

NEW WOMAN OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND MANJU KAPUR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract:

'New Woman' of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur is a specific breed of women in the novels of Indian writing in English; different from her western counterpart, she looks critically at the feminist ideology which she thinks is male-identified. This 'New Woman' differs from the 'New Woman' of Victorian society, in the sense, that she protests against society but not against marriage, she is against joint family but is in favor of nuclear family. She is economically independent, educated, socially emancipated, mentally strong, and paradoxical in conduct.

Keywords : *New Woman, breed, feminist, emancipation, paradoxical, nuclear.*

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Introduction

Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur are the shining stars in the galaxy of the Indian English women writers, their basic approach to women's lives is to liberate them from the hierarchical system of patriarchy, and for this, they have endeavored hard to create such female characters as befit the present scenario of Indian society in which role and space of women have innumerable been questioned. Indian English literature, generally, presents two types of roles played by women: conventional and unconventional. In both types of roles, women suffer. In conventional roles, women suffer due to their acceptance of patriarchal culture and socially-constructed ideology, while in unconventional roles they suffer because of rejecting the orthodox society and embracing the ideas of modernity influenced by western culture.

Exposition

In the first novel *'Roots and Shadows'*, Shashi Deshpande Portrays the confrontations of Indu with matriarchal system of Akka, who dominates the entire family and the moral values of Indian culture on the other hand Virmati, a protagonist of Manju Kapur in the novel *'Difficult Daughters'*, is difficult in the real sense as she is difficult to handle due to her free spirit and rejection of cultural values.

Since her childhood, Indu had to bear the injustice of orthodox society where men were given privilege and women had to play the role of submissive daughter, sister, wife, and mother even her chaperone Akka imposes her conventional thoughts on Indu. She stops her from making friends with boys. Not only Akka but also the other elderly women of the family compel her to remain within feminine limits. In the words of Indu, *"As a girl, they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive "Because, you are a female"* (R.S. 174). Indu despises such orthodox conception of Akka as she feels her mother's dominating nature as hurdle in her path of freedom.

Indu does not like anybody's interference in her life not even of Akka who had made Indu an heir of her property, so she decides to marry Jayant despite Akka's objections to it. She, however, soon realizes her blunder and tries to seek self-fulfillment in her life. In the same way, Virmati has also been victim of tradition-bound society. In her childhood being the eldest child of her family, Virmati had to take the responsibility of her siblings at the cost of her education. Like Indu, she also belongs to the second generation in which their elders suppress their feelings and desires and impose their own views on them. Kasturi, mother of Viramati, forces her to leave the dreams of higher education and get married. She rebukes Virmati in the following words, *"Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad-tempered*

with your family” (DD 21). Kasturi desires to nurture Virmati according to the ideas of Patriarchy where women are allowed to acquire elementary education only.

She comes from a good family where girls were taught housekeeping from the time they could walk. All of a sudden Kasturi felt grateful to her mother for those long hours she had spent in the kitchen, “*cutting, peeling, chopping slicing, pounding, wrapping, mixing, kneading, baking, roasting, stirring and frying. It paid to know these things*” (DD25).

Despite all these exhortations, Virmati pursues her higher education and marries, against the wills of her family, Harish who was already married and father of two children. There are similarities between the character of Indu and that of Virmani. Both are modern and educated women and have been victims of their families but they too differ in the sense that Indu was a conscious girl since her childhood and Virmani, a very meek and submissive initially but later on emerges as a ‘*New Woman*’. Shakuntala, the cousin of Virmati, emerges as a bold lady from the very beginning of the story. She never suppresses her feelings under the pressure of her family. She tells Virmati:

“How much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life in being independent? Here we are fighting for the freedom of nation, but women are still supposed to marry and nothing else” (DD 17).

Shakuntala leads her life according to her own will without being a puppet of the society. She advises Virmati not to be tradition-bound and to push her life against the society. It was Shakuntala who influenced and shaped the character of Virmati. Shakuntala’s visit to her cousin planted the seeds of Virmati’s aspiration. Virmati resents her mother’s pregnancies. She is fed up with this life which is oppressive for women and against the wishes of her parents, she goes to Lahore to fulfill her dreams.

Kasturi could not tolerate her daughter’s impudence and says, “*God has put you on earth to punish me*” and cries, “*Did I commit crime in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you*” (DD 59). Unacceptable blame and ignoring behavior of her mother make her rebel and thrust her into the arms of Harish, a married man. But she soon realizes her mistake because Harish is still in contact with her first wife. This makes Virmati mentally disturbed and she unsuccessfully tries to commit suicide. However, later on, her mind gets changed and she pursues her studies. In Lahore, Virmati comes in contact with Swarnlata, who also is a ‘*New Woman*’. She also defies her parents’ decision as she ‘*wanted to do something besides getting married*’ (DD 118). She has joined politics and remarks about marriage.

“Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war- the Satyagraha Movement- because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wakeup from your stale dream” (DD 15). Swarnlata, besides Virmati and Shakuntala, emerges as a ‘New Woman’, with her views, influenced by European Culture. It can be proved with what she says, “Most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty- or-sacred burden. We are lucky we are living in times when women can do something else. Even in Europe, women gain more respect during wartime” (DD 152). Swarnlata’s firm determination to serve her country also forces Virmati to be a part of the freedom movement. She consoles Virmati at a time, when Virmati was in separation from Harish. Virmati takes the strong decision of abortion on the advice of Swarnlata.

Thus, Swarna, Shakuntala, and Virmati prove themselves as ‘New Woman’. They do not accept old traditions and protest against them. They establish their own identity in a patriarchal world. Despite, being modern in outlook, the characters of Manju Kapur are traditional too. Virmati does not believe in live-in-relationship and completes rites and rituals of marriage with Harish, the professor.

The characters of Manju Kapur want to be more than just mother, wife, and daughter. Virmati’s daughter Ida belongs to the third generation. She had disastrous marriage as it is short-lived. Her search for self-identity begins when she finds herself in comparison with her mother. She endeavors to be a model daughter and under the pressure, she constantly looks for escape-routes and becomes revolutionary. Ida does not want to be like her mother, for she considers her the root cause of melancholy, depression, and despair in her life. Ida does not want to make a compromise in her life as her mother did.

Thus, the novel portrays the female characters of three generations. One generation comprises, Kasturi and others, the second Virmati Swarna and Shakuntala, and the third Ida. All these characters are *New Woman* in their approach and perspectives. ‘*A Married Woman*’ by Manju Kapur represents the suffocated psyche of Astha, the protagonist of the novel. She continues to grapple with the unfavorable patriarchal forces of society. Since her childhood, Astha is forced to abide by the norms and rules of the society.

For middle-class people, girls’ education and marriage are considered a sort of burden on their parents. Her mother often reminds her, “*When you are married, our responsibilities will be over*”. (AMW 01). Astha’s mother is superstitious and tradition-bound which she proves in these words, “*Do You know the Shashtra says if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?*” Astha feels suffocated in such a conservative family. She

refutes these words, “*I do not believe in all that stuff*”, said Astha and thought, as an educated person, “*Neither should you*” (AMW 1).

Astha, being an educated girl, could not bear the orthodox views of her family and society. Against all these, she falls in love with two young boys Bunty and Rohan. In our society; to get intimacy with boys before marriage, is considered a sin for a woman. Regarding this, so many bonds are set for women by the society and Astha successfully breaks these boundations to gratify her needs. She is physically and emotionally attached with two boys but their love does not reach the consummation, resulting in failure. This has a very adverse effect on the mental and physical health of the girl.

“Manju Kapur has successfully delineated conflict between traditional values and modernity through her characters. She, throughout life, undergoes many hopes and despairs, compliments and rejections and recognitions and frustrations” (Bhaskar 44-45).

Astha carries the burden of middle-class values for a long time but realizes that there is incompleteness in the life of a woman without marriage. As Simone De Beauvoir opines, “*The destiny that society traditionally offers a woman is marriage*” (Beauvoir 451).

Before marriage, Astha lives fictional life. She finds marriage, the best way to escape from the loneliness of her life and a medium to enter the joys of the world. The initial stage of Astha’s marriage was full of joys and happiness. “*Astha’s heart was as full of love as the lake was full of water*” (AMW 42). Her life seems satisfied in the arms of her husband. But soon the monotony starts in her life as the relation with her husband became sex-centered.

“A few months and dullness began to taint Astha’s new life. What was she to do while waiting for Hemant to come home?” (AMW 46).

Hemant starts ignoring her. He does not spend quality time with her. Hemant, even did not consult her in financial matters of the family. Hemant had relations with other women and he hid this fact from his wife. It was discovered when Astha found a condom from his suitcase. This infidelity creates a disturbance in their lives. Her married life begins to seem to her as a burden. In Goa, Astha wants to buy a silver box but her wish is rejected by her husband when he says, “*You earn! what you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday*” (AMW 165). Astha could not give vent to her feelings. She destroys her future in painting and writing because Hemant crushed her talent under his feet. “*Now she gets boredom in her married life, Woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodations*’ (Bhaskar, 42).

With the passage of time, Astha loses interest in love and marriage. She says, “*If a marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave*” (AMW 160). Hemant could not give Astha all those pleasures and satisfaction, which she gets in a theatre troupe of Aijaz. This happiness and satisfaction, however, could not last longer as Aijaz is killed in terrorist activities prevailing in the society. Once again Astha submerges in depressions. To convalesce from her depressive state, Astha moves to Rishikesh to meet Swamiji. There she finds mental peace as the words of Guruji soothe her mind “*Misery springs from desire, desire springs from attachment and that if she gave up all these things, she would be happy*” (AMW 96).

During a protest against Babri Masjid’s demolition, Astha comes in contact with Pipelika, Aijaz’s wife in Ayodhya. Astha and Pipelika develop a new kind of *homosexual* relationship as both of them are in the same condition.

This is the new trait of the female protagonist of Manju Kapur.

Such type of lesbianism is not seen in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Lesbianism is now a trait of ‘*New Woman*’.

Both were not sexually satisfied in their lives and so felt the pleasure of strange love:

“They were standing, slowly Pipee puts her arms around her. She could feel her hands on the narrowness of her back, on the beginning spread of her hips. Gently she undid her blouse hooks and her bra looking at her face as she did so and slowly she continued, feeling her back with her palm, coming round-up towards her breasts, feeling their softness, especially where the nipples were, feeling them again and again, in no hurry to reach any conclusion. They were enclosed in a circle of silence, the only sound, the sound of their breath, close together and mingled” (AMW 230).

Astha and Pipee needed each other because of the void in their lives. Pipee provokes Astha to be bold and Astha utters to her husband:

“*Please Hemant, I am thirty-six, I need to be independent*” (AMW 227).

Thus, Astha stands up firmly against the oppressive system of society and the indifference of her husband towards her.

The novelists delineate the plight of women who belong to almost the same class. Both the novelists deal with the defenselessness of women, the craftiness of women, impertinence and impudence of women, and obstinacy of women. The female protagonists of both the novelists suffer from male hegemony. There may be differences of intensity but not of the type of nature. They all are puppets in the hands of culturally-constructed male dominance. The female characters of both the novelists have emerged as ‘*New Woman*’.

The 'New Woman' of Shashi Deshpande, throughout their lives, consider that without a husband their existence has no meaning. On the contrary, the New Woman of Manju Kapur revolt against their husbands and are not satisfied with them because of their indifference towards them. Virmati and Astha are victims of the ignorance of their husbands towards them. Virmati was brought up in a large family where education and modernity are considered as a sin.

The women protagonists of Shashi are 'New Woman' of the split psyche. There is conflict in their minds. Sometimes, they appear goddesses with their high morals and virtues to become ideal wives and caring mothers and at other times, they degrade themselves lower than common ordinary women. In the words of Jaya:

"That I had often found family life unendurable, worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging patterns" (LS 04). Jaya, after the involvement of her husband in the fraud of his office, introspects her past life and has a feeling of liberty at this time. There is no cleaning, arranging work to be done. Housekeeping was to be her monotonous duty. She says: *"I was free, after years, of all those monsters that had ruled my life"* (LS 25).

Contrary to this, when Jaya thinks over her past life of wants and desires, her hankering after luxuries and material world, she is confused and asks herself who that was who was responsible for this situation in their lives, whether it was her husband who was greedy of money or she herself that wanted to have glamour in life. She seems to blame her husband in the following lines in which she refers to a woman philosopher of Vedic age:

"Maitreyee comes to my mind now, Maitreyee who so definitely rejected her philosopher husband Yajnavalkya's offer of half his property 'will this property give me immortality?'" She asked him (LS 25). From the above findings, it is clear that women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are more sophisticated, introspective, and glorious than those of Manju Kapur. Deshpande explores the construction of womanhood especially, in the social and cultural predicaments that exist in India. Her female protagonists are gifted with rare intellect of crossing the boundaries of patriarchal practices. Her novels are pervaded with the references to myths. Her female characters are deeply rooted in the mythology and philosophy of India. They, however, try to shape their own characters in a modern outlook. Deshpande seems to reject the age-old notion that what women should be and propagates what they are. What the women of Deshpande did is not rejection of myths but a meaningful and creative interpretations of them. Her protagonists are middle-class professional

urban women walking the tightrope of tradition and modernity, negotiating the balance between the spaces within and outside the threshold.

The female characters of Shashi Deshpande are freedom-loving. They like loneliness and not silence in their lives. Silence terrifies them whereas loneliness brings pleasure and happiness in their monotonous lives. Jaya, while in Dadar flat, was alone as her husband Mohan and her children were not there:

“It was a relief to be alone, I’d always treasured my hours of solitude without Mohan and the children. Mohan’s constant presence, since we came here, had become a burden to me” (LS 68).

Shashi Deshpande presented her female characters so lively that the readers can relate themselves with the fictional characters and their problems. Their day-to-day lives are as ordinary as of any woman in the real world.

Shashi Deshpande carved her own place in the literary world. Her fiction gives the reader a deep insight into the psyche of women protagonists. Her female characters are an image of her own personality. They are as sophisticated as the writer herself. ‘That Long Silence’ is the most autobiographical work of Deshpande not in the personal details but in the thinking and ideas.

Shashi Deshpande focuses on the reality and truth of the lives of Indian women. She expresses her views in an interview that her literary style is one that is very simple and plain and believes that men and women have different notions and ideas while writing. They write differently and on divergent matters. Deshpande herself writes in English and her books have been translated into many different languages. Deshpande is that confident voice, which explores the individual and universal female psyche and she has got reputation as a novelist of first water with seriously incredible potentials. Deshpande’s simple, realistic and transparent writing style suits her ‘*New Woman*’ as a middle-class citizen of India in their day-to-day conversation. This middle-class English is a unique quality of Shashi Deshpande’s work, Deshpande’s characters are not of high status. They are not queens, heroines, and goddesses but the women who are found almost in every family of India. They have no adventures. They express their anger in simple and day-to-day colloquial languages. When Ai molests Jaya, Jaya speaks :

“She cannot dictate to me! I will do just what I want! I had declared with bravado. But unreasonable demands always establish their own claims, so that I always had to struggle against a sense of wrongdoing, against an urge to justify, explain myself” (LS 95).

Both the novelists are similar on the issues of marriage, family life, freedom,

and individual identity and differ on reaction, revolt, and psychology. Deshpande's women characters are meek and submissive at the end of the novel, while Kapur's protagonists revolt and protest till the end of the story. Kapur's women are new and modern in their perspectives, whereas those of Shashi Deshpande belong to the orthodox and conservative type in their basic approach. They subdue themselves to the family bond. The tone of Shashi Deshpande's 'New Woman' is docile but the 'New Woman' of Manju Kapur is authoritative and fastidious. Extramarital affairs prevail in the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur. Manju Kapur's 'New Woman' goes one step ahead and indulges in lesbianism. However, they depict that lesbianism is not a solution to the problems of sexual dissatisfaction and relinquish it at the end of the story.

A vast change has taken place in the style of the portrayal of a woman in Indian English fiction as silent bearer of the tyrannies of society and supporter of rich Indian custom and traditional values of the Indian family. This work has been done successfully by a plethora of Indian women writers incorporating Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur who have described the woman as an individual revolting against the traditional role, breaking the vacuum of suffering, trying to drag out herself from the four impregnable walls of patriarchy and assert her individual self.

Deshpande highlights the situation of women and their dilemma in the fast-changing socio-economic milieu of India. Deshpande's forte lies in exploring the psyche of women. There are several factors that make Deshpande different from other contemporary women writers. These are: She is the daughter of a famous Kannada dramatist and her education of English medium which exposed her to the feminist writers like Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, the Bronte Sisters, Virginia Woolf, etc, Deshpande's extensive reading of the great books from her father's library and intimacy with several eminent personalities who visited her father through meetings, discussions, and interviews. Deshpande infuses into her women protagonists all those qualities which make them adapt to the present social scenario. The *New Woman* of Shashi Deshpande is paradoxical in herself. Indu, in the novel, '*Roots and Shadows*', loves her husband, yet she feels that in loving and marrying him she has lost a part of her real self. Her married life seems a failure as she does not unravel her real feelings before her husband, Jayant. She is afraid that this act may disappoint him as Indu wants to be a writer. On one hand, through her writings, Indu seeks to expose herself to the world; and on the other, she yields to the wishes of her editor suppressing her conscience. It is Naren to whom she pours her heart. While indulging in sexual intercourse, she does not feel guilty of adulteration and immorality and remarks:

Wronging Jayant? But had I not wronged Jayant even before this. By Pretending, by giving him a spurious coin instead of the genuine kind. I had created him of my true self. That I throughout dishonorable, dishonest much more than this, what I have done with Naren. (Rs. 188)

Conclusion

In the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur, The writers try to probe the emotional backgrounds of their female protagonists. The female protagonists of both the writers share some common traits. They have the capability to analyze their own role in their oppression, rebelliousness, and the quest for an identity. Both the novelists probe the complexities of the man-woman relationship and the change they undergo. However, the perspectives of the two novelists differ, for Deshpande rises above feminist concerns to tackle the existential question itself. Indu and Jaya undergo a process of introspection and self-analysis to acknowledge their role and place in the family. As Shibani Banerjee opines:

Deshpande's women wish to be the architect of their own fate. She has focused on middle-class educated women and has depicted vividly, a disturbed, yet a brave feminine psyche in the new ethos. What is heartening is the fact that her protagonists are determined to face the world. Similarly, in the novels of Manju Kapur, one finds the women characters getting across the odds, struggling, compromising, and defying the laws in order to prove their worth (Banerjee 61).

Manju Kapur's female protagonists are more modern in their approach and perspectives than those of Shashi Deshpande. They can go too far for fulfilling their desires. They engage in lesbianism, unlike the characters of Shashi Deshpande.

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