try to unify the fractions. As they decide to assert their selves against other forces that seek to enchain them, 'the dark', as Saru realizes, 'no longer holds any terror,' and as Jaya and Indu visualizes, they see the hopes of happiness and peace in their family lives.

From the study of the three female protagonists, it becomes clear that it is the authentic base of Shashi Deshpande's novels, which makes her 'feminism' typically Indian. Deshpande evolves a feminist understanding of the woman's problem out of a purely Indian climate. The central experience in her fiction is authenticated by autobiographical overtones. Deshpande's feminism is not a copy of the western feminism. It is very much rooted in the Indian soil; her reading of western feminists has only helped to place her thoughts on feminism in order. The term 'feminism' is applied to Shashi Deshpande in the broadest sense here to refer to the writer's intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her interest in women's problems, and not in the sense that she makes an advocacy for women's rights in her fiction. In fact she does not hold the torch of women's liberation beyond making the woman realize her 'self.' If she begins with the feminist cliché of the patriarchal modes of injustice to women, she goes one step further also and brings out the injustice caused by woman on man. She rationalizes a characteristically Indian predicament and also experiments with a classically Indian feminist solution to it. What is evolved through her intense awareness of the Indian woman's situation is a mode of narration, where the woman is at the center, speculating and working out the problem positively.

Shashi Deshpande's feminism is certainly not cynical or nihilistic. She avoids indiscriminate use of the western feminist jargons and analyses the universal significance of the woman's problem, thereby transcending the feminist perspective. She believes that feminism is "...very much an individual working out her problem." (Mala 1989: A156) She is quite down to earth in her feminist approach to the

woman's problem. For though she is aware of the seriousness of the Indian woman's dilemma and the generation old struggles behind it, she also believes that a positive change in women's social status cannot materialize without bringing about a change in the woman's mindset first. So the novelist holds that it is the heroines' retreat in their selves rather than in any external crutches which injects a hope for the woman's redemption from her predicament. The woman's increasing involvement rather than detachment in her predicament as expressed in her novels reveals the positive, humanistic side of Deshpande's feminism. Hence Shashi Deshpande rightly considers her role as an Indian feminist as one of a 'humanist feminist.' (Ibid: A143).

References

- Deshpande, Shashi. 1980. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Vikas Pub.
- . 1983. *Roots and Shadows*. Bombay: Orient Longman.
- . 1988. *That Long Silence*. London: Virago Press.
- . 1989. Interview with R. Mala. "The Predicament of the Indian Woman: The Heroines in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande." Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation. Pondicherry University. 1 April. pp. 116 - 157.
- Dasgupta, Sayantani. "Feminist Report: Reinventing the Feminist Wheel." <zena.secureforum.com/Znet/ZMag/articles/sept94dasgupta.htm> 10.03.05
- Davis, Robert Con. 1986. *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism through Poststructuralism*. Ed. London: Longman.
- Weedon, Chris. 1997. "Quotation from Narayan" On Dislocating, Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism." New York: Routledge.
- Weedon, Chris. 2005. "Key Issues in Postcolonial Feminism: A Western Perspective."
- < <http://www.genderforum.unikoeln.de/genderealisations/weedon.html> > 10.03.05