

The Feminine Fury in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

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Abstract

In the Indian social context, sexism is immensely powerful and pervasive and it is deeply internalized by both men and women. For centuries Indian traditions, social norms, culture and customs have been leading men to feel that they are superior and different and forcing women to think that they are inferior human beings who are not expected to play any role other than the traditional ones of each being a wife to her husband, a mother to her children and a caretaker of the house. Of course, these ideological institutions have succeeded in creating an image of Indian woman as always smiling and joyful, eager to serve and please and never transgressing the boundaries of femininity defined by the powerful patriarchy.

Traditional Writers and Female Expectations

The traditional writers of India either represented or misrepresented the genuine female expectations and experiences in their works and at the same time used literature as an effective tool for applying pressures of patriarchal expectations and demands on women. Indian women writers who recognized the ideological operations of patriarchy beneath the structure of literature now oppose this attitude through what is described as a 'practice of resistance' in their writings. They make earnest attempts through their writings to reveal the true picture of Indian womanhood which is struggling under political, sociological, psychological, economical, religious and literary oppressions. There are many women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Namitha Gokhale, Shobha De and Shashi Deshpande who in their fiction protested against the traditions of patriarchal Indian culture. Like other contemporary Indian feminist writers, Shashi Deshpande explores and exposes the prominent patriarchal premises and prejudices embedded in Indian culture and life style.

Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande has enriched Indian literature in English with a significant contribution of eight novels, four children's books and a number of short stories. She is a brave woman writer who purposefully and fearlessly overthrows the sexist ideologies of womanhood and generously allows freedom for growth and self-fulfillment to her female characters. In her fiction, she ponders over how male supremacy damages female egos and leads women to a state of intellectual slavery. In her novels she depicts the lives of Indian middle-class women who are born and brought up in a social atmosphere of profound conditioning on the basis of gender.

Indian Middle-Class Women

Indian middle-class women are constantly subject to two opposing and conflicting forces, the cultural construct of the ideal of femininity and the feminist ideal of women's equality and autonomy. An Indian woman is conditioned to a blind emotional dependence on men and in a sense the whole purpose and meaning of a woman's life is to win and retain a man's love in her life. Whenever there is a slight deviation or variation in the approval and affection of her man, she gets terribly upset. On the contrary, if she asserts her rights and demands, it is received as a cultural shock which upsets the equilibrium of the society. Shashi Deshpande presents a large number of such middle-class women who are only concerned with their husbands, children and home and are adjusting themselves to their feminine roles with ceaseless efforts.

Roots and Shadows

The novel "Roots and Shadows" begins with the description of the day before Mini's wedding. All women in the house have got up very early and started their work. Even the bride is not an exception. She is ladling hot water into a bucket for her father's bath. The novelist purposefully included this description at the beginning of her novel to show how an Indian reality, the traditional patriarchal concept 'women are for men' is so deep rooted in Indian minds that it operates in a natural and unquestionable way.

Women's deep commitment to the family shows the strength of their character. But it is a pity that the unlimited potential of the majority of Indian women is simply wasted or

unexploited, as people are unaware of its possibilities. Their energy and ability are manifested only in minor tasks such as cooking, washing, cleaning and such other household duties. The infinite creativity of women in the unmanifest form becomes destructive and it makes women angry, rebellious or sad and silent. In other words, they feel an emptiness and meaninglessness in their hearts.

Question the Strict Division Between Man's World and Women's Place

Feminist writers question the strict division between man's world and women's place. Household works are typically considered to be women's work and in fact such services are unpaid and unrecognized as 'labour'. Shashi Deshpande is angry about the rigid sex-role differentiation existing in Indian society. She expresses this anger by subverting the patriarchal role assignment; she makes her women push their way into male dominated areas. In "Small Remedies" she brings in an instance to prove this premise. One day when Lata goes to her father's shop to check the accounts, Hari takes her place in the kitchen and takes charge of the kitchen work:" watch him work, notice the efficiency with which he washes and dries, which tells me he's used to working in the kitchen, that he is comfortable with these chores"(43).

Small Remedies

Again in "Small Remedies" Shashi Deshpande subverts the traditional image of domineering and demanding husbands, by portraying Lata's husband Hari who enjoys cooking and household work more than his wife and Leela's husband Joe who always encourages the social commitments of his wife. This kind of subversion done by the novelist becomes relevant and noteworthy because most of the wives and mothers of India spend a lifetime crushed by incredible workload within the social structure of patriarchy without any reward or recognition.

The joint family system which upholds the value of living together and which existed in India a few decades ago, is described in "Roots and Shadows". In such systems, usually a male head or the patriarch assumed supreme power and was respected and obeyed by all the family members. But in "Roots and Shadows", Shashi Deshpande deconstructs the privileged and powerful patriarchal father figure and reconstructs the system by replacing a woman in his position with lots of power, intelligence, wealth and prudence.

A Matter a Time

In “A Matter a Time”, Gopal, the husband of Sumi and father of three daughters, withdraws from his duties and responsibilities without any explanation. The Sumi gravely takes the responsibility of bringing up her children by doing the work of a teacher. In “The Binding Vine” also, Urmila controls the family very well in the absence of her husband. By placing women in key positions, the novelist conveys the idea that patriarchy is not natural, it is man-made. Hence it can be changed and it should be changed.

The change in the traditional role of wives due to higher education and employment of women is also presented in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande. She has created a number of wives who are earning members in almost all her novels. When the wife becomes an earning member, there occurs a change in the equilibrium of the power structure within the family. Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande shows how with many tensions and difficulties, the family is shifting from an authoritarian to a democratic type of relationship.

The novelist also observes the rapid changes taking place in the social scene due to various reasons such as urbanization, employment and spread of education. Nowadays sons have to leave their parents to sack a career and that leads to the formation of a new system of micro families where man and woman alone are staying together to start a family. In “Roots and Shadows”, the novelist portrays both a joint family and a micro family simultaneously and shows the advantages and disadvantages of both of them. Indu disliked the atmosphere of the joint family during her growing years and she purposefully left it behind by embarking on a career-oriented city life with her husband Jayant.

Evils of Dowry

Shashi Deshpande also raises her voice against the evils of dowry through her novels. A member of grief-stricken fathers and mothers who worry about raising money for the wedding of their daughters are presented in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. In “ Roots and Shadows” Padmini’s parents are extremely worried about the heavy dowry they have to pay for her marriage which is

in fact not very covetable. In “The Binding Vine” Shakuntala is another mother who struggling hard to save money to marry her daughters off. Shashi Deshpande strongly supports anti-dowry-consciousness-raising programmes while describing the marriage of Madhu and Som in her novel “Small Remedies”. Madhu has no money to offer as her dowry as she spent all her wealth for her education. Som is a doctor who values Madhu more than anything. In the same novel Shashi Deshpande presents an ideal couple Leela and Joe, where Joe is an eminent Christian doctor marrying a penniless widow Leela, after waiting for fifteen years for her consent. Similarly, in “Roots and Shadows”, Indu’s marriage is without dowry. Then Saru and Manu in “Dark Holds No Terrors” also have a marriage of their own choice where dowry was quite immaterial.

Homeless Feeling

The ‘Homeless feeling’ experienced by a woman when her husband dies or deserts her is very painful and it is powerfully presented by the novelist. A deserted wife is always a disgrace to the family. In the novel “A Matter of Time” Shashi Deshpande studies seriously the severe agony of women when they are rejected and abandoned by their husbands. If Kalyani was mentally abandoned by her husband, she could somehow save her face in the society because it was a private punishment which she alone suffered. But in the case of her daughter Sumi her husband Gopal disappeared one day, leaving no clues to his wife or the three daughters as to where he was. Sumi was not shocked by the long absence of her husband, because she remembered their earlier promise to free themselves whenever they wanted free life. She blamed neither him for leaving them, even after one year nor herself for her miserable plight. But it was extremely painful for Sumi to encounter the inequisitive questions of people including her own daughters and relatives as if she were responsible for the inexplicable disappearance of her husband.

Unmarried Status

In the patriarchal system it is something unnatural and undesirable for a woman to remain unmarried. Naturally these married women enjoy higher status than unmarried women even though they have less freedom after marriage. Indian women give more importance to the social

status and sense of security ensured in marriage. In “Roots and Shadows” such a typical Indian situation is depicted. Indu’s cousin Padmini was exhibited in front of many eligible bachelors, but was not accepted by anyone. Her father is not in a position to pay a heavy dowry to make her a “more desirable woman in the marriage market.” Finally they selected an uneducated, unemployed and uncultured young man as her bridegroom, whose only attractions are his immense wealth and his willingness to marry Padmini. It was a great shock to Indu that Padmini is least bothered about the eligibility and suitability of her would be-husband. It throws light on the subservient and submissive attitude of Indian women along with their inadequate assertiveness and fearful silence while taking crucial decisions regarding their marriages.

Widowhood

Within the framework of marriage, women are entitled to the status of wives and mothers. When a woman loses her husband or if she remains unmarried or if she becomes an unmarried mother, or a childless wife, she is treated as an ugly object or a bad omen. “In Roots and Shadows” Indu’s aunt, Narmada Atya is a childless widow. She had a very hard life at her in-law’s house. By presenting Indu as a married woman, who is not yet ready for motherhood because of her serious engagements, Shashi Deshpande challenges the myth that motherhood is the absolute fulfillment of women’s lives. According to the novelist motherhood must be a matter of conscious choice and decision made by women. Hence Deshpande presents a powerful female character Madhu in “Small Remedies” who has control over both production and reproduction. In spite of her conscious delay in embracing maternity, she believes that “a child’s birth is a rebirth for a woman. It is becoming part of the world once again” (88).

Women as Propagators of Patriarchal Values

Shashi Deshpande portrays a number of women characters who consciously or unconsciously act as propagators of patriarchal values when they deal with their children. Sarututa’s mother in “Dark Holds No Terrors”, Akka in “Roots and Shadows” and Kalpana’s mother Shakuntala in “Binding Vine” are victims of the age-old Indian belief in the unthinking subservience of women to tradition and to elders. Traditional writers focus on the pleasurable and respectable aspects of motherhood and covertly communicate the patriarchal ideology that it

is the main responsibility of women to look after children and educate them in keeping with the existing social values and principles. This androcentric idea is also attacked in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Two protagonists, Indu in “Roots and Shadows” and Madhu in “Small Remedies” lost their mothers in the early childhood itself. But they are represented as shining stars among other faded female characters. Indu’s father never interfered in her upbringing during her childhood except for his decision to give her English medium schooling and she had ample opportunities to observe the subtle operations of gender inside the family with a detached mood.

Similarly, Madhu was brought up by a liberated woman Leela, her aunt and her husband Joe, a great scholar and teacher of medical science. She was initiated to the world of books by Joe and to a world of independence and autonomy by her aunt Leela.

Women’s Awareness of Their Inferior Status

Shashi Deshpande creates a number of female characters who have deep awareness of women’s present inferior status and the numerous factors leading to this condition. In fact these women characters become the mouthpiece of the author herself who has been engaged in the process of ‘unconsciousness raising’ for the uplift of ordinary Indian women.

Various Techniques Adopted

Using the Stream of Consciousness method and a narrative technique which goes back and forth, Shashi Deshpande attempts to unravel the woman question and the inner world of women in her novel. The novel is wisely and wonderfully structured on the themes of self-exploration and self-discovery made by the central female character. The novelist has also explored the Herculean obstacles women have to encounter when they try for self-discovery and self-actualisation. Shashi Deshpande has in fact succeeded in making remarkably realistic portrayals of middle class, educated Indian women who often feel aggrieved and annoyed by the all-pervading and mighty sexism. She vehemently attacks the andro-centric ideologies and the foolish complacency of its unthinking followers including women.

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