

The Conventional and Unconventional Roles of Women Characters in Indian English Fiction with Special Reference to the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience. Man's relationship with woman is most often the bond that exists between a master and a slave. With the result that the collective image of humanity has been defined as a subject in its own right, but merely as an entity that concerns man either in real life or in his fantasy life. There has existed all the same a distinctively female literacy tradition grown out of the anxieties of a woman's life. Women writers have been drawn more to fiction-writing than to the genres of poetry and drama. Generally, there are two types of roles played by women characters in Indian fiction: the conventional and unconventional. Both types suffer in one way or the other. Shashi Deshpande is a very recent author in Indian writing in English. Her novels deal with the problems of the adjustments and conflicts in the minds of female protagonists who ultimately submit to the traditional rules in the transitional society. This paper as an article seeks to explore the conventional and unconventional Roles of Women Characters in Indian Fiction with Special Reference to the Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande. It is also an attempt to introduce the most acclaimed female Indian writer of Indo- Anglican Literature. The aim of this paper is to introduce two of Deshpande's novels, *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terror* which presents women who want to go in self-quest and are free from the restrictions imposed by society, culture, nature and are also free from their own fear and guilt. The methodology

followed in this article is as per the norms stipulated in M L A Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Seventh Edition, Edited by Judy Goulding. (First East - West Press Edition 2009).

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, 'New Woman', inimitable representation, individualistic women, masculine experience, vestiges of the past, intellect, unconscious dawn.

Indian English Literature in the recent past has attracted a widespread interest, both in India and abroad. It has come to be realized as of great significance in world literature. Indian Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and other writers have documented this female resistance against a patriarchal maintained Indian culture. This writing in English has now reached a new phase, the phase of an inimitable representation of the 'New Indian Woman' who is dissatisfied with the inhibiting cultural, natural or sexual roles assigned to her from the unconscious dawn of the patriarchal India.

The term 'New Woman' has come to signify the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society, conscious of her individuality. The New Woman has been trying to assert and ascertain her rights as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with men. Ellen E. Jordan observes that "the English feminists endowed the 'New Woman' with her hostility to men, her questioning of marriage, her determination to escape from the restrictions of home life and her belief that education could make a woman capable of leading a financially self-sufficient single and yet fulfilling life. There are a number of Indian novels that deal with woman's problems. But the treatment is often peripheral, and the novels end up glorifying the stereotypical virtues of the Indian woman, like patience, devotion and abject acceptance of whatever is meted out to her.

Man's relationship with woman is most often the bond that exists between a master and a slave. Woman is an object and she is essential to man because it is seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realization. Women writers writing in English, present with insight and understanding the dilemma which modern women are facing in a traditional society where dual morality is the accepted norm. Self-willed and individualistic women have to face suffering caused by broken relationship. Women who are conscious of their emotional needs are striving for self-fulfillment, rejecting the existing traditions and social set-up and longing for a more liberal and unconventional ways of life.

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Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian Writing in English. One of the reasons for women writers in large numbers taking up their pen is that it has allowed them to create their own world. Simon de Beauvoir aptly remarks that

The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other (*The Second Sex*, 178).

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience. With the result that the collective image of humanity has been defined as a subject in its own right, but merely as an entity that concerns man either in real life or in his fantasy life. There has existed all the same a distinctively female literary tradition grown out of the anxieties of a woman's life. Women writers have been drawn more to fiction-writing than to the genres of poetry and drama. The very reality of woman's life situation is "interrupted"; nature perhaps is the reason for a close affinity between woman and fiction-writing. Woman is a being; she is not an appendage of man. A woman is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. Woman has established herself as an autonomous being, free from restrictions imposed by society, culture, nature and also free from her own fears and guilt.

Generally, there are two types of roles played by women characters in Indian fiction: the conventional and unconventional. Both types suffer in one way or the other. According to Bala Kothandaraman,

The unconventional are seen to suffer for their violation of accepted norms of society or for questioning them; death is the way out for them, unless their experiences teach them to subdue their individuality and rebelliousness and realize the wisdom of the traditional ways (*The Feminist Dilemma*, 106).

The conventional women also suffer, but their suffering is sanctified by the norms of Indian culture and particularly by that of a patriarchal culture. The conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women by the women novelists. A tradition-bound woman may sacrifice her happiness for the sake of the well-being of the family

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as a unit, but at the same time retains her individuality. Indian woman usually does not bother about her personal happiness and comfort as much as she addresses herself to the task of making others happy and upholding traditions and conventions. A woman may be seen and understood by her father in one way, her husband in another way, her son and daughter in some other ways and by herself in yet another way. Keeping all these views in mind, the writers especially women writers has reflected the same in their fiction.

Sociologists find that woman suffer due to her emotional attachment with home. But since her sense of individuality has matured by the introduction of education, she does not want to lead a passive married life of a sacrificial and shadowy creature. She expects a measure of satisfaction. Promilla Kapoor remarks that

Women's personal status and social status has come as a change in her way of thinking and feeling and the past half century has witnessed great changes in attitudes towards love, sex and marriage (*The Changing Status*, 101).

Women have reached a stage of understanding themselves in a way they are trying to understand the fundamental truth. Centuries of Indian tradition and age-old cultural beliefs have made the Indian woman as the most patient, obedient and loving woman in the world. Her suffering, silent screams, disappointments and frustrations are not heard even in this modern world. Though the educated and employed Indian woman is economically independent, financial freedom is not enough.

Shashi Deshpande is a very recent author in Indian writing in English. Her contribution to the world of fiction dates back to 70s and 80s. In her novels she has tried to project a realistic picture of the middle-class educated women who are financially independent and who represent a larger part of the contemporary Indian society. Her novels deal with the problems of the adjustments and conflicts in the minds of female protagonists who ultimately submit to the traditional rules in the transitional society. In an interesting interview, she reveals that all her characters are concerned with their selves and they learn to be honest to themselves. The women in *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terror* do present themselves as the women who want to go in self-quest and are free from the restrictions imposed by society, culture, nature and are also free from their own fear and guilt. Commenting on *Roots and Shadows*, O.P. Bhatnagar

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remarks:

... the novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with male dominated society (*Indian Womanhood*, 94).

Indu, a middle-class young girl brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka (the surrogate mother in the novel) learns the truth about herself and at the end she dismisses all the shadows that she had thought to be to her real self. "I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing" (205). This statement shows Indi's assertion of will and self. As Simon de Beauvoir observes thus:

the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of the other will die in them (*The Second Sex*, 74).

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has childhood scars. She expresses hatred towards her mother: "if you're a woman I don't want to be one" (55) for Saru's mother has showed sexist gender in her treatment towards Saru and her brother Dhruva. She rebels against her mother and goes to Bombay to get medicine degree and later she weds Manohar (Manu) disregarding the authority of her mother. The departure of the heroine from the mother is the first step towards autonomy.

Shashi Deshpande's heroines reject rituals that are vestiges of the past. Indu wanted to explore the inner struggle of herself. She represents a set of the modern women who are educated and are very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems like love, sex marriage, settlement and individuality. Indu reviews everything with reason. She analyzes the ideals of detachment and freedom and tries to achieve them. She tries to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. Indu is projected against the women belonging to the older generation. To the old generation, a woman's life is nothing "but to get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand children" (128) and the ideal woman is the one who does not have her own independent identity: "A woman who sheds her 'I' and loses her identity in her husband's" (54). Indu wanted to protest against conventional laws which are molding the female character as only symbols of lust. Maria Miles, on remarking upon the situation says,

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The non-conforming conduct of the women is not the consequence of an eternal necessity out of changed consciousness. They are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equality between men and women but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities (*Women against feminism*, 547).

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu too “searches for release from the constraints of the traditional and traditional-bound institution of marriage” (54) in search of an autonomous self, only to realize like them, again that “this refuge is hard to achieve”.

The realization of the need to conform for survival and the awareness that conformity is the great destroyer of selfhood and the only self that can be achieved is the self-born in interpersonal relationship, make Indu cry: “this is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself, there was somewhere outside me a part of me without which I remained complete, then I met Jayant, and lost the ability to be alone” (34).

The woman in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. The simple need to be independent eventually becomes a demand of the inflated ego and takes shape as the love for power over others. She resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom.

The parental home symbol of tradition and the old world values have no room for Shashi Deshpande’s women, for they breathe the air of rituals that obstruct the growth of a woman as a being. The feeling of homelessness is indicative of inner disintegration. Tension between the different parts within one’s self takes away the harmony within and without. The novel gains its feminist stance in Indu’s exploration onto herself, but it also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human existence. Indu moves on the road of self-realization and the destination seems to be the point of comprehension of the mystery of human life.

Shashi Deshpande suggests that Indu has learnt to see not only her life full of possibilities for growth and grace, but the very meaning of life itself. At the end of the novel Indu realizes that

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Akka is not a sadist as thought earlier, Indu has confronted her real self and she knows her roots.

In *The Dark*, Saru comes to the conclusion that neither her father nor her husband Manohar can be her own refuge. Killing all the ghosts that haunt her, Saru finds her own way to Salvation. The parental home initiates the protagonists into an understanding of the meaning of human life: “All right, so I’m alone, but so is everyone else. Human Beings ... they’re going to fail you. But because there’s just us, because there’s no one else. We have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk” (200). Saru has gained the assertion of will and confidence in her. She learns to trust herself. Saru, who had instructed her father not to open the door for her husband Manu, now tells her father: “And oh yes, Baba if Manu comes, tell him to wait, I’ll be back as soon as I can” (202). Saru and Indu, through the education they received in school of experience of life, realize their inner potentials as said by Vivekananda:

Educate your women first and leave them to themselves for we want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one’s own feet. With such education women will solve their own problem (*The Complete Works*, 55).

The struggle of these women to give shape and content to their individual existence in a sexist society culminates in a crisis and ends in compromise. “Defeat is relief and freedom only relative for women there is no escape from relationships”. New bonds replace the old, that’s all. In the end comes the realization that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it. That alone can bring harmony in life.

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