

Chapter III

FEMINISM AND SHASHI DESHPANDE

Feminism as a movement has been well established, and women creative artists especially women novelists are very well familiar with the feminist movement. Hence a survey of feminism will be helpful to understand the novelist, Shashi Deshpande.

The theory of feminism and its influence have spread so rapidly in the latter half of the twentieth century that it is now impossible to define it in a few words. It has been spread into several branches and each has wide variety of approaches.

In the west three intellectual revolutions of the past have played significant roles in moulding the structure of feminist thought. The oldest of these is the **birth of liberalism** in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The important concern of this theory was the **"right of man"** expressed mainly through the writings of Locke, and Rousseau. It was chiefly concerned with the rights of man before law and the public life—right to vote. This idea was subsequently followed by an equivalent claim about **"the rights of women."**

It is the **first women's movement** which advocates for the equal political and legal rights for women. It is also called **Suffragette movement**. This movement originated out of intellectual revolution, which is still the source of insight into various modern feminist thoughts. Later on it gave rise to the French and the American

revolution. This movement was later on, carried by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The second phase of women's movement, what is now popularly known as the modern feminism is triggered by the writings of Simone de Beauvoire, Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer and others like Virginia Woolfe. The theories of these writers are valid for all societies. There are the socialist theories, which have the impressions of Marx and Engels. The Marxist-socialist theory grew from the realization that political liberalism was hollow without economic equality. Thus, economic rights were added to political ones. So those feminists, who were influenced by the Marxist theory, came to be called as Socialist Feminists.

The modern feminism in the later nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was influenced by the notion of sexuality and sexual behaviour in social and political contexts. Freud, Jung and Lacan played tremendous roles in challenging modern feminist thought to unexplored new region. These writers introduced the psychological theories and thinkers began to rethink on the relationship of sexuality to society. Expressions like, 'sex role stereotyping' soon became frequently used expression in feminist writings.

While the prominent concern of the first phase of feminist movement was the political rights of woman, its second phase has its concern with the cultural, socio-political, economic, psychic and spiritual aspects of women's liberation. Poised against the overt and covert oppressive forces exerted on women by the male dominated social machinery, the second phase of feminism is noted for its multi-

dimensional perspective and devastating attack on several age-old conventions of social formation.

Simone de Beauvoir can be considered as the keystone of the modern feminism. In *The Second Sex* (1949) Beauvoir analyses that women's subordination proceeds from the assumption that men view women as fundamentally different from themselves. In being defined as 'the other' women are reduced to the status of 'the second sex'. The masculine is accepted as the norm. Humanity is male and women is defined as relative to man. She is not defined as 'herself', -- an autonomous being. She is viewed as relative to man. **Germaine Greer** discusses how the restrictions imposed on their emotions and sexual instincts reduce women to Female Eunuchs. **Betty Freidan** calls attentions to the problems that has no name experienced by the happily married housewives and reveals how the conventionally assigned roles result in the construction of a female mystique.

This second phase of the modern feminism gave upsurge and awareness of the 'Patriarchal' nature of human societies.

The word 'patriarchy' has its roots in the Greek word 'patros'. It was first introduced by **Kate Millet** in *Sexual Politics* (1970) to refer male-dominated power structure that forms the basis of our society. Kate Millet elaborated on how the power of 'patriarchy' is maintained even in modern societies where women have education, financial resources and extensive civil and political rights. This is accomplished chiefly by means of an ideological engineering of consent among women themselves. Thus, the picture of women oppression that emerges from Millet's analysis is essentially that of an interior

colonization. The women are socially conditioned to embrace their secondary status. According to Millet, "in modern times patriarchy is upheld chiefly by attitudes rather political or economic structures. This patriarchy is so deeply ingrained into our thinking that the character structure it creates in both the sexes is more a habit of mind and a way of life than a political system".¹

Feminist theorist like Simone de Beauvoir and others gave great importance to the issue of women's experience. They believed that women's experience was different from that of a men because of their long oppression. But in the 70s this issue took a paradoxical shift. The exponent of this new changed perspective refused to consider women's difference from men as a form of inadequacy and a source of pride and confidence. Some of them even advocated to establish femaleness as normative and maleness as a derivation of it.

The mother centred theories of **Jacques Lacan** and the entry of lesbian feminists into the field of theorizing led this change in perspective to new horizons. The theorists categorized themselves by different terminologies, such as, Marxist-socialist feminist, radical and lesbian feminists and, liberal feminists etc. Despite divergence in their perspective they are united by a common belief that women are oppressed – culturally, politically, and psychologically and exploited economically. Further, this system is maintained and reproduced by a patriarchal structure that seeks to naturalize it.

Marx and Engels have considered the status of women in the family and in the society from an entirely new angle. In the *Communist Manifesto (1848)* the bourgeois attitude to woman has been exposed.

Engels in his essay, 'The Origin of Family, Private Property and state' examines the change in the status of women from the barbarian society to the modern bourgeois society. He sums up his own view and also that of Karl Marx on the entire man-woman relationship:

The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of antagonism between man and in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of female sex by the male.²

He ridicules the idea of monogamy because in the male dominated society 'monogamy is only for the woman, not for the bourgeois because bourgeois are not at all contented with having the wives and daughters of their proletariats. They seek greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives.

The notion for bourgeois marriage and chastity for women has distorted the image of woman in literature. It has given rise to two characters - the wife's paramour and cuckold. The bourgeois marriage reduces the wife to the level of the prostitute. Marx and Engels believed that woman can never find her status based on dignity and freedom in bourgeois society. It is only in the communist society that the woman would be really free and her dignity would be restored to her.

There is a different vision of socialist feminists. They think that the society would be politically and economically democratic. The means of production would be publicly owned and the fruits of production equally distributed. Factors like sex and race would be no longer predetermine one's status. It also says that most of the functions

that a family performs would be socially performed. Thus, the oppressiveness would certainly cease. According to Juliet Mitchell, an important advocate of modern socialist feminism, “the result would be, not the destruction of the family, but a plural range of institutions—where the family is only one.”³

Among the radical feminists, only Shulamith Firestone has developed a comprehensive theory of the origin of women’s oppression. She is of the view that the origin of sex class system lie in the biological determined reproductive roles of men and women: women bear and nurse children “unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men woman were created different and equally privileged.”⁴ Until reliable birth control methods became available, women were “at the continual mercy of their biology.”⁵ Biology made women dependent on males for the physical survival. Thus, the biological family is an inherently unequal power distribution.

Although women’s oppression has its origin in biology, it is, therefore, immutable. Technological development—reliable birth control and in future, artificial reproduction like test tube babies have potential of freeing women. Radical feminists have the vision of control over reproduction through technology.

The liberal feminists believe that the inferior position of women is due to cultural and psychological factors. John Stuart Mill is considered the first liberal feminist. In fact, Mary Wollstonecraft, who in her book *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) made many points which were later taken up by John Stuart Mill. In her book, she attacks

the educational restrictions and mistaken notions of female excellence that keep women in a state of ignorance and slavish dependence. However, Mill's classical work *The Subjection of Women* (1869) became the bible of the feminists in the later part of the nineteenth century. It provided the movement a philosophic vision. According to Mill, the subjection of women was the product of age-long custom and was not the proof of any inherent inferiority in them. He writes:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.⁶

Like other liberals, Mill also believed that equality between the two sexes can be brought about by moral reforms, education and legal measures. Among contemporaries, the views of Betty Freudian come nearest to this attitude.

In the third world countries, feminism has a very different set of concerns. With the history of colonization behind them, the feminists from these countries engaged themselves in the task of liberating their women from oppressive cultural and regional conventions like *pardah*, *Sati* etc. They confront antagonistic forces like the lack of proper education and influence of superstitions. Although most of the third world countries differ politically, socially and economically from one

another, there is often a similarity in their ideologies which result from a common colonial experience. In third world countries female labour is considered as the property of man. They are undervalued and ignored. These colonial ideologies have attached low status to women and their work.

As feminism is primarily a revolution of social consciousness, it affected literature and literary criticism from its earliest days. Feminist criticism has now become a fully established branch of literary studies. One section of feminist critics has engaged themselves in re-reading of literature written by women to discover hidden expression of feminist protest. For example, the work of **Susan Gubar** and **Gilbert Sandra** who discover 'the mad woman in Attic in Jane Eyre as the concealed feminist protest in Bronte. Another section of feminist critics engage themselves in the task of exposing the forgotten, unknown and unappreciated texts of literary importance. Research in this field has brought into light several female writers like Rokeya Hossein. These critics take up re-reading of male texts to unearth the positive or negative attitudes to feminism that these works conceal.

Another significant attempt in this field has been to discover a female tradition in literature. One of the pioneering studies in this field is that of **Elain Showalter**. In her *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) she studies the work of the British women writers and discovers a female tradition and subculture in English literature, which has been overlooked by male critics.

According to Showalter, the development of female tradition is similar to the development of any other literary subculture. She

substantiates her argument that 'female imagination' is the product of a delicate network of influences operating in history. She draws on Fanon's study of colonial and racial subcultures, which suggests that all literary subcultures—Black, colonial etc.—go through these major phases. The first one is of **imitation**, in which artists and intellectuals in the subculture imitates the norms of the dominant tradition, internalising its standards of art and its views on society and in so doing, legitimise their claim to human equality. In the female tradition, Showalter names this stage '**the feminine phase**'. The female writers of this phase portrayed their heroines as 'ideal woman'—as the angel in the house, surviving on sacrifice, endurance and passive subservience.

The second phase of literary subculture is a protest against the dominating values and standards. Such protest is manifested mainly through the advocacy of minority rights and values including demands for autonomy. Showalter calls this stage '**the feminist phase**'. This stage openly demands better status and more freedom for women.

The third and the most important phase is the search for 'a genuine identity'. In this stage, the quest for freedom is turned inward and aimed at the goal of self-discovery. However, Showalter makes it clear that these categories are not rigid and quite often they overlap. Sometimes all the three stages may appear at a time in a single writer. The third stage, the '**female stage**' is marked by the development of women-centred literature. Showalter observes:

The novels of this stage are physiologically rather than socially focussed and exhibit the recurrence of the symbols of an enclosed or secret room.⁷

The theorists and the crusaders of the feminist movement believe that woman will attain her real status based on security, dignity and freedom, if she is fully emancipated, intellectually equal to man, economically independent and discards all her shackles. This was their cherished hope but the fact belies such a hope.

Actually, the western movement fights for the undeclared sex orientation while the feminist movement in the developing countries is based upon the socio-economic issue. However, gender is the common strand among all the feministic approaches. It exerts a greater pull to the disadvantage of woman. It plays its role in bringing about the poverty. Instead of economic parity with men, women are being pushed below the poverty line. It is very much visible in the developing countries like India. Even achievements of economic independence do not guarantee emancipation from male-dominance. Rather the economically independent, educated, emancipated modern woman find herself burdened with even greater shackles. Ajita Garg has termed it as "women doubly enslaved—enslavement on the domestic front and enslavement on the employment front."⁸

The girl child even in the educated families continues to suffer due to gender discrimination, while the educated housewife's lot is no better. In many cases, she is treated as an instrument of augmenting her husband's income.

Outside the family, women is being reduced more and more to the level of commodity. The obsession to exploit a woman's body for advertisement and sales promotion in talking away the last shreds of the dignity of a person. In the so-called civilized societies crimes

against women are in the increase. So, in the modern society, women still do not enjoy security, dignity or freedom in the real sense.

Engels has put the situation correctly when he observes:

...that woman was the slave of man at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us from the period of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Woman occupied not only a free but also a highly respected position among all savages and barbarians. People whose women have to work much harder than we would consider proper often have for more real respect for women than Europeans have for theirs. The social status of the lady of civilization, surrounded by sham homage and estranged from all real work, is socially infinitely lower than that of the hard-working woman of barbarism.⁹

Shashi Deshpande who is relatively free from several prejudices regarding man and woman, is highly sensitive to the issues involving women. She has deep impressions of Western feminism and considers gender central to her writings. Her works deal not only with ordinary women in ordinary, urban situations but stem from a firm belief that our lives are to a great extent governed by gender. She feels that woman have not participated in world making; the stories, myths and legends in our *Puranas*, epics and *Kathas* have been written by men. Moreover, women have been conditioned to a great extent by myth: "To be as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapoorna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri,

as strong as Durga—these are the ultimate role models we cannot entirely dismiss.”¹⁰ Deshpande feels that women never start with a picture of themselves on a clean slate, their self image honed by the hegemonic influences of myths, movies and current day soap operas. She sees herself as a writer whose writing comes out of, she says:

My own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of a consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman.¹¹

Deshpande expresses her unhappiness at the consistent ghettoization of ‘Women writers’, at their marginalization. She herself says:

I call myself just ‘novelist and short story writer’. Truth is,...I am deeply interested in human beings, in the human conditions. ...about our relationships with one another, with society and our moral values.¹²

In fact, Shashi Deshpande is extremely objective in treating with human being. Premila Paul observes: “Shashi Deshpande does not glorify women’s sufferings. Though she enlists a sufficient amount of sympathy for her protagonists, it is not on the ground of her being a female sufferer.”¹³ Shashi Deshpande clarifies that she has chosen to

have a woman as a central character not in order to project or support some feminist position because she feels that she can write about a woman with conviction and some inner knowledge. She says: "I know women better than I know men, so perhaps my books are more about women, and that's about it."¹⁴ Statements like this may not leave one in doubt about the writer's feminist stance. Shashi Deshpande maintains that she has never consciously projected any feminist ideas. Her novels and short stories which contain feminist thought—women's sexuality, the construction of gender roles as a wife and mother, self-discoveries lead the reviewers to ask the question as to what extent she would consider herself a feminist. Her reply is:

I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my life, I mean. But not consciously as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it.¹⁵

Most of the feminist writers in India hold almost the same view. C.S. Laxmi, the Tamil writer expresses the similar opinion when she says, "I also don't sit down and tell myself that I am going to write a feminist story. Feminism is part of my life, it's what I am."¹⁶ But the reviewers like Malashri Lal are not convinced by Shashi Deshpande's statement that she is not a conscious feminist novelist. She thinks that she shares "her protagonist's conviction that women are God's and society's cruelly wronged creatures."¹⁷ They contend that *The Dark*

Holds No Terrors contains several scenes—in a village, in a college cafeteria, in Bombay chawls, in bedroom, in maternity wards—where women are denied the rights to be individuals.

Shashi Deshpande, however, feels that her brand of feminism is not the militant feminism adopted by the western writers. The problem of her protagonist rise mostly from situations in the Indian context and differ from those of their western counterpart. She does not refer to western ideology in her novels, but rather regrets the fact that many of the Indian feminist critics do not have the clear idea of the concept of feminism. In an interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom, Shashi Deshpande says:

It is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whosoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And often there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not having children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it.¹⁸

Other critics like R. Mala interpret extra-marital relationship as part of feminism. She says that sexually ignored or sexually repressed Deshpande's women "strive for expression through sexual relationships or affairs with men other than their husbands. Saru's affair with Boozy (her boss) and Padmakar Rao (her college mate) seems temporary

substitute for her unfulfilled marital life.”¹⁹ A close study of the novel reveals that Saru does not indulge in any physical relationship either with Boozy or with Padmakar Rao, and so the question of being unfaithful or having an extra-marital affair does not arise. On the contrary, Saru seems to have lost interest in sex after the rightly assaults of her husband, Manu. This is made clear when she says: “And for me sex was now a dirty word.”²⁰ R. Mala presumes that an educated woman, who tries to assert herself as an individual, must necessarily develop, should develop sexual relationships with several men. This is typical thinking of the most of the Indians. By the assertion of self, Deshpande means that a women must not allow her ‘she’ to get deceased, which certainly does not mean propounding feminism or any kind of ‘ism’.

Shashi Deshpande further explains her own conception of feminism in one of her interviews with Malini Nair, she says:

The women in my book are people who come to realize what it is to be a woman in the process of their own lives and the situations they face not through books and theories. I think feminism is an entirely personalized perception. It is when you start questioning preconceived notions about your roles. I don't think there is anything 'inherent' in a woman apart from the fact that she can conceive. All other things are equally important for them as they are for the men.²¹

There is no antagonists or villains in her novels. Shashi Deshpande does not take the sides with her characters, rather presents them as

close to reality as possible. She portrays both their strength and weaknesses. She further says that the men in her novels are never bad and the women never entirely good. The only unfairness she sees in the set up is the fact that “men having made the rules of the game have made the world a more comfortable place for themselves.”²²

Many reviewers have interpreted the novel, *That Long Silence* as a feminist critique written in the form of novel. According to Toril Moi, “The principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not perpetuate, patriarchal practices.”²³ This is what Shashi Deshpande does in her novel *That Long Silence*. While doing so, Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya, the protagonist, is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are; they should see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except herself. Jaya, mostly blames herself for what she had been, she tells us that she is not writing a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive, suffering wife. “I am writing of us.”²⁴

Many Reviewers have labelled the novel *That Long Silence* as a feminist or feminine novel but there are some reviewers like K. C. Nambiar who is against any kind of labelling. He says *That Long Silence* is “a muted and essential sympathetic treatment of the problems of marital relationships; maintaining a credible balance between the sexes.”²⁵ Keki Daruwalla, a distinguished Indian English poet, says: “Labels are inadequate here, as they always are when confronting a work of art. One cannot dub *That Long Silence* either as a feminist or

psychological novel. It has been written...with an unerring eye for character. Shashi Deshpande never over reaches herself".²⁶

As Shashi Deshpande talks of equal status of man and woman except their gender, woman conceives while man helps her in conception. At the point of marriage, Shashi Deshpande says that it should not be taken as to satisfy the sexual urge and woman should not be used as a tool that helps in procreation. Under the impression of western movement, Shashi Deshpande says that woman has every right to find fulfilment in the act of sex. Marriage should be the mutual subjugation of man as well as woman. None should think of dominating over the other.

In the novel, *The Binding Vine* Deshpande discusses the evil of marital-rape. Mira, who is modern, educated and awakened is the victim of marital-rape. Shashi Deshpande is extremely against all such oppressions which bring about the physical and mental wreck.

Although to some extent Shashi Deshpande is impressed by the western feminism, but not to the extent of Simone de Beauvoir who declares most of the Indian marriages obscene. She observes:

Marriage is obscene in principle in so far as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading characters to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspects as bodies, not as persons.²⁷

Deshpande's protagonists are no doubt, victim of unequal power structure in marriage, but in all her novels, she shows how one can rise above such injustice and lead a meaningful existence. In the end, her protagonists almost always strive to make their marriages work. As J. Bhavani observes:

This is not a negative but a realistic end to the novels, Deshpande upholds marriage as the backbone of society, what is stifling is the personal of the wife and not the institution of marriage.²⁸

We may notice that Deshpande's views coincide with the thoughts of **Elain Showalter**, who says: "The women protagonists in her novels achieve "personhood", yet do not negate the family or the society. They go beyond what he (Elain Showalter calls) the "Female Phase" which is the phase of self discovery, a turning inward freed from the dependence of opposition a search for identity."²⁹ They no doubt discover themselves but the quest does not end there. It should be observed that they are not feminists in the first stage but in the second. The second stage cannot be viewed in terms of women alone but also in terms of the separate personhood or equality with men. The second stage involves coming to new terms with the family, new terms with love and work. It is a kind of enlightened reintegration into the society where they find their own voices; no longer being directed by others. In the end they acquire self knowledge.

Shashi Deshpande says that she is neither in favour of feminism nor against it. Being a women, she says, it is "an acceptance of my womanhood as a positive thing, not a lack. An understanding that I am

different, not inferior.”³⁰ She further elaborates that feminism can never be anti-men because it really works for a better, a more meaningful and companionable relationship between men and women, instead of an uneasy relationship.

Shashi Deshpande has always been negating to the charge that she is a faminist. However, it took years to say, ‘I am a feminist.’ Actually her utmost desire is to be called a writer, not an Indian writer, Asian writer or post-colonial writer, but she wants to be known only as a writer. However, when she says that she is a feminist she means that male as well as female have equal rights to born and survive. Everybody has equal rights. Nature has never differentiated between male and female. She elaborates the point in her essay “Why I am a Feminist” as such:

I believe that the female of the species has the same right to be born and survive, to fulfil herself and shape her life according to her needs and the potential that lies within her, as male has. I believe that women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings, but one half of the human race. I believe that women (and men as well) should not be straitjacketed into roles that warp their personalities, but should have options available to them. I believe that Nature, when conferring its gifts on humans did not differentiates between males and females, except for the single purpose of procreation. I believe that motherhood does not bar everything else, but is a bonus, an extra that

women are privileged to have. Would the anti-feminist deny all this?³¹

We take notice that Shashi Deshpande is strictly against the position of women as prostitute as is declared by Marx and Engels. But her views, to some extent, coincide with modern feminist thought which has changed much since the radical feminism of the 1960s. Betty Friedan in her book *Feminine Mystique* challenged the universal belief that a woman should find contentment in motherhood and domesticity. Two decades later, Betty Friedan, in her book *The Second Stage* says that humanity can survive only if women make certain compromises. She suggests that women should pursue some meaningful activity within marriage in order to find happiness and contentment in their lives.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande agrees with the views of Betty Friedan and Elain Showalter that a woman whether she be the career women, or housewife should not feel dissatisfied. She should happily and eloquently play her myriad roles in her family, and seek pleasure within her household.

Notes and References

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