

FEMINIST ANALYSIS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S FICTION: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande's novels have frequently been analyzed through the traditional feminist framework, an attempt sometimes contested by the writer, although she writes unambiguously from the female point of view. Man image, Woman Gaze analyses Deshpande's apparently dichotomous stance and elaborates on her departure from the limited scope of theoretical assumptions. It focuses on her understanding of contextual peculiarities and the need to affect sustainable shifts from within social and relational structures. The intricate working of the resistant male psyche is observed and tackled not from a belligerent but an analytical point of view. Deshpande's purpose is to locate constraints on masculine identity which hamper the reshaping of the gender paradigm and to consider factors which could impel men to move out of them.

This paper discusses the Deshpande's portrayal of husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers to throw light on the slow pace of social change, as it works its way through underlying psychological conflicts and crises of identities. It also brings to focus, her assessment of the inbuilt flexibility of human nature, which eventually adapts to changing situations, creating openings where none existed.

Keywords: feminist, antagonist, emotions, male psyche

A Willingness to understand the attitude of those whom radical feminist studies have situated in the other camp requires a deliberate shift in perspective. One could begin by substituting antagonism with objectivity, in trying to understand the processes which have gone into formulating traditional notions of masculinity. This would provide an insight into the creation of an image, which over time has been naturalized through social consent. The dichotomy between the person and the image makes the male experience a difficult traversing ground between the complexity of emotions and the unrelenting demands of personas and social patterns. The hardened male identity which resists change, on closer analysis might reveal a fear, not just of privilege but also of the only available notion of the self. The inflexibility of male attitude could, therefore, be rooted in reasons other than hostility against female self-hood alone. Deshpande explores all this to analyze the multi-dimensional facets of the issue which one tends to see from a simplistic one-way stand. In the process, she also suggests the possibilities inherent in approaching the more realistically, so that the shift in gender roles is a mutually acceptable and comprehensive one.

How men respond to these constantly changing relational dynamics and their own precariously poised identities, is discussed in this paper. The response analyzed are neither simple nor static. The plethora of influence which works upon the misplaced notion of the self results in behavioral shifts which cannot be categorized in simplistic terms. Therefore the particular perspective from which the role of the husband, the son and the father have been analyzed, do not constitute mutually exclusive categories. Each of these portrayals is composed of overlapping strains. The attitudinal inertia, the willingness to share privilege and liability, the supportive stance are possibilities inherent in every male role. They form different stages in the continuum which marks the shift in the very conception of masculine identity.

This Paper proposes to examine the change is resisted by the entrenched male-oriented system because apart from threatening the superior male status, it also threatens the very constituents of the identity by which men define themselves. There is a socially constructed image which defines masculinity. This patriarchal system which emphasizes that men should control resources as well as decision-making also dictates the attitudes and qualities which men must have, for perpetuating this system. As a control tactic, the system associates a male sense of self with his ability to live up to these requirements. The undercurrent of ridicule directed at any diversion from the prescribed persona elicits derision, at what is condescendingly described as effeminacy. This ensures that men have no option if they want to survive in the gendered male community. If we look at the equivalents of 'masculine' in Thesaurus, we find an almost unreal set of attributes including virile, macho, muscular, resolute, strapping, vigorous, etc. The problem with this attributive process is that "... it naturalizes masculinity, thus making it inevitable and non-negotiable." This kind of non-

negotiable participation in a hegemonic gender stereotyping makes men its prisoners because the system hinges their sense of worth to it.

Significantly, in Deshpande's portrayal of male response, men are the objects and not the subjects of study. It is amply clear, that it is her women who will determine the change and the redefinition. It is their lived experience which will form the material, the energy for action and for change. It will deal with the contradictions they discover between their defined roles and the perspective which feminism gives to them, on those roles. Men form part of the analysis, the agents of the structures to be transformed. She makes sure, that attempts to involve them in the change and appropriation which need to be changed. That is why, in the vast time span covered in most of Deshpande's works, till the women are unsure and apprehensive of their own contradictory responses, they can at best elicit hospitality to their confused overtures at selfhood. It is only when they become sure of what they want, that men too are forced to look at the feasibility of the new equations. In other words, it is the controlled reaction of feminism, to what is obviously a complex psychological issue, which according to her can lead to a change in perspective among men. It is from a point of self-assured understanding of the roles they wish to assume, that women can initiate the shift from hostile antagonism, towards willing participation. With a surety that arises out of belief in one's correctness, and the acquisition of competencies which equip one for independence, Deshpande's women use their perceptions to make inroads into male hostility. Implicit in the process, is the stress on the benefits that would accrue to men as well, if they work in tandem with women for implementing the process of change.

It is interesting to note that even when Deshpande portrays hostility among men as they try to safeguard their privileged domain, she does so with the skill and insight of a psychologist. Underlying it is her opinion, "... what is he, but a victim of his own idea of himself?" What comes across is not just the plight of the female trying to stand up to the privileged sex, but also the insecurities of the privileged male. Deshpande understands, that for men, masculinity is the core around which their personality takes shape and that in compromising with it, they would be playing with their self-esteem. Her approach and understanding are close to the precepts evolving through contemporary gender studies, which explicate that "the gender schema becomes a prescriptive standard or guide and self-esteem becomes its hostage." Therefore, there exists among men, "an honest sense of the wish to save at whatever cost, a sexual polarity, a vital tension, and an essential difference, which they fear might get lost, in too much sameness, equality, and equivalence." Feminism threatens not just this polarity, but also the privileged status which it entails. The psychological dislocation it involves, gives rise to knee jerk responses, some of which display the desperation of a person driven to the wall. Among these is the "classification of the disruptive and disturbing information as non-data." Men respond suspiciously to alteration in status arrangements. Deshpande's men to respond with anxiety, resistance, and a loss of a sense of order when they find themselves face-to-face

with the inexorable change in gender equations. Mohan in *That Long Silence* and Som in *Small Remedies* repeatedly attempt at establishing their own image as providers with simultaneous attempts at constructing their wives as homemakers, although in both the cases the women involved are intelligent individuals in need of recognition for their abilities. As they find their women attempting to set out of the phallogocentric structures, these men exercise designs of mastery, and try to coerce them back into predefined roles, which they insist are the only true imperative of their gender. While Mohan reacts strongly to Jaya's attempts at establishing herself as a writer, Som reduces Madhu's attempts at writing to nothing more than a hobby. In more aggravated forms; this culminates in patterns of domination which translate into cruelty. Manohar in the *Dark Holds No Terrors* turns to sexual cruelty, as Saru's professional success diminishes his status as the provider.

More interesting are Deshpande's insights, on what she feels could eventually compel men to tide over their egos, to acknowledge the inevitability of change. We find her male characters, returning to retrieve relationships from the brink because beneath the bravado of their initial hostility lies their need for those relationships. Here again, Deshpande's opinions are validated by studies on gender. Stephen Heath in his book *Male Feminism* (1987) clarifies that men have a socio-sexual stake in feminism." Despite their attempts to dismiss female discontent as non-data, relations cannot be magically free of the given terms of male-female positioning." The growing resentment and the desire for dignified options have made women averse to being used as "a looking glass possessing the magical ... power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size." This, in turn, has dislocated the falsely magnified identity by which men have existed all these centuries. It would give them an opportunity to renegotiate their identity against the crumbling structures of patriarchy. Deshpande's men to seem to be inching closer to this renegotiation. Mohan deserts Jaya when she asserts herself. Yet, he eventually returns to her in full awareness of the impossibility of retrieving the old equation in their relationship. Manohar follows Saru to her father's house faced with her resolute refusal to reply to his letters. Som asks Madhu to return to the relationship she has rejected for its inflexibility. Implicit in all these examples is man's attempt to regenerate a place for himself, once it is clear that the old paradigms have dislocated him from his former secure positioning. It becomes imperative for him as well, to participate in the formulation of new equations.

Looking beyond these surface implications, Deshpande also implies that as resistance loses its full throttled thrust, it might make way for a more integrated personal core for men too. In accepting new equations, they would also be availing the right to dispense away with the inflexible gender codes, which dwarf them in comparison to the image they need to live up to. This, in turn, would help them reconcile their attributive and optative identities. Male position as the provider might have arisen out of comparatively greater suitability to the demands of a particular time. However, the consequent economic and social edge it has given

to man has led to an insistence that those particular attributes are the sole constituents of his position of power, but in the process also diminishes the full range of his experience as a human being. He relegates to the background the individual differences, weaknesses and psychological peculiarities which formulate him as a person. This results in an awkward positioning in the prescribed grid, so that notions of masculinity interfere with realistic expectations from the self. For example, Gopal in *A Matter of Time* acknowledges that the responsibility of marriage is not for everyone. He, however, recognizes it too late, thus leaving his wife and three daughters in a lurch. Jaya's brother Ravi in *That Long Silence* does not have that element of responsibility, which is required for living up to the role of a husband and a son. Devious, manipulative behavior thus becomes his strategy to wriggle out of the expectations others have from him. The most touching portrayal that of Dhruva, Saru's little brother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* who are made a victim of these role formulations. His mother makes him sleep alone because he is a boy and must live up to his masculine role, notwithstanding the fact that he is morbidly scared of the dark.

Explicating upon the dichotomy which this induces, Patrick Lee says, "males are viewed as competitive, achieving, risk-taking, and invested with environmental mastery among other things. All one has to do is to look briefly at random samples ... real men who live too long for love and approval, counting their accomplishments on the fingers of their one hand, and hedging all risks with the preoccupation with security." This gap between the attributive and operative identities makes the male perpetually vulnerable. Deshpande implies that aligning themselves with the changing impulse would give men an opportunity to dispense away this stress. It would give men an opportunity to dispense away with this stress. It would aid in rectifying the larger than life image which they have constructed for themselves. It would also help them in coming to terms with their own limitations without suffering a loss of self-esteem.

In agreeing to participate in the new equations, men might also discover how their attributive identities have, in many social situations, been exploited and utilized by other power structures operating within society. The value judgments, exposing them to ridicule at the slightest deviation from their prescribed roles, might then emerge as part of the covert control tactics used by society in a shrouded reversal of roles, to sustain its own economic agendas. Deshpande portrays this through the unresolved undercurrents of resentment, especially in those male roles, where the surface privileges get translated into responsibilities, with no consideration for desires and aspirations which lie beyond those roles. Among these is Chandu Mama in *That Long Silence*, whose ambition to go abroad to study is thwarted by his mother, who refuses to risk her future security, thus reducing him to a small-time doctor, venting his frustration through petty affairs. Jaya's father's Gandhian aspirations are similarly trampled upon by his mother. Those who escape these social constraints to pursue their own aspirations are looked upon with disapproval. Jaya's uncle Makrand is never forgiven by his

mother for leaving home to become an actor. There is the underlying authorial sympathy in the portrayal of Dada, Jaya's elder brother, who forgoes his responsibilities as the eldest son, in order to pursue his own ambitions. Shripati in *Moving On* is also an example of a frustrated man whose professional and personal aspirations are sacrificed at the altar of responsibilities and obligations, inherent in the male role. Deshpande seems to be suggesting that the claustrophobia inherent in such situations could find a solution in alternatives, which regard gender as a fluid concept and believe in the possibility of redefining privileges and responsibilities, for both women and men.

Deshpande implies that participation in female empowerment might also reward men in of power equations. Time and again, she shows that the compulsion to maintain a subordinated posture to suit male requirements causes resentment among women. The disparity between their inner experiences and the lives they are forced to live corrodes into commitment. Deshpande's women find other avenues, intellectual and emotional, to cater to their true identities, while the men in their lives continue to revel in the false belief of their ability to control them. Indu's attraction to Naren in *Roots and Shadows*, Saru's bent towards Padma in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Jaya's leaning towards the Kama in *That Long Silence*, Urmi's attraction to Bhaskar in *The Binding Vine* are all examples of intelligent women veering towards relationships outside marriage, because they do not find recognition of their potential as thinking individuals within it. These are juxtaposed with relationships like those of Joe and Leela, Tony and Rekha, Hari and Lata in *Small Remedies*, where men recognize and respect the woman's individuality and in return get unalloyed loyalty and a love untarnished by secondary considerations. Deshpande thus advocates recognition of women's individuality, regard for their right to find satisfaction through what best suits their temperament, and an acknowledgment that they are more than the roles society has imposed upon them. In return, men might find themselves participating in relationships tempered with mutual regard, intellectual rapport and companionship, which do not flounder upon the volatile foundations of a power struggle. Once again the writer's views are in congruence with those emerging through gender studies, which draw conclusions based on empirical evidence.

If Deshpande portrays these benefits for the discerning male, she also depicts changing attitudes among men who see the rigidity of opinions negatively impacting those whom they care for. Her works also showcase a new set of opinions among the younger generation of men, to whom the new, more balanced equation comes quite naturally. Deshpande sees this as an obvious progression and implies that if help comes from quarters which have had the privilege of being in positions of power, it should be availed. In fact, in many places, there are sequences and situations in her novels where male contribution to female empowerment is welcomed and willingly accepted. It not only brings the power of social sanction to the aid of women's issues but also finally culminates into a joint effort, which works towards a more habitable world. We see this attitude portrayed among men of every generation. Saru's father

supports her decision to study medicine, Jaya's father trusts her literary abilities, Urmi's father recognizes her as more competent than her brother. Ever Shripati, the aloof patriarch advises Sumi to focus on her daughter's education rather than their marriage. We also have men like Amrut in *Binding Vine* who is clear about the equal status he wishes to share with his future wife. Raja in *Moving On* displays large-hearted flexibility in adapting to Jiji's clarity on what she wants.

In a world where boundaries limiting a woman's life to home are fast fading, how men in the outer world react to the female overture at selfhood becomes equally pertinent. Deshpande depicts these as mixed attitudes, undergoing the same slow change, as the familial ones. Indu's employer in *Roots and Shadows* represents the old attitude which expects a woman to toe the line. He takes it for granted that Indu would write what he wanted her to, irrespective of her own sense of right and wrong. The magazine editor in *That Long Silence* slots Jaya's woman-oriented work into peripheral literature, fit only for women's magazines. However, there are others who respond more positively and show a slow but certain change. In most cases, this change derives from recognition of a woman's right to decide for herself, and in deference to her persistence in doing so. Nagaraj, the property dealer in *A Matter of Time*, begins with disdain for Sumi's decision to look for a separate house. However, he eventually recognizes her resolve and decides to help her. The image of Nagaraj riding the scooter with Sumi on the rear seat becomes representative of male help coming from the most unlikely quarters. After Sumi's death, he comes to have one last look at her and goes back carrying with him the image of a woman, who brings to him an understanding of something beyond his own perceptions. There is also the striking image of the unknown boy who steps in to help when Aru finds herself literally and metaphorically lost after venting her anger against her father for having deserted the family.

Later when she thinks of the figure on the motorcycle riding ahead of her, heedless of the pouring rain, leading her out of confusing lanes, there is something in the image which reflects a new breed of men to whom the role of supporter comes naturally. The ones who continue to use their twisted gender orientations for exploitative ends abound even in the changing times. The property sharks who try to usurp Jiji's father's house in *Moving On* by threatening and playing upon her fears as a single woman, reflect that section of men. But along with them are men like Iqbal in *the Country of Deceit*, who recognizes Devyani's need to pick up the threads of her life after her break-up with Ashok, and invites her to join his law practice. He also ensures that she knows that he is making this offer in recognition of her potential and capability, not out of pity.

Here too Deshpande's views are ratified by sociological findings. Radhika Chopra, an Indian sociologist working on women's issues talks of this "... self- reflexive agency among ordinary men, a reflection that has emerged from engagements with gender." This according to her is different from the earlier men's reform movements, where women were merely objects in the

debates among men. The twentieth century sees a different sense of men understands gender relationships. Perhaps this results from the fact that their lives correspond to autonomous women's movements. Understanding these movements makes enlightened men realize the suffocation of normative strictures, particularly when they relate it to the effect they have upon women for whom they care. Just because certain trends have evolved out of a collective impulse, "... it does not imply that the individual is thoughtless, uncreative, and inflexible ... is blind to contradictions that may be inhering knowledge or acculturation."

Issues of personal experience persuade individual men to engage with issues concerning gender. This becomes the motivation for them to "take apart gender identities, which masquerade as cast-iron monolithic formulations." Stephen Heath, in his book *Male Feminism*, provides the missing dimension to the concept what it obviously concerns them; they have to learn to make it their affair." He further adds, "Feminism speaks to me, not primarily, not equally, but too. The definitions and images and stories and laws and institutions oppressive to women that it challenges, end, involves me, since not only will I find myself playing some part in their reproduction, but I too am caught up in them, given as a 'man' in their reflection, confined in that place which is represented as mine."

Deshpande's analysis of male response is thus underlined by a positive belief in its potential to respond. It demonstrates her faith in the reality of a more integrated future for a man-woman relationship. It is to this that one could attribute the pattern of growth in her works. Individual works trace how rigid responses become malleable and make way for better relational overtures in subsequent generations. The paper as a whole shows how the dominant theme of resistance of the earlier novels is replaced with a new, dynamic response of the later ones. The anger and insecurities inherent in unequal, claustrophobic relationships stand contrasted to the dignity and honesty generated by attitudes which respond to change.

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