

Shashi Deshpande's Major Novels : A Study in Humanism

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Abstract. The present article is intended to explore and explain Shashi Deshpande's broader vision of the human world in which woman stands as an integral constituent of all that is known as human. What is human, if not, a combination of both man and woman? Human world stands incomplete in the absence of the either. Shashi Deshpande has made an artistic attempt through her literary works to fill up the 'Big Black Hole' or vacuum in our understanding of the human world. She has widened our mental horizon to behold the whole truth about the human world. Also, the paper disproves the stand taken by other critics who have betrayed more their bias against woman than revealed their understanding of Shashi Deshpande's creative works in particular and the human world in general. None of the critics have ever cared to decipher what Shashi Deshpande really intends to do through her creative works. She is a humanist and not a feminist as she has been presented by critics.

Keywords: Humanism; social-engineering; feminism; woman's recognition; woman's identity; gender justice; gender integrity; happy-home; human happiness.

Despite Shashi Deshpande's repeated denial of herself being considered a feminist, critics all over the world have, on the thematic analysis of her creative works, declared that she is a feminist of the first order in Indian English literature. This has inspired me to re-examine her works in the light of her contention to clear off the mist of confusion about her creative works and her stand, knowing it fully well that literature, being a mysterious product of one's mind very often contradicts the stand, the author takes in his life.

One remarkable fact about her is that she has thoroughly been disgusted with the increasing number of divides between two authors and labels attached to the authors by the critics, such as colonial writing, post-colonial writing, diasporic writing, feminist writing etc. She views such divisions and labels with suspicion because these have mostly been intended to narrow the range and blight the image of authors, so that they not be able to stand at par with the writers of the mainstream of English literature. Let us see what she has herself to say about it :

Through the years I have rejected all the labels that are attached to me – and I call myself just novelist and short-story writer. Truth is, I am a story-teller. I

am deeply interested in human beings, in the human condition. Through the stories I tell, I am probing into human condition. I am asking questions most of us ask of ourselves some time or the other – about life, about death, about our relationships with one another with society and our moral selves. My novels come out of these ideas and thoughts, out of people, and not out of me living in India or being Indian.

(Writing from the Margin 58)

Shashi Deshpande is a novelist, who happens to be living in India, the same way as Margaret Atwood happens to be living in Canada, or Margaret Drabble who happens to be living in Britain. Like all novelists she creates people in her novels and needs to give them a name, a local habitation to dwell in, a language to speak, and social and cultural background, so as to make them appear live and real. She does not want to go beyond the place she was born in, the place she lives in and the culture she is stepped in, only to enable her characters to exhale the air of authenticity. But these are physical facts and one need not get lost in them. One should look beyond the physical facts to the inner truth, the human reality involved therein. She says :

I am more involved with the internal landscape of human beings because the external details are not of paramount importance. (76)

The external details of their life are part of life, but they are certainly not the most important. One needs to explore the human element involved therein. Her vision as a novelist always centres on human life and existence, the problems that arise in course of living and the reaction that comes out of people involved therein.

All her novels portray the plight and problems, trial and tribulations of married women from their childhood to the old age in the Indian middle class family. So long as they are girls living with their parents before marriage, they feel themselves a burden on the family and pass through mental torture because of being discriminated against the male child. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly said :

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces the creature...which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 295)

With high hopes and great expectations, they enter the house of their husbands only to discover that they have passed from one cage to another, where there is nobody, not even their husbands to consider and appreciate their emotional

self. She finds herself alone even while living with her husband. The long awaited marriage turns out to be a mirage for them. Manju in *If I Die Today* says, "you start of expecting so many things. But bit by bit, like dead leaves, these expectations fall off."(24) Indu in *Roots and Shadows* says about marriage :

It is a trap...That's what marriage is...A trap? a cage? (58)

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror* feels like 'trapped animal' on bed at night. (47) Jaya says in *That Long Silence* about marriage :

A pair of bullocks yoked together...To go in different directions would be painful. (11)

Mira in *The Binding Vine* feels like being raped every night by her husband and imagines that even Lakshmi might have similar experience at night. Her diary says:

Did Lakshmi too, Twist brocade tassels round her fingers and tremble, fearing the coming of the dark-clouded, engulfing night? (86)

Sumi is deserted by her husband for no fault of her own in *A Matter of Time*. She is left alone to suffer with three young daughters in this wide world. Marriage has nothing but disillusionment in store for Indu, Saru, Jaya, Mira and Sumi the central characters in her novels. Her novels centre round the theme of miserable life of woman and her sad experience in the man's world.

Shashi Deshpande's novels contain so much that can be regarded as the staple material of feminist thought and it is perhaps because of these facts that she has been branded a feminist in Indian English literature. But this would be one-sided appraisal of her novels. Impartial reading of her novels and honest criticism reveals that she is a creative writer of high repute and knows the relative importance of committed writing and spontaneity in creation. She has clearly stated:

For God's sake, I am a novelist. I write novels, not feminist tracts. Read my novel as a novel, not as a piece of work that intends to propagate feminism.
(*Writing from the Margin* 159)

If she has intended to write about feminism and convey a message about it, she would not have written a novel or a short story. She would have written an article or an essay and she has often done it. In her interview to Ashvini Sarpeshkar Tandon, she declared:

I do not like to be branded this or that because life is more complex than that. My enduring concern is for human relationship. (Femina)

It is true that she, being a woman has sympathy for a woman and her sympathy is betrayed when she portrays the bruised heart of woman in the man's world. But she always restrains herself and highlights their weaknesses even while she appears to be writing in their favour. She told an interviewer :

If others see something feminist in my writings, I must say that it is not consciously done, it is because the world for woman is like that and I am mirroring the world. (*The Sunday Observer*)

Shashi Deshpande's repeated denial of herself being considered a feminist clearly indicates that she wants to distinguish herself from the Western feminists who have nothing but hatred for man. She shares some of the views of Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir but she is not one of them. The western feminists reject family and home, hate men and wage a war against them. They want woman to desert family and home and go out on the streets and shout slogans for woman's right to equality with man.

Unlike, the Western feminists, Shashi Deshpande is not opposed to the concept of home and family. She looks upon family as "a sheltering tree" for all those who have nobody in this wide world to call as their own. But at the same time she does not idealise the institution of family. She says :

The family is not a divine, sacred institution, but one created by humans for the benefit of all society, and therefore, it should be built, not on the sacrifice of some but on the co-operation and compromise of all its members. (*Writing from the Margin* 84)

Family is the sacred ground where the plants of all kinds of human relationships breed and thrive. Everybody has to live within relationships. Nobody can live in a vacuum. That is why, Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terror*) and Jaya (*That Long Silence*) despite leading the life of suffering and frustration in their husband's house, do not desert the family and walk out on their married life. They prefer to return back to the fold of family at the realization of truth of human life and existence in this world. In answer to a question asked by a reporter, what is it that inspires you, she says :

Human being, I find them. fascinating. Our endless variations, our essential sameness, own strength, our anguish as what life offers us. And above all our relationships with one another. (29)

She does not want woman to be a man or live like a man. Her emphasis is on the sameness of woman with man as a human being. Both man and woman share the common destiny of all living creatures of birth, growth, survival and death. They go through the same human destiny of pain and suffering of joy and hope. She says, "The factors which unite us are far more important than the gender differences." (144)

But out of ignorance or age-old bias we put emphasis on the differences which divide us and look upon women as inferior or subordinate human beings. The fact is, she says, both man and woman combine together to constitute what is called human. To imagine the one in the absence of the other is to betray one's ignorance than one's knowledge about the whole of what is known as human. To place one at the 'centre' and the other at the 'margin' is to betray the age-old bias, the society has against women. Man without woman and woman without man leave all that is known as 'human' incomplete. She believes that women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings, but one half of the human race. She says :

A world without frustrated, dependent, trapped, frustrated women is a better world for all of us to live in. After all, no man is an island. (85)

Women should accept their womanhood as a positive thing, and not as a lack. They should understand the truth that they are as much a part of the human world as man is. Shashi Deshpande says that motherhood is a bonus, an extra that women are privileged to have. It is because of having this understanding on the part of women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande that they do not lose their mental balance, despite leading the life of suffering and frustration, like those in the novels of Anita Desai. Nor do they walk out on married life like the Western feminists. They gather inner strength in the light of knowledge and understanding acquired from the study of scriptures and return back to the family fold to make a comfortable place in the seemingly hostile world of their husbands.

The novels of Shashi Deshpande centre round the theme of human beings and human relationships. Human relationship calls for its health and growth, mutual understanding, love and sympathy for each other. Mutual co-operation with understanding between husband and wife turns the place where family resides into a happy home which finally results in human happiness all over the world. G. B. Shaw has also said about happy marriage in *Candida* :

That's a foretaste of what will be best in the kingdom of heaven we are trying to establish on earth. (Shaw 9)

Any attempt to get happiness at the cost of another is to betray one's ignorance about human nature. Everything is interdependent in the human world. Old uncle in Roots and Shadows says, "The whole world is made of interdependent parts."(14)

Mutual understanding of the limitation of each other brings about harmony and peace in life. Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande emerge stronger after passing through great emotional turmoil with the understanding of inner truth of human life. Suman Bala has rightly said :

The ethos in her novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposing ideals and conflicting selves, which is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude.
(*Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* 12)

Shashi Deshpande has enriched Indian English novel with the fresh understanding of human relationship and human happiness. She does not write only about woman and her experience in life. She writes about both man and woman and says that they are the two wheels of chariot of life. Both husband and wife will have to understand the relative importance of each other for the smooth functioning of life. Life is not a matter of convenience. In most cases it proves to be a matter of compromise and adjustment. But too much of adjustment resulting in self-abnegation is not desirable. One must know when and where to stop.

Shashi Deshpande is the first woman novelist to have viewed woman as a human being. She says about herself, "I am a human being first and then a woman". That is why, like the Western feminists, she does not clamour for woman's right to equality with men in all the walks of life. All that she wants is woman's recognition as a human being. It would fill up the big 'black hole' in man's understanding of the human world. Ignorance is the root of all miseries in human life. It is the perception of truth which brings harmony, peace and happiness in human life. Swami Vivekananda has rightly said :

Real life of man consists of knowledge. Ignorance is death, knowledge is life. (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* 19)

Indeed, one can perceive for oneself truth about human life on the prism of family life depicted in her novels. But the family, woman's life and woman's experience are the outer facts of her novels. The scale need not be mistaken for all

that is weighed on it. Likewise the prism need not be mistaken for all that is reflected on it. Shashi Deshpande has rightly said to Vanamala Viswanatha, the interviewer :

I want to reach a stage where I can write about human being and not about woman in relation to man.
(Pathak 237)

By recognizing women as an integral component of the human worlds, she has not only widened the frontiers of the human world but also widened our understanding of all that is known as human. She is an explorer of truth about human being. She says :

The search for the truth of oneself is the most exciting adventure in life. My search has led me to the discovery that above all we are human, that what we share as human is far greater than what divides us as being men and women. The thought that I have the same potential as any other human being has been the most liberating discovery of my life.
(*Writing from the Margin* 100)

Moreover, her novels are artistic exposition of her vision of human life and happiness.

Keeping in view the facts discussed above, one may conclude that Shashi Deshpande is a great novelist because her prime concern has always been for human beings and their happiness. It would be an act of injustice on our part if we dismiss her writing as woman's writing or feminist writing. She deserves a place of honour beside Jane Austen, Emile Bronte and George Eliot, the great novelists of the mainstream of English literature.

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