

**INDIANIZING FEMINISM: AN UNDERSTANDING OF SHASHI
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ABSTRACT

Feminism has its impact across the world. Indian writers have strengthened the voice of Indian women by writing on the themes focused on women's issues. Shashi Deshpande's brand of feminism advocates a more meaningful and companionable relationship between men and women. Her protagonists work towards realization of this goal in spite of leading unhappy and subjugated lives in the labyrinths of marriage. They end their long-maintained silence and question the patriarchal mores that ignore their individuality. They explore all possibilities to keep the marriage integrated, all the way trying to assert their self-identity in all matters.

Key words: Feminism, Subjugated, Patriarchal, Individuality, Integrated, Self-Identity**Introduction**

Feminism is “the belief in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes” (Brunell & Burket, 2018), though it is applied in varied degrees of intensity across the globe. Feminism in modern India can be traced back from the days of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, but little emphasis is laid on the nomenclature. Indian literature including Indian English works has reflected the protesting voices of the Indian women against the subjugation of women in all walks of life in the name of traditions. Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Anita Desai and a host of other writers have dealt with feminist perspectives in their writings.

Deshpande and Feminism

Calling herself “a humanist-feminist”, Shashi Deshpande has expressed her own view of feminism which stands apart from the Western philosophy:

Is to be a feminist, to want to be like men? I don't think so. On the contrary, to me it has meant an acceptance of my womanhood as a positive thing, not as a lack. An understanding that I am different, not inferior. And how can feminism be anti-men, when it is really working for a better, a more meaningful and companionable relationship between men and women, instead of the uneasy



relationship between the tyrant and the oppressed. (Deshpande, 2003, pp. 83-84)

Deshpande does not subscribe to Germaine Greer's view that women should not marry. Her brand of feminism is primarily concerned with how to be 'intact' loving another. She wants women to assert themselves, but not to be aggressive; she wants them to escape domination, but not dominate.

Deshpande's view of feminism is shaped by her experiences as a typical middle class woman in a traditional society, and it is more apt to the Indian context. It is reflected across her writings through her characters, dialogues and situations because "she is concerned with the women's question in terms of marital relationships, familial bonds and the trauma of violence on the female body in most of her writings" (Reddy, 1995, p. 48). She gives expression to the feminine voices questioning the validity of the age-old Indian traditions which confine women to the four walls of the house and deprive them of individual identity and freedom. "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer ..." (Amur, 1982, p. 8). Having no role models in her mind, Deshpande writes out of her life and the life she has seen around her. She does not believe in having "a propagandist or sexist purpose to her writing" (Deshpande, 1987, p. 14). Deshpande underlines the change in the writings of women in the eighties and nineties. They were able to move away from the images of women fostered by patriarchy. This change, as Deshpande says, was possible mainly because of feminism which made us realize:

Women are neither inherently inferior nor subordinate and that it is patriarchy that has imposed the condition of inferiority and subordination on women. Simon de Beauvoir's famous statement: 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman' encapsulates the truth of what patriarchy has done to women. (Deshpande, 1995)

The deep-rooted patriarchal ideology commissions women to be dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters, but not individual beings of recognition on par with men. The society built on these patriarchal mores characterizes women as docile, dependent, and submissive. As attributed, the sole aim of a woman's life is to get married and serve the husband. From the state of infancy, her life is directed towards realization of this goal.

Nevertheless, in the Post-Independence India, women are not ready to nod their heads to all that the husbands expect them to do. The liberal education they receive and the kind of struggle the Western women are engaged in to free themselves from the shackles of patriarchy make them think and assess their position in the tradition-gripped society. This self-assessment, a follow-up of their self-awareness, is more among the educated middle class women. They are unobtrusively moving forward to liberate themselves from the caged lives. Their inner urge to do away with the concept of a woman as an appendage to a man is stronger than ever. However, the hold of the traditional society over the psyche of Indian women is equally stronger.



Deshpande is happy to “do with women as they are”, but not as she expects them to be. She does not yield to the feminist doctrines of creating strong women characters because she knows that this theory represses the truth about the majority of women’s lives. Despite her education and economic independence, the Indian woman, as Deshpande depicts, is not in a position to revolt against the patriarchal hegemony. Talking about the impact of tradition on the lives of Indian women, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (1983, p. 18) said that “this virus seeped so deep down into the woman’s very being that it continued to elude all the education and veneer of outward changes, like a hard lump embedded in an organ”. Hence, conflict and dilemma have been a part of Indian women’s lives.

Deshpande’s Fictional World

Focused on this conflict and dilemma, Deshpande’s fictional world is woven round “a typical middle class housewife’s life ... the urge to find oneself, to create space for oneself, to grow on one’s own” (Deshpande, 1987, p. 12). All her protagonists are typical women of their class. Besides being highly educated, they are modern in their thoughts and independent in their views on life. They undertake a kind of struggle to voice their feelings and lead a life of their own. They are not willing to proceed on the lines drawn by the society. They having realized the futility of the existing norms, want to have a new path of social life which is in tune with the rapid changing modern times. Deshpande’s characters “emerge from the cocoon of self-pity to an entirely new world where feminist ideologies are rooted strongly. It is true that no society will progress without the progress of women” (Vedavalli, 2015, p. 494).

However, their struggle appears to have gone almost futile. The social forces in India compel a woman to be a ‘woman’ in the Indian sense of the term suggesting passivity, submissiveness and lifelong loyalty to a man. Even if they try to defy the prevalent societal norms, they are soon made to realize that they cannot carve a new path, moving away from the path of tradition. Their economic independence also goes in vain before the strong hold of the society on the lives of women.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita is the major bread-winner in the family. But her sound economic independence does not help her take any strong decision against her husband. Like any ordinary woman, she passively bears the sadistic behavior of Manohar for a considerable period of time. All the way, she is worried about her husband’s attacks at night. She continues to lead her life like “a terrified, trapped animal”, but is not dare enough to disintegrate her marriage or question him. She does not even tell about her husband’s strange behavior to anyone till the end. Moreover, she decides to protect her marriage at the cost of her career because she is more worried about the denigration and disapproval she is expected to face, in the couple-centered society, if she breaks away from her marriage. She is not ready to face the society which looks down upon a woman whose marriage is disintegrated. Hence, Saru schools herself to silence. She recollects Betty Friedan’s words that “it was easier for her to start the women’s lib movement than to change her own personal life” (Deshpande, 1980, p. 98). Even at the end of the novel, Saru’s decision to rejoin her husband is slightly influenced by her roots in traditional way of life. She realizes that, according to the standards of the society, she has made a mistake in choosing her own life partner unlike “the fisherman’s daughter”.



Deshpande's protagonists are culturally rooted but intellectually modern women. Standing at a critical moment of their life, they take cognizance of the realities behind their subjugated position. Instead of showing outward action, "they internalize their grief to make it a tool of intense self-appraisal" (Jha, 1994, p. 15). At the end, they do not resort to suffering stoically, neither do they find a new radical way out of the problem. They paradoxically choose and reject both ways – "staunch rebellion and meek acceptance. In Deshpande's own words, her heroines are characterized as 'middle of the road kind'" (Mala, 1991, p. 52).

Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, is an entrapped bird in the fold of an enslaving marriage. Despite her deep longing for freedom and equality at par with men, she has become a victim of marriage. She feels mentally oppressed with a husband who is shocked to find passion in a woman. But, she is unable to do anything except compromising with him at every step in life. She is afraid of facing the world independently as she said, "the hideout ghost of my own cowardice confronted me" (Deshpande, 1992, p. 159). At the end of the narrative, she has taken a strong decision to give up her journalistic job. Nevertheless, Indu continues to live with her husband, following the way of compromise. She frankly admits at one stage that she is not like a revolutionary. Self-appraisal is an intense tool for a typical Deshpande protagonist and it offers a new vision of life for her. She sheds off her fear to confront reality. She realizes that life must be made possible by seeking sustenance not only from human relationship but also from one's profession. She understands the importance of her life outside the family and resolves to make her career as an anchor to stand by.

Urmila, one of the protagonists of *The Binding Vine*, too has a strong desire for preserving her individuality even after her marriage. But, when her husband working in navy, flits in and flits out of her life, she is unable to express her feelings frankly. She is caught in a deep dilemma whether to surrender herself like her friend Vandana or to question him. Finally, she learns from Mira's life that each relationship survives on hope and so accepts the life almost as it is, with a hope for change. Hence, Urmila spells out her resolution: "I race through my chores in the next one hour ... This is how life is for most of us, most of the time; we are absorbed in the daily routine of living" (Deshpande, 1993, p. 203). The same hope for change is seen in Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*.

Jaya has a hope of getting the things better by breaking the silence in her life and asserting her 'self' in the web of family itself. Human relationships are very much important for Deshpande's protagonists like Jaya. There is no doubt that she is individualistic and liberated. She has a strong antipathy for the self-sacrificing image of the 'Hindu nari'. Nevertheless, individuality is not to be sought on the debris of the collapse of marriage. Jaya says, "Yes, I have been scared, scared of breaking through that thin veneer of a happy family ..." (Deshpande, 1989, p. 191). Liberation does not lie in severing the nexus between husband and wife. Liberation is sought in the context of giving an equal position to women to stop their exploitation.

Jaya hopes for working out a healthy balance between husband and wife. It may be difficult for her to pick up the threads and knit the fabric of life together again in the face of stark realities she is set to confront with. Still she may try. This is the philosophy based on which Jaya is going to build her future life. One cannot say she is a stereo-typed woman just



because she wants to continue her life with Mohan. Sarita, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, may be found fault with for living with her husband who inflicts intolerable physical violence on her. But, in regard to Jaya's life, the problem is not as much severe as the one in Sarita's life. There are chances open for her to assert her individuality in the life with Mohan. Deshpande's opinion may be that if divorce is looked for, life will be disrupted for children from that marriage. Divorce should only be a last resort, if there is a major exploitation of either party.

The life in India is different from that in Western countries where there will be almost no dependents on the family. Mohan might have cleverly destroyed Jaya's progress as a writer. It is true that he has expected her to follow his footprints in every matter. But, Jaya probing into her past, understands that all this happens because of her. She has kept silent in all the matters. Jaya is now determined to speak out her feelings and try to safeguard her identity as a person. She may fail or succeed in her efforts to find freedom in life. The result depends upon how she applied her decisions to the realities of her life. These four protagonists of Deshpande serve as representative fictional projections of Indian middle class women sandwiched between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

Deshpande's Indianized feminism exhorts women to move out of the shell of silent life and face the realities of life by questioning the injustices at every stage, all the way trying to be intact in the web of marital life. Women's equal rights, independence and self-respect are as important as the protection of married life in the Indian context.

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