

Gender and Identity in English Literature

Dr. Padmavathi Goriparthi

Assoc. Professor of English, Chalapathi Institute of Engineering & Technology, Chalapathi Nagar,
Lam, Guntur, A.P, India

Authors: Shashi Deshpande, an Indian women novelist, has projected a realistic picture of the educated middle-class women who struggle to find their place in the patriarchal set up. Her protagonists are bold heroines who raise their voice against the patriarchal culture. At the same time, she depicts women who are slum dwellers, less educated, subservient to men and are forced to lead a wretched life. Shashi Deshpande seems to be engaged in a constructive process of consciousness rising. Her object is to enable the more affluent women to share awareness of sexist's experiences that create co-operation and pave the way for uniting people to find themselves with a strong cord of sisterhood.

The scope of this paper discusses; a relationship implies first some sort of intermittent interaction between two people involving interchanges over an extended period. The interchanges have some degree of mutuality, in the sense that the behaviour of each takes some account of the behaviour of the other. However, this mutuality does not necessarily imply "Co-operation" in its everyday sense; relationship exists between enemies as well as between friends, between those who are forced into each other's company as well as between those who seek it.

Key words: Intermittent, Mutuality, Successive, Affected.

As with A.K. Narayan so with Shashi Deshpande, the middle-class milieu finds a voice which brings to life the average, common insignificant happenings in the life of ordinary men and women. Their protagonists are humble and modest, un-self-confident but sensitive members of the middle-class who are conscious of their own limitations and of their environment of rigid traditional norms and conventional inherited habits of thought.

In addition, 'relationship' in everyday language carries the further implication that there is some degree of continuity between the successive interactions. Each interaction is affected by the interactions in the past and may affect the interactions in the future. "Each individual has relationships with many others and each relationship he has will be affected by the other relationship that he has and the other relationship that his several partners have".¹

Shashi Deshpande presents the middle-class educated woman, may be because she herself hails from a middle-class family, or because middle women constitute a large segment of contemporary Indian society. Besides, they are a fit subject to show the class between tradition and modernity, idealism and pragmatism.

Deshpande's novels usually begin with an unconventional marriage leading to the problems of alienation, accommodation and adjustment. The conflict in her protagonists is resolved through their desperate unconscious submission to traditional roles. Woman's primary social role is to be a wife and mother. Man's primary social role is to be the family bread-winner. This is the defining edge of all female experience, that the young woman will grow up; that she will meet a man who will be her partner in life; that he will, until very recently at least, look after her economically; that she in turn will bear children and make a home for them and for the man. She has to develop her sexuality along particular lines; she has to create an image of herself

which a man will find pleasing. This is a complex social matter, not at all a straight-forward “natural” process.

Mother and daughter share a gender identity, a social role and social expectations. In mothering a baby girl, a woman is bringing her daughter to be like her, to be a girl and then a woman. Because of the social consequence of gender, the mother inevitably relates differently to their sons and daughters. The Deshpande heroine is anti-matriarchal. She hates the parental home. “Well, educated, hard-working people in secure jobs cushioned by the insurance and provident fund, with two healthy, well-fed children going to good schools²—that’s the setting of Deshpande’s novels:

The Dark Holds No Terrors tells the harrowing tale of Sarita deprived of parental care and affection; she lives a pale, loveless life. Her mother loves her brother but hates her. And when he is drowned, she blames her for no fault of her own. “You killed him. Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive, when he is dead?”³ This gender difference in her mother’s treatment of her son and daughter enrages Saru. She rebels against her: If you are a woman, I don’t want to be one.”⁴ It is this that makes Sarita resent the role of a daughter. She works forward to the role of a wife with the hope that it will give her relief from the oppression of the mother, that it will give her freedom.

“I had come away from my parents in a fever of excitement after the last battle. The die was cast, the decision taken, my boats burnt.”⁵ But this decision proves to be an anti-climax. Her second home becomes the very prison she had escaped from. She is soon disappointed with her husband. Her husband is a sadist who bullies her. While she provides bread and butter to the family, he feeds on her earnings and tortures her both physically and sexually. Her husband Manohar cannot bear people greeting her and ignoring him. She begins to loathe the man-woman relationship which has no love in it. “Love...how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman.”⁶ Manu’s male ego is hurt by her superiority complex. His masculinity asserts itself through nocturnal sexual assaults upon Sarita. Thus, the benevolent, cheerful husband by day turns a lecherous, libidinous rapist at night.

In Roots and Shadows, Shashi Deshpande’s first novel. Akka is the head of the family and unquestioned ruler of the roost. Akka is the traditional mother-figure, toeing the line set by old customs, rituals and traditions. Herself a childless widow, she came back to her parental home ages ago to be the “ruthless, dominating bigot and inconsiderate Akka.” She could reduce the elders like Kaka, Atya and others to “red-faced, stuttering ‘children’ by her venomous tongue.” But not Indu, however. She questions Akka, rebels and marries Jayant much against Akka’s command. Indu leaves home full of hatred for the family, for Akka specially. Indu fears that she is turning into an ‘ideal’ Indian wife, only obeying her husband’s wishes and fancies.

That Long Silence though mainly concerned with Mohan, Jaya and the impending disaster, affords glimpses of a mother and grandmothers. Jaya dislikes her mother and has “contempt” for her “slapdash” ways. She blames her squarely for not preparing her for “the duties of a woman’s life.” She expresses her anger in no uncertain terms. “She behaves as if she owns me.”⁷ Jaya’s memories of her two grandmothers, the Ajji and the other-Ajji, are not complimentary either. In this, Jaya analyzes the illusory nature of Love. “Love is a myth, without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unendurable.”⁸ “Love” in Deshpande is not a “Metaphysical concept” or a “canonization of emotion” as in Raja Rao; it is only a substitute for sex”.

Deshpande's protagonists often end up discovering good traits in people whom they had earlier dismissed as selfish or cruel. Similarly, they also discover the seamy side of those whom they had all along taken as angels of love or fair play. Deshpande does not believe in portraying her characters in black and white. Her characters may be guilty of dividing human beings into the categories of good and bad.

In the struggle of these women to give shape and content to their individual existence in a sexist society the realization comes in the end that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it That alone can bring harmony in life.

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