

"WOMEN CHARACTERS SEEKING LIBERATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA DESAI AND SHASHI DESHPANDE"

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The condition of women has gradually changed globally and the meek female has yielded placeto the liberated woman. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changesover the past few centuries. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low pointsof the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of womenin India has been eventful. The image of women in fiction has also undergone a change duringthe last four decades. The second generation of Indian Women Novelists has moved away fromtraditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characterssearching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status.K.V. Surendran writes, "There has been a very slow evolution in women's writing to come to itsown. This may be owing to several reasons like lack of education, their social and familialobligations, tradition of child-marriage, child bearing and child rearing etc. History has ignoredand submerged their contributions; the critics have dismissed their works and its aesthetics on theground that they were concerned with a limited world of experience because they were moreconfined to their domestic duties and liabilities" (Surendran 74). Novelists like Anita Desai,Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee have reacted to the changed psychological andemotional realities of Indian life. Being enlightened and exposed to the nuances of life in East and West, they are able to deal with the situation efficiently. Thus feminism, free sex, self-assertion, quest for identity are some of the major thematic concerns of these novelists.

[11/07, 6:57 pm] My Kids: Anita Desai probes into the inner consciousness of her women protagonists and explores therealities of their lives. Owing to their indomitable spirit and compromising attitude, they emergeas winners after undergoing considerable hardships. Maya

in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), fails to tread the path or play the societal roles traditionally assigned to an Indian woman. Maya is a hyper-sensitive, young girl who undergoes great mental trauma born of her marriage to a much older, business-like, matter-of-fact Gautama. He is insensitive towards her physical and emotional needs and thus there is considerable discrepancy in their attitudes. Gautama's indifferent attitude towards the astrologer's prophecy along with his extreme involvement in his professional life intensifies Maya's neurosis. Gautama expects his wife to adhere to the traditional customs of Indian society and be traditional, submissive, tolerant and compromising. In the initial years, Maya tries to fulfill his desires by being a duty-conscious Indian wife but when she finds that he is insensitive towards her emotions and feelings, she becomes silent and passive. To Gautama, "lives are trivial and expendable" and a kind of understanding and companionship is impossible between the two (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* 20). To get rid of such a relation, Maya kills Gautama by pushing him off the terrace. She does so in a detached mood since his death would not matter her much for he had "never lived and never would" (Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*, Monisha's marriage is doomed right from the very beginning. She is married into a family unlike hers. She is unhappy in Jiban's house and remains confined in it, segregated from the city of Calcutta. She hopes for freer life in Kalimpong and Darjeeling. She says, "They have indoor mind, starless and dark. Mine is all dark now" (Desai, *Voices in the City* 137). Ultimately, all her efforts to compromise with life fail. Life becomes so stifled and meaningless that she sets herself ablaze.

[11/07, 6:58 pm] My Kids: Shashi Deshpande is an award winning Indian Novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer shriranga. She was born in 1938 Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. She published her first collection, of short stories in 1978, and her first novel. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in 1980. She is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, for the novel 'That Long Silence' Her works also includes children's books. Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of many complex relationships. In her novels many men and women living together, journeying across life in their difference age groups, classes and gendered roles. The old tradition bound world consists with the modern, creating unforeseen gaps and disruptions within the family fold. Women's understanding becomes questionable as the old patterns of behavior no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become in tense of quests for self-definition, because it would not be possible to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by clarity about one's own image and role. Shashi Deshpande an eminent novelist has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focussing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. Shashi Deshpande uses this point of view of present social reality as it is experienced by women. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives is also to present indirectly the fathers, sons and husbands the relation between men and women, and between women themselves. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. The words which we always associate with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. As in the 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', the life of Sarita who is always neglected

and ignored. 'Roots and Shadows' explores the inner self of Indu, Mini, and Akka and Shashi Deshpande Shows the 'That Long Silence', Jaya is not a silent and make sufferer. In 'The Binding Vine' Mira has hated the way her mother has been surrendering herself to her husband and ever she has not herself identity. In the 'A Matter of Time' is an exploration of Kalyani, Sumi and her daughters Aru. Shashi Deshpande's fiction is an example of the ways in which a girl child's particular position, social reality and identity and psychological growth determine her personality. Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. Basically she writes about the situation of women and their failures in the fast changing socio-economic milieu of India. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in middle class society Starting a Shashi Deshpande novel is like sitting in a railway compartment and resigning oneself to an endless journey into the night of middle-class India. The very proximity of the stranger sitting opposite is disturbing. On top of this, he, or most likely she, is the kind who will stake her territory with carefully rolled bedding, one who would bring out a stainless steel tiffin carrier and insist that you partake of a meal with her. At the same time Deshpande's skill is such that by the end of the journey you are completely enwrapped in the lives of the people that she forces you to contemplate. The very blandness of her characters, the ordinariness with which she anoints them at the outset gradually works in their favor.

[11/07, 6:58 pm] My Kids: Another strong voice of female identity and assertion in Indian writings in English is ShashiDeshpande. Her own experiences and thinking helped her devise her own idea of fiction. Deshpande has revolted against the patriarchal attitudes, "However, I found out, very early in my writing career, that women's experiences are believed to be of interest only to women, that women's problems, ideas and lives are specifically and narrowly considered women's problems and not human ones. It is male problems, male ideas and male experiences which are human" (Jain 33). Deshpande's protagonists refuse to sacrifice their individuality for the sake of upholding the traditional roles models laid down by society for women. But they attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), Sarita returns to her paternal home to escape from her husband Manohar's sadism. The withdrawal helps her view her situation objectively. Besides being merely a daughter, sister, wife and mother, she evolves into an individual with her own legitimate expectations of life. In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Indu too has a rebellious spirit like Sarita. At Akka's bidding, she frees herself of the constricting traditional role of a wife and mother, and destroys the mantle of the family matriarch. Though she has married Jayant against the wishes of her family she soon gets disillusioned. She fails to get excessive happiness as she begins to lose her own identity. Her husband's extreme dominance suffocates her and she feels trapped in marriage. She says, "When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant, When I dress I think of Jayant.... Always what he wants, what he would like, what would please him.. Have I become so fluid, with no shape, no form of my own" (Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows* 34). She realizes that her husband need not determine the role she should play in her own and other people's lives. She gradually transforms into an individual with her own identity and begins living life on her own terms and conditions.

[11/07, 6:58 pm] My Kids: Shashi Deshpande's women characters keeping in mind the various types and phases of the women characters expressed in her six novels are studied here and it tries to link these novels with the various phases of feminism.

Feminism is, indeed, a serious attempt to analyze, comprehend and clarify how and why feminity is or the feminine sensibility is different from masculinity or the masculine experience. Feminism brings into perspective the points of difference that characterize the 'feminine identity' or 'feminine psyche' or 'feminity' of woman.

It can be studied by taking into account the psychosomatic, social and cultural construction of feminity vis-a-vis masculinity.' The male writers have mostly seen women as inferior and weak. Gendering and some sort of misogyny are evident in the texts written by men. They see men as 'superior sex' or the 'stronger sex' while women are seen as are the 'inferior sex' or the 'weaker sex'. Men are considered as logical, rational and objective, and, women are perceived as emotional, inconsistent, intuitive, subjective and lacking self-confidence.

But the modern woman has raised her voice against the atrocity and injustice done to her by the system. And it is their pronouncement in an overt tone that has created the difference also in textuality. It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the contemporary feminist ideology evolved and the female voice was heard with special concern.

Shashi Deshpande, the daughter of an eminent Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar Sriranga, is a widely acclaimed novelist who has ten novels and five volumes of short stories to her credit. Her father is called "the Bernard Shaw of the Kannada Theatre." Like her father, she has also won various awards such as "Thirumathi Rangammal Prize" and prestigious "Sahitya Akademi Award" (National Academy of Letters) in 1990 for her novels. She also won the "Padma Shri" award in 2009 for her valuable contribution as a writer. She also wrote the screenplay for the Hindi film "Drishti." She is a postgraduate in English from Mysore University. After her marriage in 1962, she went to England with her husband. After her return, she started writing short stories which have records of her personal life. Earlier her short stories were published in bestselling Indian Magazines such as "Femina," "Eve's Weekly," "The Illustrated Weekly of India," "Deccan Herald" and "J.S. Mirror." Later on, after getting popularity her short stories were collected in five volumes. These are: "The Legacy and Other Stories" (1978), "It Was Dark and Other Stories" (1986), "It Was the Nightingale and Other Stories" (1986), "The Miracle and Other Stories" (1986) and "The Intrusion and Other Stories" (1993). Shashi admits that three things were responsible for her development as an English writer. She says: "There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female" (Of Concerns 107). This statement clearly echoes the voice of a feminist soul in her. However, unlike the early feminist authors who chose to portray the subjugation of women in ordinary life, Shashi Deshpande moved a step further and made educated women as the subject of her writing and voiced the agony of such women who have to depend on their male counterparts for the choices and decisions of their life. In the words of Y.S. Sunita Reddy, "She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present

day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism” (Reddy 146). Neither her male characters are culprits nor do her female character sufferers. Infact, the female characters in her novels know their rights and they raise their voice against the male domination and women oppression. Through her novels she raises various issues related to women and her position in human society.