



Feminine Sensibility in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Study

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Feminine Sensibility in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Study ABSTRACT
Shashi Deshpande holds an eminent place among the Indian Women novelists in English. Her portrayal of the women character, their sufferings and their search for identity is very interesting and noteworthy. Her description of gender discrimination and women empowerment seems to be just the replica of what Simone De Beauvoir observes in her classic work "The Second Sex".

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande holds an eminent place among the Indian Women novelists in English. Her portrayal of the women characters, their sufferings and their search for identity is very interesting and noteworthy. Her description of gender discrimination and women empowerment seems to be just the replica of what Simone De Beauvoir observes in her classic work "The Second Sex". The book "The Second Sex" published in 1949 tells us the story of the treatment of women throughout the history. Beauvoir thinks that woman is always considered the 'other'. In order to express her feelings she takes the help of Physiology and Biology and comes to the conclusion that women are always subordinated and they are always treated mercilessly by the patriarchal society. Similarly if we read the novels of Shashi Deshpande, we find a very pathetic plight and suffering of women in the society.

Keywords

Gender discrimination, Search for identity, Feminism, Women empowerment.

Shashi Deshpande is a novelist par excellence. What matters most in her novel is the agonies and sufferings, plights and persecution of women under the patriarchal hegemony. The central theme of her novels is the gender discrimination which is the burning topic of the modern age. Her discourse of feminism through the portrayal of some women characters is very literary and interesting. She has portrayed the modern educated and middle class women who are very sensitive to the changing scenario. She has also depicted women in the different roles- mother, wife, daughter and an individual. Her

description of women searching for roots is also very noteworthy. In one of her interviews, she rightly observes:

“Men’s world and female world rarely come together. What the men were doing was not known to women. They would go out and come back. What women were doing men generally don’t know, because it was the women’s work, it was their problem of cooking, bringing up children and childbirth... and men never concerned themselves with them. At certain points they met, but mostly they have two separate worlds, and it was the women who supported one and another. There must have been cruelty also, lots of cruelty between women, but there is lot of support. It was the women who supported you when you were in trouble, it was the other women who supported you between you were ill... men and women should live together in more friendly way. That is a solution that is not going to come through sisterhood. There must be good companionship between men and women. Without that I don’t think there is any solution to the problem of women...not through sisterhood is only a comfort.”¹

Shashi Deshpande imaged on the fictional world of India in 1970. She herself is projecting a woman in a very beautiful manner. She is of the opinion that these working class women always face the problem of adjustment between tradition and modernity, idealism and pragmatism. She has to her credit a number of great works on women sensibility. She has also written four books for children, over eighty short stories and a screen play. She also owns the prestigious Sahitya Academy Awards for her novel “That Long Silence” (1989). We also see that most of her women protagonists are educated and exposed to western ideas. Shashi Deshpande never believes that women are inferior beings who must remain passive and submissive. Ruby Malhotra rightly observes:

“The novelist carefully portrays shades of pain, love, anger, and frustration as she portrays many parent- child relationship in the novel. It is a novel about contemporary Indian society, about our awareness of the conflicts between our aspirations, visions in life, the threats of intolerance, anger, violence, and the survival of our traditional values and ideals and our cultural heritage still in the present circumstances, Shashi Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian woman novelist who has made a bold attempt to give voice to the frustrations and disappointment of women in a patriarchal world. It is a novel which provokes our thought and moves us deeply and Quietly.”²

Her novel “Roots and Shadow” tells us the story of the struggle of a woman named Indu who struggles hard to save her identity. The protagonist of this novel is Indu who recollects her days of childhood and adolescence. She recalls how in her period of menstruation she was hated as an unclean or an untouchable. Shashi Deshpande observes:

“My womanhood...I had never thought of it until the knowledge had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day I had grown up. ‘ You are a woman now’, Kaki had told me. “You can have babies yourself. I, a woman? My mind had flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. I was only a child. And then, she had gone on to tell me, badly, child’s unself consciousness about my own body, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it. And don’t forget she had ended, ‘for four days’ now you are unclean. You can’t touch anyone or anything.”³

Her other novel “Small Remedies” published in 2000 shows the novelist’s developed skills of literary writings to perfection. Madhu is the central character who belongs to the traditional Marathi Brahmin family. She is an urban educated woman. She also develops her deep understanding which is about Hindustani music. She is also such type of woman character who denied a marriage and a home. As a protagonist she struggles hard with her shattered family life. About this protagonist Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes:

“Madhu, however cannot impose the new concept of heroionism on an old fashioned woman who whitewashes her life through selective amnesia.”⁴

Madhu’s husband Som has a full fledged relationship with another woman before her marriage. It is a matter of great contrast that a man who has a number of relations and affairs with other woman, always expects his wife very loyal and devoted to him. On the other hand Leela the aunt of Madhu was remarkable and an independent woman who was very much devoted to the ideas of communist party. She participated in Quit India Movement but the height is that she criticized Gandhiji’s ideas of Non-Violence and Satyagrah. But she is a very honest character. At the last phase of her life she repented and regretted some of her action which she has committed earlier. Leela is also an independent woman character. After the death of her husband she took up a job and supported her family. She had to work for the welfare of the poor woman who was suffering from the dangerous and contagious disease Tuberculosis. During this period she comes in the contact with Dr. Joe who later on became her second husband. About Leela Dr. R. Malhotra rightly observes:

“Leela was the woman who strongly believed in communist ideology. At times she did not hesitate to speak against the party. Despite her hard work in the party, she was not given a good place by the party bosses. She worried because party members who worked under her were already given good places in the party while she was not given the opportunity to rise in the party. Once a widow of sitting party member was given a ticket to stand for elections. This made Leela to comment although she had never complained against the party.”⁵

It is to be noted that Indian women have excelled in each and every field of the society. There is no arena which remains unconquered by Indian woman. In other words, they are gaining ground in the field of politics, sports, entertainment and literature. Modern women are so self sufficient that she can be easily called a super woman who are seen struggling at every stage single handedly. They are now more ambitious and more bolds. They have proved their mettle in all the aspects of life but some of the women particularly belonging to the village life are seen suffering the violence afflicted on her. Ashish Kumar Gupta rightly observes:

“Women may have left the secured domains of their homes, but a harsh, cruel, exploitative world awaits them, where women have to prove their talent against the world. The Indian woman has to make her way through all the social prejudices against her, and the men yet to have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country’s way for what. May young women in India are now living their lives exactly the way they wanted to-from living away from home to living alone, from earning their own money to spending it how they liked, from marrying when they wanted to or not, and from choosing when to have children or not, they are making their own choices.”⁶

The portrayal of women by Shashi Deshpande is very near to the poetry of Kamala Das. Kamala Das is a prominent Indian woman poetess who fought for the emancipation and liberation of women’s identity in a patriarchal society. Her poem ‘An Introduction’ is a classic work expressing the subdued sentiments of women chocked either by the conventional and traditional society or by the patriarchal domination. This poem is autobiographical and confessional in tone and temper. This poem, in a very cryptic and epigrammatic way goes into the inner chamber of the mind of a persecuted woman digs out the real self, which is generally hidden under the pressure of so many obligations and the deliberate distortions of the set patterns. The poem also contains some beautiful images and symbols which are highly suggestive. This poem shows Das’s constant search for identity, her bearing the brunt of patriarchal domination. This poem also presents the truthful picture of personal life, her emotion of love and sex and her bold and candid thoughts about feminism. This poem is confessional because it deals with her

private and personal life about love, sex, bodily functions, puberty and above all her constant struggle for an individual existence in an entirely adverse society.

The presentation of the plights and persecution of woman is central to the famous book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' by Mary Wolstonecraft. This book is a classic work on the life and activities of woman. It deals with the right and education in the life of woman. She stresses in the need of the individual development of woman and it can only be possible through education. She was of the view that the need for education is more significant in the life of woman than for man. It is due to the lack of education that woman have to live under the control of patriarchal domination. In other words she argues that education is the most vital thing for the development of woman because it is the education which trains the minds of women and also raises their voice against Male domination. Mary Wolstonecraft rightly observes:

"I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and happiness consists, I wish to persuade women to Endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body... (and) to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of loadable ambition is to obtain a character as human being regardless of the distinction of sex."7

Conclusion

Thus the works of Shashi Deshpande are based on the concepts and theories propounded by the great champions of feminine sensibility. Her novel shows the progressive outlook of a woman who wants to assert her individuality in the male dominated society.

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