

Shashi Deshpande: A Staunch Feminist Voice

By

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande emerged in the 1970s as one of the leading figures in Indian Writings in English and stood proudly with many contemporary novelists like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Githa Hariharan and Shobha De. She has brilliantly attempted to peep in the psyche of the contemporary generation and presented the real picture of Indian society from all perspectives. In all her works, she attempts to capture various events and reality of human life and purposefully questions people's mentality and belief towards women, who are also born as human beings, but their causes of suffering are born as a girl child. In her works, Deshpande has raised the issues about a girl child's birth, how a female child grows in a family and society, and suffers from interiority to a male child. The result is that she finds herself bounded in the chain of fate, luck and destiny. Through her novels and short stories, Deshpande has explored various social, traditional, psychological, historical and environmental issues of contemporary India.

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Women have been normally and traditionally supposed to be passive or subordinate to men in this patriarchal setup, but with the growing consciousness overall and with the advancement of contemporary theories like structuralism, deconstruction, post-colonialism and feminism, writers like Jacques Derrida, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Virginia Woolf have changed the human perception towards women in general. Shashi Deshpande has also very well conformed to the existing contemporary radical thoughts and theories on the issues of women. In her article *The Dilemma of the Woman Writer* Shashi Deshpande has raised a question on woman's experiences and values. She is a contemporary novelist. It seems that her novels have emerged from society, where gender, patriarchy, and power play a significant role in society but objectifies the label of the feminist text of her writing. In her works, major issues regarding women of the middle class and their social environmental problems have been discussed broadly. The identification of the writer is also a significant issue in her literary field. When she has put a question to herself: "Where do I belong?" (Jain 18) Her responses are to various kinds of belongings :

"There are at least three different traditions she relates to, two which she acknowledges and third which she not" (18).

In an interview, she advocates herself to be an individual and says :

"When you deal with just my work, then take me as an individual writer and deal accordingly. Don't call it women's writing or feminist writing" (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, 254)

In order to knit her plots together, she has interwoven all the details. Her short story *Intrusion* first published in *The Legacy* and included in *Intrusion and Other Stories* presents a woman protagonist's psychological perspective. In the story, the bride intends to become a friend before

establishing a physical relationship. Her desire and thoughts prove only a dream, and merely a feelings has left to her : “And at present, we were not friends, not acquaintances even but only a husband and wife” (38).

In her making as a novelist, Shashi Deshpande goes on inheriting influences from the writings of Jane Austen and Somerset Maugham that have left significant impression on her mind. The love for Maugham was “just a passing phase” (Pathak, 233), whereas she has accepted about the influence of Jane Austen on her, in an interview to Vanamala Vishwanatha she says :

“I think Jane Austen had more lasting influences, I still read her regularly. But I do not think there have been any conscious influences on my writing as such” (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, 233).

However, she has also deeply read Dickens, and Tolstoy’s writings. The works of Simon de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer stimulate her mind to a large extent, which she considered in an interview : “When I read them, they stimulated me” (233). The writings of Salman Rushdie especially *Midnight’s Children*, she approves, “original, brilliant, bizarre, [and] at times incomprehensible” – a novel which changed everything for Indian writing in English” (13), but she has disapproved the theory of marginalisation by Rushdie. In the preface to *The Legacy and Other Stories*, G. S. Amur has remarked:

“Women’s struggle, in context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother and, most important of all, as a human being is Shashi Deshpande’s primary concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories. (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, 15)

In most of her works the subject matter has been repeated like gender-issues, human-relationship, marriage, love and alienation.

Clarifying about her stance on feminism, she avers to Ashvini Sarpeshkar Tandon in an interview :

“I do not like to be branded this or that because life is more complex than that. My enduring concern is for human relationship. I certainly do not think my novel are a man vs woman issue at all” (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, 19).

The influence of western feminism on her, she admits “to a small extent” as she opines to M. D. Riti :

“One never knows what influences one as a writer. I have read a lot of feminist novelists, and understood what they are trying to say easily. However, I began reading feminist writing only recently, while my writing has reflected feminist ideas right from the start” (*The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, 240).

Giving greater importance to human relationships and human emotions, Shashi Deshpande has created wonderful stories treasuring the relationship and has dismissed that being a mother or wife is a thrust by society or people on a woman, but “it is needed”.

An indepth study of her creative output clearly shows that Shashi Deshpande has raised issues regarding existentialism, where she has observed life’s facts and fiction. She is concerned about the dilemmas and choices of women about life and career, or we can also observe the facts about how women in our country have been compelled to accept the thoughts of family or society. It is also true that many reforms and movements have processed towards changes of human destiny by recognizing facts of life, society or nation.

Most of the issues analyzed in the works of Deshpande are not mainly about male or female, but gender-oriented. No doubt, culture and civilization have their values and relevance; but problems or issues related to gender or women are worldwide. By the old generation, Deshpande has exposed the views or perspectives of conservative, cultural and dominated Indian society, where some social practices and thoughts of human being towards a male and female child are not simultaneously treated.

On the other hand, through the new generation, the novelist has presented a changing perspective of human beings, especially women, for their lives and existence. The major difference of the thoughts and perspectives between the two generations put question marks on various issues like gender, race, class, culture, nation, womanhood, human-existence and rape. This may also be an exhaustive and pertinent area of research for an academic scholar. Hence, a critic and a sensible writer can observe these facts or reality of a nation through other tools as well, and it may be a text, or mass-media, or through a survey in the centre of women or gender studies, painting, interviews and so on. Shashi Deshpande has put all the aspects of feminism that has a close relationship to the contemporary Indian society and she can rightly be hailed as one of the major voices in Indian English writing on the issues of feminism.

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