

**CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN WRITING AND
GENDER STUDIES WITH REFERENCE TO SHASHI
DESHPANDE AND ANITA DESAI'S NOVELS**

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Chapter VI

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CONCLUSION

Does beauty pageantry a feminine statement where women feel victorious about their bodies or is it a ploy to make the female body an object of consumerism and desire? Feminism of late revolves around the two opposite view points. But binaries such as this will seldom lead to any meaningful debate as it only reinforces the stereotype and hence is dismissed by many feminists as less useful to stake claims for feminism. On the contrary, they draw attention to multiple locations from which the question of feminism needs to be addressed: class, caste/race, ethnicity and nationality. Feminism under postmodernism brought out the polyphonic nature of feminist thought. Though the influence of postmodernism as a system of academic approach has waned in academic circles, the questions it gave rise to have remained pertinent. Two streams of thought emerged from the postmodern feminist theories. One is related to the question of difference and identity formation. Another is about how the diversity within feminism is related to and informs the debate about social transformation.

The question of identity and its off shoot, identity politics, predominantly focuses on issues related to sexuality and the body. Taken to its extreme identity politics hinges on essentialism and fragmented nature of the self which feeds well in to a consumerist society. Nancy Fraser has tried to argue that constructing identity in terms of man-woman (or phallocentric and gynocentric) binaries will be

reductionist. Quoting Luce Irigaray, Nancy Fraser says that “the phallic conception of sexual difference is not an adequate basis for understanding femininity – nor, I would add, masculinity. Still less, then, is it able to shed light on other dimensions of social identities, including ethnic, color, and social class” (148).

The above statement marks the advent of third-wave feminism which called attention to a number of different reference points to understand and locate diversity. It has come a long way since the days of the first wave when equality was the main discourse. Demand for equal space (*a room for my own*) was the most important demand during this phase. Equality still constitutes a major demand and a concern, particularly in third-world societies where the socio-economic gap between genders is huge. Equality as an idea and a value is something that Indian feminists, in spite of their quarrels with Western Feminisms, found valid and relevant. In societies that were emerging afresh from anti-colonial struggles, equality was an important aspect of national identity.

Women argued for space within the new national space: in governance, bureaucracy, academy and other public institutions. Equality was the main tool with which women could stake their claims into public space. Above all, India had its own history of women struggle for equality. The Bhakti movement that spread across the subcontinent between twelfth and fourteenth centuries threw up women poets like Akka Mahadevi and Mira who declared their divine love as superior to

any physical relationship that mortal men could offer. Thus these women Bhakti poets indicate the opening of woman consciousness much before it was codified into a theory.

The set back to imperialism caused by the collapse of the ‘golden age of capitalism’ during the late sixties, the opposition of Vietnam War and the rise of civil rights movement shattered the strong hold of capitalist modernity. It also unleashed a big debate on the women rights as an independent category of struggle leading to opening up new debates on the questions of sexual repression, social control on women and sexual difference. This epoch making changes ushered in the second wave of feminism which realized that the question of equality is intricately but invariably related to the process of exclusion. It also questioned the male centred ideology that had sunk its deep roots into the State and market machineries. It was at this juncture that the notion of ‘labour’ was expanded to include domestic work, reproduction and sexuality. Theoretically speaking, the second wave feminism marked the beginning of problematizing categories that were normalized over a period of time. Hence, it can be described as an age of contestation. It is also the age which made feminists to question the nature of the state welfare and the complicity it had in perpetuating gender bias. This also saw the beginning of the third wave of feminism which made the issue of egalitarianism as its main focus. It called for recognition of gender difference as an important intervention in bringing welfare schemes to women. According to Nancy Fraser it is the project aimed at ‘recognizing

difference' that took the form of identity politics as the hallmark of third wave feminism. It prioritized culture over other 'material' aspects of existence.

Commenting on the rise of identity politics, she states that identity politics:

aimed more at valorizing cultural difference than at promoting economic equality. Whether the question was care, work, sexual violence, or gender disparities in political representation, feminists increasingly resorted to the grammar of recognition to press their claims. Unable to transform the deep gender structures of the capitalist economy, they preferred to target harms rooted in androcentric patterns of cultural value or status hierarchies. The result was a major shift in the feminist imaginary: whereas the previous generation had sought to remake political economy, this one focused more on transforming culture. The results were decidedly mixed. (4)

According to Fraser, the new wave of feminism presents a mixed bag of concepts and demands because, one strand still continues with the earlier demands for equality and redistribution, whereas the other hand it tried to displace earlier concepts put forth by feminism:

The effect was to subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition. That was not, to be sure, the original intention. It was assumed, rather, by proponents of the cultural turn that a feminist politics of identity and

difference would synergize with struggles for gender equality. But that assumption fell prey to the larger *Zeitgeist*. In the *fin de siècle* context, the turn to recognition dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism. The result was a tragic historical irony. Instead of arriving at a broader, richer paradigm that could encompass both redistribution and recognition, feminists effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another — a truncated economism for a truncated culturalism. (5)

In Fraser's view, this is where third world feminism is stuck today and according to her there is a need for feminists to come out of this conundrum and address the core issues of political economy again for a true liberation of women from oppression. It is not that she is arguing to throw the cultural question away, but to interface it with the economic factors. That will create, according to her, a new kind of feminist praxis.

This quick summary of the conceptual background of three waves of feminism is to show how the three waves co-exist in their functionality. In other words, while struggle for equality, difference, a space of their own still matter a lot, but now they have to be integrated into new demands that have been thrown at women by globalization and postmodernism. The classification based on periodization,

many feminist scholars feel, has led to narrowing down of our understanding of Indian feminism. Writing about the need to have a fresh look at the periodization of feminist movements, Leela Fernades has argued thus:

(t)he application of the conventional form of the historical periodization of feminism as distinctive waves also has inadvertently led to misreadings and misrepresentations of the substantive contributions of emerging paradigms within this scholarship. Dominant narratives of third wave feminism tend to focus on three central paradigms—multicultural inclusion, identity politics, and intersectionality. Although these have certainly been key paradigms within feminist scholarship, third wave feminism represents a more complex and various set of debates and interventions than these paradigms suggest. (88-89)

Since the nexus between social movements / concepts and literature is very closely linked in case of women writing, it is possible to see how all the three waves of feminism co-exist in the writing of Indian woman writers. The texts under study provide adequate material to see the working of different strands of feminisms getting intertwined in the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. This is to not to propose that these writers are conscious of the political significance of what they are writing about. But the writing itself has the potential to survive and go beyond the intentionality of the writers. For instance, by denying that they are

confirmed feminists and their writing should not be read within the narrow bracketing of a definitive ideology, they are in a way upholding the plurality of positions from which a writer has to interrogate the question of Indian women.

Similarly, the writers steer clear of the vexed debate whether there is something distinct category that can be called 'Indian' feminism. It is a fact that ideologies have to negotiate differently in different contexts and feminism is no exception. Thus we see the texts of Desai and Deshpande encompassing the question of equality as well as that of a space for women. That their women fail to achieve this unique space is not their limitation alone; rather it is the limitation of theory, of our times and of our politics. But what is important to note that their women characters in the novels under study depict the features of all the three waves, but not in the same rigour. For instance, they follow certain common trajectory in their lives: from become aware of their victimhood, to a realization to struggle against it.

As discussed in earlier chapters, their struggle leads them either to death or to hysteria or to silence. Some like Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Urmila in *The Binding Vine* go beyond silence and find the meaning of their lives in expressing their solidarity with others. Some, like Uma in *Fasting and Feasting* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* decide to pursue their interests and create a career.

It is important that these women who refuse to be victims or who withdraw into silence are registering their protest in their own ways against being victimized. Every novel under consideration depicts the struggle of their women to fight

patriarchal domination. In other words, we can say that their novels tell the story of how women find different strategies to fight patriarchy. The question here, again, is not so much about whether they succeed or not, as much as it is about exploring the complex nature of patriarchy which has entrenched itself in the psyche of both men and women, directing social behavior and social norm.

Added to patriarchy there is the entrenched caste system in India which in many ways work together as they share similar operations of power. Caste, like patriarchy operates through a network of power which is not easy to identify. Thus every oppressed caste reproduced the oppression on another caste group which it believes is lower in status. Caste hierarchy and make domination become double oppressive agencies to victimize women. But in both Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, the complex relation between caste and patriarchy is not worked out in all its complexity. Their novels do bring in women from different class/caste background but the caste question remains unaddressed.

Women oppression has acquired new dimension and complexity in the age of globalization. Contrary to the argument of modernists that modernity can bring liberation to women by creating more opportunities and economic independence, globalization seems to have worked against the interest of women, particularly the lower class women. Under changed labour laws women are exploited in their jobs, lack security in the workplace from sexual abuse and become pawns at the hands of forces of globalization. Modernization does not always bring progress or liberation.

This is shown in the novels of Desai and Deshpande in many ways, as most of their women are upper class educated women who also hold a good job. Their plight shows that the moribund traditional values do not fade away, but get reinvented resulting in the continued victimhood of women. The hegemony now functions in the name of wealth and power which every middle class family aspires for.

Women today are more visible than before, though their visibility is still conditioned by patriarchal norms. They can take jobs that were only restricted to men; they can now claim access to space which was denied to them earlier. But these ventures, important as they no doubt are, still show a dependency on male values. Aspiring for spaces once occupied only by men does not displace their supremacy but only endorses. Thus a differentiated role for women which has no reference to male values or norms, is the future of women emancipation.

This is yet to be situation and that perhaps explains why none of the characters of these two novelists are shown as absolutely free and liberated. But they do show a serious aspiration and the novels only explore the problems women face in exploring a space of their own. But women still have a long way to go. In spite of modernity and democracy female dropout rates are still high, there are more women in unorganized sector, female literacy still falls short and destitution forces parents to sell their daughters into prostitution or bonded labour. What is needed is a comprehensive approach where women's plight has to be understood not just in relation to patriarchy but also in terms of the intersections of gender with class and

caste. It is with this in mind that scholars like Amartya Sen have emphasized a holistic approach which upholds the need for factoring in issues like education, income and property to achieve female 'well-being' and 'agency'. Without them the suffering of women continues. Gender equality is not just a woman's question: when woman suffers the whole family also gets affected. It is for this reason that Sen advocates that gender inequality is not a female problem but something that can endanger a whole community. (203)

Scope of the Thesis

The study primarily focuses on examining how the three phases of feminist thought get played out through the women characters of these two novelists. In fact, the three phases mark the multiple locations from which women encounter their oppression and also the way in which they struggle to find their space. In other words, the study is an attempt at reading the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande in terms of some of the major preoccupations of women's thought to establish the linkages between feminism as a theory and experience.

Limitation of the Thesis

Since the study primarily focuses on interrogating feminist thought as seen from the experiential world of the women characters, it does not elaborate on certain conventional literary aspects of novel like plot construction, narrative technique and the use of imagery. It employs them to the extent they are significant for the primary concern of the thesis.

Findings

The study finds the three stages of feminist thought that are not strictly chronological in their concerns though they emerged during three distinct time periods in the development of feminist thought. An examination of the women characters and their predicament reveals that all the three phases cohabit and even coalesce with each other. In a way, they exist, to borrow a term from Walter Benjamin, both in calendrical and messianic time. For instance, the concerns of the first wave of feminism to find an equal space for women along with men are embedded into the major thrust of the third wave, which demanded recognition of difference as a means to establish equity. Similarly, the nature of oppression that the women characters of these two novelists undergo and the predicament they get into, reveal the simultaneous presence of the various concerns of the feminist thought.

The thesis tries to propose that all the women characters stand as a testimony to the first two stages of feminist thought. However, they differ in their attempt at establishing their identity as distinct feminine subjects as there are significant variations in their understanding of their own selves. The study recognizes that though they struggle to wriggle out of their predicament, they fall short of realizing the full potential of what the third phase of feminist thought stands for.