



INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande has made impressive debut in the field of Indian English literature. Like other women writers, she has expressed the trauma of Indian women in a patriarchal set up, the sense of resentment in a male dominated society, the problems at home front as well as in work place -all these issues find central place in her writings. Still she is a strong supporter of Indian family system and her middle class protagonists never liberate themselves from their joint families -even return to the traditional society after carving a niche for themselves.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Malaise, Maltreatment, sentient, search for self\realization

Women's Contribution to Indian English Fiction and Shashi Deshpande

Women in Modern India have not only shared the exciting but dangerous burdens of the struggle of Independence, but have also articulated the national impulse and the consciousness of cultural change in the realm of letter.¹

Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar announces that "Women are natural story tellers"², thus saluting to the whole womankind for an ingrained virtue. Women are actively engaged today almost in every field of life, i.e. science, technology, engineering, medicine, politics, sports, bureaucracy etc. And they are not lagging behind their male counterparts even in the field of letters. Meena Shirwadkar writes in this context as follows :

Literature, which until recently was male-dominated, has started reflecting the sparks that have emanated from this struggle of the woman to be herself.³

Women have definitely made an impressive debut in the field of literature, and we have some illustrious names to mention in this connection, such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Santha Ram Rau, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Kamala Das and Anita Desai. Women have lately emerged from the hard shell of their domestic responsibilities and have initiated writing creatively in a perceptive way. Women writers have expressed in literature their first-hand experience of the whole range of female traumas and troubles. It is well-nigh impossible for a man to unfurl the secluded world of Indian Woman. Now when women have got a very pliant tool of the English language in their hands, they have begun presenting themselves through it to the world at large. Meena Shirwadkar comments in this context thus :

The early fiction by Indian Women in all Indian languages was an effort to give expression to their agonies and sufferings of which they have never had any dearth.⁴

Women writers have presently begun voicing their feelings and thoughts in a forceful manner, shaking off their sad experiences of the past in a male-dominated society. The awareness of individuality, the sense of incompatibility with their tradition-bound surroundings, the resentment of male-dominated ideas of morality and behaviour, problems at home and at the place of work or in society : all these issues come up before them in a flood of projection. The male writers have so far projected women mostly as grandmothers, mothers, mistresses, wives and sisters, or sometimes even avoided them totally. They have mostly treated them as mere appendages, or a symbol of beauty, sweetness, purity, faithful love or frivolity. So, it is left solely to women writers to delineate the malaise and maltreatment meted out to the fairer sex in our society.

The early women writers, especially the novelists, in their enthusiasm and fervour, made their writings didactic, sentimental and even romantic. Despite these shortcomings, they made a laudable contribution through their writings by opening the vistas of the so-far concealed feelings of womenkind for the world-view. Gradually, a second group of mature women novelists, whose style showed more finesse and felicity^ appeared on the literary horizon and through their novels, they began to highlight the problems of the female society, *i.e.* love and sex, isolation and alienation, external and internal crisis and search for 'self'. The women writers of our times have largely focused their literary camera on the individual more fully than on his or her actions, for they are generally concerned with the inner atmosphere of an individual rather than with his outer surroundings. Thus, the women novelists in Indian English literature have attained a speedy maturity and insight over the years.

Women writers are rather more sentient and closer to the temporal realities, more aware of the subtle nuances of human psyche than their male counterparts. The following comment by B.S. Goyal elucidates it :

These women novelists are closer to earthly reality, to the subtle nuances of social behaviour, to the complex structures of

men's and women's inner life, and to the use of a language that varies from the pedestrian and prosaic to the poetic and ornate.⁵

Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Santha Rama Rau, Bharti Mukherjee, and Anita Desai are some of the illustrious women novelists who have shown a keen insight into the complex human nature and its inner revelations. Of these women writers, Anita Desai is unique in one way - she has trodden the hitherto untrodden path of inner sensibility. She has blazed the trail for the upcoming writer like Shashi Deshpande. Like Anita Desai, Deshpande is preoccupied with the inner world of sensibility rather than with the outer world of action.

Shashi Deshpande, who was born in 1938 at Dharwad in North Karnataka, is the highly talented daughter of Shri Adya Rangacharya (Shriranga), a renowned Sanskrit scholar and a well-known Kannada playwright. At the age of fifteen, she moved to Bombay and graduated in Economics from the Elphinstone College, Bombay, and then she moved out to Bangalore where she did her graduation in Law from the Mysore University, topping the list of the candidates at the final examination. After her marriage, Mrs. Deshpande obtained diploma in Journalism from Bhavan's R.P. College of Mass Communication. Much later in 1984, she completed her post-graduation in English Literature also. Deshpande started writing seriously in 1970 after the usual marriage-children break. She commenced her writing career with several children books and collection of short stories, and has produced five collections of short stories, which are the following :

- 1) *The Legacy* (1978).
- 2) *The Miracle* (1986).
- 3) *It Was Dark* (1986).
- 4) *It Was Nightingale* (1986).
- 5) *The intrusion and other Stories* (1993).

The Legacy is being used as a text-book in the Columbia University for the course on Modern Indian literature. She has, to date, produced six novels which are as follows :

- 1) *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980).
- 2) *If I Die Today* (1982).
- 3) *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983).
- 4) *Roots and Shadows* (1983).
- 5) *That Long Silence* (1988).
- 6) *The Binding Vine* (1993).
- 7) *A Matter of Time* (1996).

Her novel, *That Long Silence*, is the winner of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for 1990. It has been translated into several foreign languages, i.e. German, Finnish, Dutch and Danish. Her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), won the Nanjangud Tirumalamba Award in 1990. It has been translated into German and Russian. Her novel, *Roots and Shadows*, earned the Thirumati Rangammal Prize in 1984, and was also selected for the coveted prize of The Best Indian Novel of 1982-83.

With such an admirable output, Shashi Deshpande stands apart from her contemporary female fiction writers. She is unlike her predecessors in one way-she has obtained no foreign education and experience. Kamala Markandaya is settled in England; Ruth Pravar Jhabwala is of Polish parentage; Anita Desai has German mother; Santha Rama Rau and Bharti Mukherjee are settled in America. They all have had some part of their education and experience abroad. Uma Parmeswaran regards Markandaya and Jhabwala as 'Native-Aliens', because "they are not as rooted in Hindu culture as early writers".⁶ Most of them have written their works from the view-point of attracting foreign readers and markets.

But Deshpande was brought up in an entirely Indian atmosphere. She occasionally uses Marathi words like 'Kaka', 'Kaki', 'Aya', 'Dada' etc. that give her novels a unique Indian touch. She presents a lively and picturesque description of the customs and traditions prevalent in Maharashtra and Karnataka. She commands a close view of the traumas and the tribulations of a middle-class Indian women. And she has caught the delicate threads of psychological upheavals of human beings, especially

of women. Sarabjit K. Sandhu has also remarked about her as under :

Shashi Deshpande has projected this aspect of Indian Women with more sensitivity and instinctive understanding as she belongs to this category, in the sense that, unlike other women writers, she is born and brought up on this soil, gained her education in India itself and wrote about India. This projection of the women's world in her novels is more authentic, credible and realistic. She knows what Indian women feel.⁷

The novelists like M.R. Anand, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai-all project in their respective ways the socio-cultural milieu. Anita Desai, however, breaks a special ground in exploring the modern Indian sensibility in her writings. The forte of Shashi Deshpande lies in the exploration of the inner world of human psyche and sensibility. She probes the psychological recesses of an individual mind with an accent on the quest of life *itself*, trying, thus, to trace the meaning and purpose behind the thinking pattern of an individual.

This makes us focus sharply on the key concern of Shashi Deshpande on the search for 'self' in her novels and literary output in general. Once a person is able to conquer his or her ego, he or she can realize the latent 'self'. Shashi Deshpande's novels reflect self-analysis via an emphatically naturalistic technique. This goes to underscore the point that the fear faced by a person notwithstanding, there is always available an avenue to shed off this fear and realize one's 'self'. Mostly, Shashi Deshpande's concern is to search for the underlying meaning and import of an individual's life and existence. By implication, Mrs. Deshpande suggests repeatedly that the main hurdle in the way of realizing one's 'Self' is the element of self-psychoanalysis. An individual can never realize real happiness through material tools or by simply blaming others for his or her problems. No wonder, then, that Shashi Deshpande's female protagonist-characters are ever busy in search for 'self'. Unable to cope with their external chaotic milieu, they frantically start searching for their true "selves"

inside. A.K. Awasthi places the whole thing in a right perspective when he remarks :

As her objective is to Probe the deeper layers of human sensibility, she (Deshpande) shows that man's basic desire is to be himself, but the pressure of other considerations is so overpowering that it is lost in wilderness.⁸

This onerous task she ably accomplishes in the series of her self-revealing novels. The Thesis here attempts to explore the search for 'self in the novels of Shashi Deshpande as it stands exemplified in her leading female characters.

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