

The Image of Women in Literature with Reference to the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

Dr. Narayani Sharma

Asst. Professor, YITM, Rajnandgaon, (C.G.)
E-mail: snarayani76@gmail.com

Abstract—It is an established and universally acknowledged fact that women though physically and mentally competent to perform on par with men, have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, but also deprived of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, their thoughts and their anguish.

The Feminist Movement, which began in the west in the 1960s, went a long way in meeting out justice for women. There is still much to be done to do away with the age-old prejudices and mis-conceptions regarding women. In a male dominated society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multi-dimensional roles in the family. As wife and mother, service, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance are her required attributes. Excessive endurance and series of adjustment that she makes in her life, faithfully and obediently are her admired qualities. Her individual self, plays either no role in the patriarchal society. The status and position of women degraded with the passage of time. With the growth of educational and vocational opportunities, the educated middle and upper class women, particularly in urban areas, have become conscious of their rights. More and more educational opportunities and employment avenues were thrown open to women. Exposure to reformist movements, economic independence, influence of western feminist movements all helped women to go a long way in bringing about drastic changes in their position and attitudes. Impelled by a desire to realise their aspiration for a new way of life, women began to voice their feelings freely.

Keyword: Par, anguish, existence, feminist movement, patriarchal society.

It is an established and universally acknowledged fact that women though physically and mentally competent to perform on par with men, have not only been denied existence as complete human beings, but also deprived of the opportunity to give expression to their feelings, their thoughts and their anguish. As Shushila Singh remarks: “Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life”

(Singh, Sushila, Feminism and Recent fiction in English, 7). The Feminist Movement, which began in the west in the 1960s, went a long way in meeting out justice for women. There is still much to be done to do away with the age-old prejudices and mis-conceptions regarding women. In a male dominated society, woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multi-dimensional roles in the family. As wife and mother, service, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance are her required attributes. Excessive endurance and series of adjustment that she makes in her life, faithfully and obediently are her admired qualities. Her individual self, plays either no role in the patriarchal society. In the words of Mary Fergusson : “In every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, and as sex object – in their roles in relationship to men” (Ferguson Mary. Women and their Identity, 45). The Hindu woman has idealized the mythic models from the Ramayan and other Purans. The role of woman has been full of contradictions as far as Indian customs and traditions are concerned. However, the position of women was not as gloomy during the Vedic period as it is today. Throughout the Vedic Period, woman was given a status equal to that of man. Her participation was essential in sacrificial rites like yagyas and she was on an equal footing with man in upholding Dharma. During the subsequent periods, there has been a gradual decline in the status of woman.

According to scholars, Manusmriti was the earliest that dealt with social philosophy perpetuating a dependent role for woman. It did not advocate equality of status between men and women. Manu regarded woman as more emotional and less rational than man by nature. He said,

“When creating them, God allotted to women a love of their breed of ornaments. Impure, desires, dishonesty, malice are her basic conduct.” (Manu, Manu smriti 9th, 18)

The double standard of morality set-up by Manu worsened the position of women and this further went down in the later years due to lack of education and introduction of child marriage during the Mughal Period.

With the growth of educational and vocational opportunities, the educated middle and upper class women, particularly in urban areas, have become conscious of their rights. More and more educational opportunities and employment avenues were thrown open to women. Exposure to reformist movements, economic independence, influence of western feminist movements all helped women to go a long way in bringing about drastic changes in their position and attitudes. Impelled by a desire to realise their aspiration for a new way of life, women began to voice their feelings freely.

The Indian women were now beginning to realise their rightful place in society. The deep-rooted myths about women have not allowed them to lead an authentically free life. Indian society was under the influence of the west, in the wake of the Renaissance. The monumental "Minute" of Macaulay prepared in 1833 provided for the adoption of English as medium of expression in educational institutions, important offices and Judicial courts. This opened up fresh avenues of thought in culture, art and literature, science and technology. This was strongly supported and encouraged by progressive thinkers.

Shashi Deshpande presents such of those human feelings that are in the process of being effected from the pages of human history. She makes them come alive as characters that appear real and as though belonging to our own neighbourhood. Her attitude to her characters seems to be sympathetic. There is magic in her writing in that we feel as if we are close to the experiences that are projected in her writings.

It has been established that through an analysis of the mother-daughter relationships, the solution to all problems of women lies with in women themselves. What is required is a movement towards the self-consciousness. Women verses men and women verses women are the two kinds of conflicts that occur when we analyse the life of human beings. Most of Shashi's women characters are seen trying to get out of the traditional image of woman subjected to the superior power of man in marriage. She deals with the woman belonging to Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional environment and are struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self – identity and independence. Most of her women characters are able to rise above their identity crises by analyzing their childhood and the process of their upbringing. The root of all the prevailing problems of women in their subjugation, which is always present in the form of silent

suffering and their social conditioning, generate slavish attitude, which, in turn, creates complications in their psyche, when they decide to remould or change it. The mode or style of their development inculcates in them submissiveness, silence and passiveness which has a strong hold on their psyche. Even modern educated women consciously drape themselves with these traits and find themselves in a fix. These traits, which have become the roots of femininity always cast their shadows in women's life. Shashi Deshpande seems to suggest through her fiction that a change in the upbringing of girl-child is required. Only then, she would be liberated from the clutches preserved for women since ages.

It should be borne in mind that a woman is a being. She is not a mere shadow of man. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of finding her own way to salvation. It is true that women today are not what they used to be in the past. Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self, an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. *Roots And Shadows* (1983) her first novel but published after *The Dark Hold No Terror* (1980) and *If I Die Today* (1982) marks the beginning of the quest of woman for herself. The theme is continued in her later novel *That Long Silence* (1988) and Deshpande's concern is the woman and her external quest. Women in *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Hold No Terror* have established themselves as independent beings, free from the restrictions imposed by society, culture, nature and also free from their own fears and guilt, that women have reached a stage of understanding is the fundamental truth. The parental home, a symbol of tradition and old world values has no room for the Shashi Deshpande heroine. She breathes the air of rituals that obstructs the growth of a woman as a being. Mother, the possible model after whom she must mould her life, looks a bad model and hence rejected. In their desire for freedom, they almost resemble Caliban, Indu and Saru seek through their marriage a room of their own and autonomy. The woman, in order to achieve her freedom seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. 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. There are many words employed by Shashi Deshpande in her novels, which indicate that the heroine has taken an important decision, which only proves to be an anticlimax, like Caliban becoming the slave of Stephno and Trinquilo. Both Saru and Indu marry out of their cast as and their second homes become the very prisons they had escaped. In this connection R. Mala observes, "These heroines are also victims of sexual paralysis" (Mala R, *The Predicament of the Indian Woman*, 132).

No doubt, the battle for women freedom has by no means been won and many writers are still deeply concerned with the problems, which the victories as well as the defeats present, but the larger questions that confront all human beings are still to be tackled. It is in stages that women are able to reach the goal on which they have set their hearts.

Women for their emancipation need the support of their male counterparts. Men, due to their unfriendly attitude, are against accepting the reforms meant for women with buoyancy. This attitude of men does not allow the liberation of women from the bondage of family ties. A mother's concern for her children always snaps her mouth and ties her hands. Children are related with their parent's reputation. Every act they perform may enhance or affect their parent's reputation. Similarly, a mother always wants to protect her children from misery and defame. Women do not want their children to be exploited and defamed without any rhyme and reason and as a when this happens they spare no effort to safeguard their children from disgrace into which they are likely to be dragged. A mother is more protective towards her daughter as compared to that of a son. She wants to give her the best in life, even those things which she has failed to achieve in her life. Her daughter, leading a happy married life, seems to be the utmost aim of her life.

Legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women have existed throughout history and in all civilizations. The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the deep-seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of raising the consciousness of an entire culture. The very concept of equality has undergone tremendous change in the light

of new feminist theories of difference. Currently relational feminism is being widely accepted as it avoids all the barriers associated with extremities of the individualist theories. The present day feminism thought covers a moral vision and emerges as a holistic and life-affirming philosophy. Women have started asserting themselves and this establishes the very fact that women are already as valuable as men are. They are of equal human value in their own way. Equality and difference thus are not anti-thetical.

REFERENCE

- [1] Barbara Thompson – The Art of Fiction – An Interview, Paris Review : 29, Winter, 1963, P – 113
- [2] Fergusson – Women and their Identity, 4/5
- [3] Karan Offen – “Defining Feminism” – A comparative Historical Approach (Autumn 1988), P-119
- [4] Manu – Manusmriti 9th 18
- [5] R. Mala – “The Predicament of the Indian woman” – The Heroines in the novels of Shashi Deshpande : A select Study. Pondicherry University, 1989, P – 132.
- [6] Raja Rao – “The serpent and the Rope (Bombay : Orient Paper Book 1968) PP-359
- [7] Robin Morgan – The Anatomy of Freedom – Feminism, Physics and Global Politics (New York : 1982), P – 282
- [8] Shashi Deshpande – The Dilemma of a woman writer, The Literary Criterion 20, 4 (1985), PP-33-37
- [9] Shushila Singh – Preface – Feminism and Recent Fiction in English (New Delhi :- Prestige, 1991), 7
- [10] Simone De Beauvoir – The Second Sex – H. M. Parshely London : Penguin, 1972) P – 173
- [11] The Term “ Individuation” is defined as the need for Autonomy and a self-identity and this is central to Johanna's thesis in her paper, women in Indian English Literature “ The Question of Individuation”. Journal of south Asian Literature, XII, 3 and 4 (Spring 1977), P – 121 – 129.