CHAPTER - 5

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Shashi Deshpande, through her novels, emerges as a gynocentric writer as her prime concern is the representation of problems faced by women of India. She has adopted woman centered approach and tries to highlight how woman’s writing is different from that of man’s writing. Only a woman can understand the problems of women and so the fictional world created by her echoes the opinion of patriarchy but the instinct of a woman at work can well be seen in which she thinks about women, their desires and demands, their troubles and problems, their physique and psyche and in this way, she projects predominantly a woman’s world. So her works can be read most meaningfully from a gynocentric point of view.

Throughout her writing, she has raised many questions and created awareness about the problems of women who have been suppressed by the dominant group – the male for centuries. One of the important characteristics of her writing is that it does not look up to the male counterparts seeking their permission nor does it express anger or rage towards the patriarchal culture to depict how patriarchy subjugates a woman. But through literature, Shashi Deshpande has given voice to women to articulate themselves and to find a unique place in the society which is the positive side of feminist critical enterprise. Her all novels centre round women and concentrate its energy only on knowing about women.
Shashi Deshpande has very subtly, without tampering the harmony of the texts, shown how women not only of their generation, but those of the earlier generation were in a deplorable condition, how they were thoroughly exploited and dominated by men and how they were treated as their personal possessions. The suppleness with which the writer has put forward her opinion goes on to show the maturity of Shashi Deshpande and her determination to express her views about women’s condition.

The theory applied to Shashi Deshpande’s novels is taken from Elaine Showalter’s “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” which studies the woman as the producer of textual meaning. The four models of difference of theories of women’s writing on which the whole theory of gynocentricism is built up are: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural which define and differenciate the qualities of women’s writing.

In fact, gynocentricism is a phase of women’s writing where the centre of all activities is women themselves around whom the circle of human activity is drawn. But to attain this stage, women have to be determined and have to channelize their energy towards highlighting, feeling and experiencing the sense of pride in the distinctiveness and peculiarities of their bodies and its associate experiences, their language, their psyche and their cultural status. All women need to keep the women’s culture throbbing by deriving strength and inspiration from it.

By using the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural phenomenon, Shashi Deshpande has proved that though on its surface, her writing looks similar to that of men’s , it is different in content, perceptions, terms of symbols, signs, social meanings, images, similes and metaphors.
As a writer, she has pointed out the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation which is inevitable in an oppressive male-dominated society. In fact, she gives the readers an opportunity to peep into the state and condition of the present day women who are intelligent and capable to articulate their abilities but they are always thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism.

It is however important to note that each of Shashi Deshpande’s novel ends on a note of determination by its female protagonists who resolve to take the reins of their lives into their hands. Indu in Roots and Shadows, Saru in The Dark Holds No Terrors, Jaya in That Long Silence, Urmì in The Binding Vine, Sumi in A Matter Of Time, Madhu and Savrtribai Indorekar in Small Remedies, Manjari in Moving On and Devayani in In The Country of Deceit establish self identity, though they put into a great amount of struggle and face many hardships in their life. Their strong will power and determination help them to hold on to their self-esteem.

In The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980), Sarita, the protagonist becomes a victim of gender discrimination by her mother in her childhood and after marriage is physically abused by Manu - her husband who through marital rape every night pushes her to the position of a slave. In fact, her sexuality is killed with marital rape. She always suffers from the feelings of hatred and guilt. It is really painful and satirical for her that though she is a popular lady doctor by day, she becomes a victim of physical harassment at night but she remains silent throughout her life. Her husband abuses her so much so that at last it becomes unbearable for her and she leaves the house to find out space in the patriarchal culture.
Deshpande boldly raises the issue of marital rape here. The horrendous and suffocating act of violence that is played night after night in the marital bed creates a huge gap between husband and wife. But her stay at her Baba’s house gives her chance to rethink about herself. She wants to be heard, respected and treated as an equal. She makes up her mind to live in spite of her miserable life without surrendering her and escaping from the problems. Thus, the novel ends with the emergence of new Saru who is no longer a victim of Manu’s strange behaviour. She realizes that the essence of marriage is understanding and mutual respect.

*If I die Today* (1982) portrays the predicament of some of the women characters. Manju, the narrator of the story becomes the victim of a passive husband who neither hits his wife nor says a single angry word to her but by his actions, deeds and comments makes her feel guilty. Though she is pregnant, she does not receive love and sympathy from her husband which is the basic need of a woman. Mriga, the daughter of Dr. Kulkarni suffers from father fixation. Cynthia, a childless woman always aspires for child; Shanta tolerates her husband’s escapades like a traditional Indian wife. Thus, all the female characters of this novel live like skeletons in men’s cupboards. Only Manju in the course of her encounter with harsh realities of life generates in herself the power to face it bravely and starts to live a dignified life.

*Come Up and Be Dead* (1983) is the story of Miss Kshama Rao, the principal of the school, Devayani, Kshama’s cousin, Mridula and Mrs Jyoti Raman. Mridula, the girl who has committed suicide is involved in the call girls’ scandal. She is raped in the hotel by many men and becomes pregnant and at last out of fear and shame, she commits suicide. Mrs. Jyoti Raman has a terrible experience on her wedding night as she
becomes a victim of her husband’s brutality and she is threshed out of the house by her husband. She struggles a lot to establish her identity in the man made culture but unfortunately, she is murdered by a man who has a doubt that she has learnt about the sex scandal and may expose it before others. Miss Kshama Rao and Devayani suffer as they were spinsters. Thus, all the women of this novel are biologically abused and become the victims of sexual aggression of men.

In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Indu represents how Indian women are forced by a bigoted society to repress their sexuality. She experiences disillusionment in sex and becomes a victim of “sex paralysis”. For her, marriage is a trap and she is a caged bird in the institution of marriage. She even compromises a lot in her writing to make her husband happy. But her excessive compromises lead her to see life as full of possibilities for growth and grace. At the end, she realizes that she will not remain only a puppet of her husband’s desires and so she decides to articulate her suppressed voice. She realizes that she has been running after shadows in search of happiness but the source of happiness is her roots. At last, she comes out of her emotional upheaval and finds out her roots as an independent woman and frees herself from her own fear and guilt. Going through the process of self analysis, she emerges as a confident woman. Her confident and assertive utterances towards the end show that this novel is gynocentric. She also finds out the meaning of life. Akka, a widow of the family becomes a victim of child marriage and is used, abused and humiliated a lot by her husband who is double aged from her. But the death of her husband brings change in her. Her strong will power helps her to regain her identity and self respect.
“That Long Silence” (1988) is the story of Jaya, her maid servant Jeeja, Jeeja’s step son’s wife Tara and Vimala. Jaya suppresses her individuality only to make her husband happy and lives as “an ideal wife”. Her sexual relationship with Mohan always ends up with the feelings of hurt in Jaya. So her idea of fulfillment through sex is destroyed completely. After enduring a lot, Jaya revolts against this situation and establishes self identity. One great step towards her self identity is the abortion of the third child without the knowledge of Mohan and thus she breaks the image of a traditional Indian wife. This decision brings self realization and happiness in her life. On the contrary, Jeeja bears all the cruel beating of her drunkard husband as she is not able to give child to her husband. Tara also becomes a victim of violation of her husband; Vimala, Mohan’s sister and Vimala’s mother become victims of physical harassment of their husbands. All these women except Jaya endure and surrender themselves to male oppression. Only Jaya fights for self and comes out as “a New woman” with a crusade against injustice meted out to women for centuries.

The lives of Urmila, Mira and Kalpana in “The Binding Vine” (1993) focus the sexual wrongs done to women in the patriarchal ideology. Mira, the dead mother – in – law of Urmila is a vibrant young woman who is trapped in an unhappy arranged marriage. She becomes a victim of forced love making and endures the violation of her body in silence. But she expresses her agony through writing. Kalpana becomes a victim of her uncle Prabhakar’s lust and moves between life and death in the hospital ward. Shakutai, Kalpana’s mother also becomes the victim of the sexuality of her drunkard husband and even leaves her alone with the responsibility of children. Urmila is the only woman who fights for the welfare of other oppressed women. She herself is not satisfied with her
husband as he is not able to spend much time with her and always stays far from her for job. In short, all these women, from the web of loss and despair, create a binding vine of love, sympathy and sisterhood which is an important characteristic of the gynocentric study. Urmila is the only person in this novel who fights for herself and also for other oppressed women bravely and establishes her self identity.

*A Matter Of Time* (1996) is the story of four generations – Manorama, Kalayani, Sumitra and her three daughters Aru, Charu and Seema. Most of them become the victim of male chauvinism. Manorama suffers because she is not able to bear a male heir. Her daughter Kalyani, an example of self sacrificing Indian woman, gives birth to a mentally retarded son who is unluckily lost at the railway platform. The result is life long communication gap between husband and wife. Wife’s desertion is found in the case of Sumitra whose husband leaves her without any reason. In this way, all these women remain passive silent sufferers. Though Sumi is left by her husband, she comes out with a new understanding and learns to live new life with her daughters. Her strong will power makes her ready to transfer her despair into determination. Thus, the novel ends with a note of hope that through the process of self searching, one can change one’s situation from despair to hope.

*Small Remedies* (2000) is a story of anger, disappointment, frustration and pain of Madhu, Savitribai Indorekar and Leela. Madhu’s peaceful married life turns into turmoil with the exposure of the pre-marital innocent sexual act with her father’s friend which creates a life long rift between husband and wife. But the writing of the biography of Savitribai Indorekar gives her the sense of fulfillment. Being a victim of the double standards of the society, after many ups and downs, Madhu
understands that there are small remedies around her which help her to come out of the cocoon of the society. Savitribai’s life is a story of struggle and survival of a woman in a sex starved society. Leela, Madhu’s aunt becomes a victim of political subjugation but with her strong will power, she also comes out of this subjugation. Thus, all the three female characters struggle for identity and at last they all achieve their individuality.

Moving On (2004) is the story of Manjari who is after the death of her parents, feels alienated and surrounded by strangers. Though she is a widow, she challenges the notion that a young woman cannot live without the support of a man. She even shocks Raja by learning to drive a car and runs a taxi to earn livelihood. She installs a computer at home and types the manuscripts as a means of self employment. Thus, she supports her economic and physical existence by not depending on any man. Even the false attempt of rape by those people who want to grab her house makes her strong. Now she determines not to leave the house and also not to obey these people. Thus, she emerges as a fearless woman, prepares herself to fight and live in her father’s house on her own terms. She feels proud to be born as a woman. That is why she says – “One’s womanhood is always a positive gift”. This statement itself shows that it is a wonderful example of a gynocentric text.

In In The Country of Deceit (2008), the protagonist Devayani, as different from other women of the novels, though unmarried she is, chooses the man whom she loves and establishes sexual relationship with him. She boldly loves Ashok Chinappa, the new District Superintendent of Police in Rajnur who is a father of a child as she does not believe in deep rooted patriarchal ideology. She believes that marriage is not the
only means of fulfillment and happiness. This idea leads her to self realization. Her decision to have her own way gives a new confidence in her which leads her towards emancipation. Like Devayani, Rani the film actress also lives the life of her own desires. Thus both the leading female characters do not remain only dolls in the hands of male hegemony but establish their identity.

In a way, her novels do not become a vehicle propagating women’s rights nor do they scathingly attack on the contemporary patriarchal set up. They, on the contrary, concentrate upon the condition of women who are not stark rebellious of patriarchy, but within the patriarchal culture, they try to establish their own identity. Without leaving the family, they create their own space and place in the family and create a woman centred approach. She treats her women characters with understanding and compassion, while putting them against men who are selfish and hypocritical.

In her quest for identity, Shashi Deshpande’s female characters have moved from despair to hope, from self abnegation to self assertion which is an important characteristic of the gynocentric theory. Shashi Deshpande here celebrates womanhood and her female characters try to redefine their status in the man made culture. Her female characters are educated and efficient and refuse to be cowed down by men.

Unlike Western feminst theory, the female characters seek solution of their problems within marriage and finds out positive solution of their problems which is the motto of the Indian culture. Shashi Deshpande , being an Indian English woman writer, do not believe in separation, but believes in union of the family. Thus, all her female characters though
suffer a lot, by the process of rethinking and retelling, find out their own space within the family which is the core of the gynocentric theory. In this way, all her novels are gynocentric.

Shashi Deshpande has endeavoured to establish woman as an individual who breaks loose from the traditional constraints and redefines her identity in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times. Finding herself trapped in the roles assigned to her by society, she asserts her individuality. She tries to redefine human relationships, particularly with her husband. Without rejecting outright the cultural and social background, she realizes the need to live in the family but rejects her role prescribed to her by the society. She tries to attain self–identity and independence within the confines of marriage. Thus, she manages to extricate herself from male dominance.

Her female characters emerge as capable modern women who challenge the male chauvinists in society. They stand for the central consciousness beyond any shade of doubt and hence her novels can be rightly called women–centered. In her women–centered works, feminist ideology which puts women in direct encounter with chauvinistic male oppressors, finds its full and free expression. In characterization too, Shashi Deshpande has deliberately given her women characters a greater variety and depth and thus a definite edge over to their male counterparts.

Her novels are gynocentric in the sense that they are built on the metamorphosis of her protagonists emerging from being a docile wife to assertive mature woman in the end. After evaluating these novels, one wants to conclude that no one can live happily if there is subjugation and
domination in the society. A happy and satisfied life can be established only if the patriarchal society accepts woman as a woman, an important part of the family as well as of the society.

Shashi Deshpande clearly agrees with Virginia Woolf who asserts that true happiness cannot be achieved by trying to marginalize anyone. Both men and women are human resources to be used for the development of the culture, so these genders cannot be dissociated from each other. It is their unique and diverse, but combined contribution that makes wholesome, multi-faceted, pluralistic and sustainable development possible. Life must always be perceived as a whole which man and woman must share lovingly with each other.

Even Shashi Deshpande in her essay “Why I Am a Feminist” makes it clear that to be a feminist does not necessarily mean to want to be like a man, but to accept one’s womanhood as a positive gift and to affirm that one is “different, not inferior” (Deshpande: 2003, 135). Women can fulfill themselves only when they are not subjugated and oppressed. Although she advocates for an ideal family set up where both men and women avail equal opportunities and privileges, where cooperation, compromises and companionship prevail.

Instead of being economically, emotionally and psychologically dependent on men, women would independently nourish ambitions and pursue goals for self-fulfillment. In the context of the changing world, it has become imperative to do away with separate domains for woman and man and to redefine man–woman relationship as equal and complementary and not on terms of domination and subjugation. For Deshpande, “A world without frightened, dependent, trapped, frustrated
women is a better world for all of us to live in” (2003, 85). Through her writing, Shashi Deshpande has declared that both the sexes are essentially not rivals of each other but have a complementary role to play with equal dignity and self – pride.

Mutual understanding, trust, compassion and support lead to authenticity in a relationship and concretize it. Problems arise when they are one sided. The absence of reciprocity of care generates feelings of worthlessness, lack of zest, isolation, depression, inertness, lack of communication, alienation, conflict and identity crisis which are reflected in the lives of the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande but they try to come out from all these and establish self – esteem and individuality.

Shashi Deshpande through her novels wants to show that restructuring of relationship is the need of the hour. Women should be able to draw strength from their relationships and craft a way of life that includes serving others without being subservient. Their stereotypical and traditional notions should be refined, revised and redefined to create a world with a better quality of living based on equality.

There is a need to harmonize the man – woman relationship as equal partner. Like Toril Moi’s views - “In a non – sexist, non patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist” (Moi: 1985, 25), Shashi Deshpande believes in an improved relationship between man and woman, an erasure of gender discrimination and all oppressive practices against a woman. She is firm in her conviction that in India, feminism cannot be ‘anti – male’ since both man and woman have to communicate and work towards “a better, more meaningful companionable relationship” (Deshpande : 1991, 12). A mature woman must do it so that
she can light the path for future generation. That seems to be Deshpande’s vision of the future.

To conclude, the researcher would like to say that the four models of difference of gynocentricism are made into litmus on which Shashi Deshpande’s fictional world is tested, which has proved that her fictional world is really gynocentric. The various traits of gynocentricism laid down by Elaine Showalter in her essay ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’ and by Barbara Godard in Gynocritics – Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women’s writing are perfectly and enormously reflected in Shashi Deshpande’s novels.