

Search for Woman's Autonomous Self: A Critical
Study in the Selected Novels of 21st Century



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Chapter-V

CONCLUSION

With the spatial and temporal shifts in the society, a continuous and dynamic shift is observed in the paradigm of gender-relations. Subsequently there is a constant evolution of new patriarchies accompanied by new feminisms. To counter new patriarchies new feminisms emerge at multiple levels: race, class, caste, sexual orientation, nationality, political positionalities, education and age. Through their recent writings, writers like Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur endeavor to trace the trajectory of the new woman who stands at a new identity-positionality in the post modern world.

Going down the annals of world history, it is deciphered that the earliest construction of the negative identity of women through the patriarchal and androcentric epistemology dates back to Thucydides (460-400 BC). A hierarchy of male superiority was constructed through strengthening the notions of biological essentialist determinism. Patriarchy found a strong bedrock in biological essentialist determinism and the whole patriarchal edifice was constructed over it. With the course of time women found their voice and the women like Christian de Pizan (15 C) began the process of the demystification of traditional essential femininity. With the Seneca Fall Convention in 1848 began the first wave of feminism. Emerging out of liberal, socialist politics and urban industrialism, it clamoured for the political as well as educational rights of women. The second wave of feminism dealt with the cultural inequalities, abortion rights, domestic abuses, marital rapes and sexual liberation of

women. The second wave of feminism was succeeded by the third wave of feminism which sought to question, reclaim and redefine the ideas about gender, womanhood, beauty, sexuality, femininity, intersectionality, sex positivity, transfeminism etc. Under the umbrella of the three waves of feminism, various off-shoots of feminism emerged: Liberal feminism, French feminism, Anglo-American feminism, Marxist feminism, Radical Cultural feminism, Radical libertarian feminism, Psychoanalytic feminism, Ecofeminism, Postmodern feminism.

With the rising consciousness in India, there emerged the subjugated voices of the Indian feminist writers who defied the social normative of their respective ages. At several junctures Indian feminism has been accused of imitating the Western feminism without distinctiveness of its own. To absolve the charge of imitation, attempts were made to theorize Indian feminism and sketch the cartography of muted and submerged voices of Indian women writers as well as the women voices of protest. The theorization of Indian feminism is an endeavor to prove its existence prior to Western feminism. To support the precedence of Indian feminism, the history of women literature can be traced from Lopamudra and Ghosha in ancient times to Buddhist nuns of the sixth century and the Bhakti saints of 12th century. The repertoire of medieval literature was enriched with the writings of Muddupalini and Gul Badan Begum though the women literature of medieval age had meager output comparatively. The pre-independence period witnessed an upsurge in women writings that were emphatically feminist. The writings of feminists like Tarabai Shinde, Ishmat Chughtai and Mahadevi Verma proved that they recognized the mental servitude of women under patriarchy and thus registered their protest against it. Thus Indian

feminists have presented a reconceptualised, re-thought and revisionary form of feminism grounded in cultural and historical specificities of India.

Based on the positionalities of women Indian feminism can be categorized into three phases. Unlike its Western counterpart, Indian men were the torchbearers of feminism in India. In the first phase of Indian feminism intellectual men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and I.C. Vidyasagar held the baton for amelioration of women (with the support of the British). In the second phase of Indian feminism, Indian women acquired the position of the subject and stepped out of their closets of home and complemented Indian men in freedom struggle. Struggle for Independence helped women realize their complementary status and the recognition of their identity. The third phase of Indian feminism began from 1948 after the independence of India. This phase was characterized for concretization of the feminist theories and helped women in the attainment of autonomy through legal aids, amendments and regulations.

The second chapter “Debating the Sexual Self of a Woman: Exercising Peripheral Sexualities” has expounded the process, the regulatory and silencing techniques, the subtle ruses and stratagems that shaped sexuality and gender formation. The chapter has explored the construction of sexuality in Western as well as Eastern societies through the stratagems of acceptance and rejection, the punishment and release, the freedom and bondage of the body. The difference between Foucault’s Western *Scintia Sexualis* and Eastern *Ars Erotica* holds true to an extent in the context of perceptual differences towards sexuality. Through her novel *A Married Woman* (2003), Manju Kapur has unearthed the causal intricacies of a lesbian relationship and has dismantled the binary essentialism of right and wrong,

moral and immoral, homosexual and bisexual. Kapur has teased the Happy-marriage-myth inside out through the relationship between Astha and Hemant. She has exposed the ruptures that exist within a marriage and the factors that compel Astha to find companionship in Pipeelika. Kapur discards the negative association of lesbianism with sexual gratification and through the relationship of Astha-Pipeelika she corroborates Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum that lesbianism was more than physical attraction and relationship between two females. Rather it was based on comradeship about understanding, complementing, sharing and caring between women. Through *The Immigrant* (2008) Kapur has focused on the sexual autonomy of a woman that is under a constant panoptical vigilance of the society. Since ancient ages, the regulatory codes for exercising sexuality have been laid down by patriarchy and encompass within its ambit plethora of issues like infidelity, adultery, molestation, rapes, the choice of partners etc. *The Immigrant* deals with the life of an immigrant couple – a sexually dysfunctional husband, Ananda and an immigrant wife, Nina, searching for her autonomous self in a transnational habitus. Grappling with the sexual dysfunctionality of her husband, Nina's dissatisfaction of sexual desires ultimately pushes her towards Anton, her batchmate. Her physical relationship with Anton tears her between wifely loyalty that she has received since she gained consciousness and the thirst of her body that is the primal and biological instinct of a human being. She suffers from the pricks of conscience till she finds that her husband was sailing in the same boat. But in the due process she recognized that she needed to quench her bodily thirst and she had rights over her sexuality and her body.

The third chapter "Mapping the Trajectory of Woman's Self-Actualization" has discussed a woman's desire to realize her optimum potential — her self-

actualization. The chapter distinguishes the thoroughfare that women from different civilizations have to traverse to attain their self actualization. Women from individualistic culture of the western societies tend to tread easier path than their Eastern counterparts from collectivistic culture. The chapter focuses on the Indian ideals of womanhood that have already been codified through its regulatory mechanisms of patriarchal meta-narratives. Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) unravels the self-exploration of three strong willed women: Savitribai Indorekar, Leela Bai and Madhu Saptrishi, who rise against the grain to their self-actualization, self-reconciliation and self-satisfaction. Out of the three women, Savitri Bai Indorekar attains her self-actualization and reaches at the zenith of her career in music. Since India has a collectivistic culture, her path is besotted with difficulties. To attain her selfhood, she transgresses all the societal normatives of family, womanhood and motherhood. She sheds off her virtues of femininity that could hinder her growth and braces herself as a non-conformist. Unfazed by the alienations born of character assassination, linguistic incompetence, religious taboos and societal codes, she harbors her dream to excel in music. Thus she attains the highest ideal of life and self-actualized herself as a doyennes of music. With the nuances of patriarchy and its dismantling with the flux of time, Kapur in *Home* (2006) traces the trajectory of Nisha's life, the daughter of the family. Kapur, through the novel, has presented a vivid account of how a family in a collectivistic culture shapes the life of a woman and how a woman accepts, revolts, asserts and reciprocates to carve out a niche for herself. The journey of Nisha towards self-actualization is fraught with societal, cultural, economic and emotional adversities yet she emerges triumphant. The novel is an exploration of the self-actualization of Nisha where she establishes herself as a

business woman in the domain that is considered to be a man's prerogative exclusively.

The fourth chapter "The Search for Independent Status as a Widow and a Spinster" has studied the construction of singlehood as a flawed and deficit identity. The privilege accorded to heteronormative coupling deprives the single woman of her right to dignified survival. For the materialization of idealized femininity, it is necessitated by the society that woman should indulge in authorized and sanctified coupledness and maternormativity. According to the patriarchal beliefs, femininity is realized only through coupledness, maternormativity and motherly feelings of caring, forgiving, sacrificing and nurturing. Thus a halo of femininity is created by the socio-cultural normatives around woman from the moment she begins her informal learning in family and society. Shashi Deshpande *Moving On* (2004) traces the journey of a young widow Manjari, her travails and her triumphs quagmired in the terrain of emotional landscapes as a widow. It dismantles the halo around the heteronormative of marriage as the ultimate bliss which is considered to be the abode of authorized exercise of sexuality and co-existence of opposite genders. Despite receiving proposals for remarriage, Manjari chooses singlehood over coupledness and she feels herself as empowered in her singlehood. Thus she dismantles the notion that marriage conflates empowerment to a woman.

Through *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) Deshpande has uncovered the subtle stratagems of the society through which it regulates sexuality and womanhood of a woman. To control woman's free play of sexuality society prescribes norms of sexual ethics at macrocosmic as well as microcosmic levels. The individual as well as the

collective consciousness of the society has been conditioned to accept the institution of marriage as the only sanctified relationship for the exercise of sexuality. Any exercise of sexuality outside marriage is considered illicit and immoral. In fact the degree of illicitness varies according to the gender. A woman is more illicit, impure and immoral than man for the same transgression of the societal normative.

Shashi Deshpande's *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) is a bold attempt in the direction of de-stigmatization and acceptance of spinsterhood. The chapter has studied how Devayani encounters delegitimization by the society that restricts the scope for spinsterhood and the dignified survival of a spinster. Recent feminist's concerns are trying to dismantle such sexual ethics and legitimacy of marriage through new rhetoric and narratives. Through this novel Deshpande has voiced the major concern of contemporary feminism – spinsterhood by choice. Devayani, the protagonist dismantles the notion that marriage would guarantee and grant her more happiness and completion, strongly asserts her autonomous self through her love-relationship with Ashok and eventually her spinsterhood. Neither societal constructs nor the legal constructs in any form should disparage it. By reducing the woman to the status of a victim and ignoring her needs, the patriarchal society disregards something which is basic to human identity. Autonomy over one's sexuality has been central to human urges down through the ages. A woman is as human as man in flesh and blood and she deserves right to her sexuality, bodily integrity and freedom of choice. Her sexual rights should be recognized, promoted, respected and defended in an egalitarian society.

There is no dearth of women writers/ feminist writers in India and the world, yet what makes Deshpande stand apart from the galaxy of writers is her versatility in themes and characters. The wide range of her characters and their varied responses to the same situations provides a realistic portraiture of contemporary women. Her women range from a teenage girl to a septuagenarian woman, from wives, mothers and daughters to widows and spinsters. But she does not portray all the women in the same frame and mould. Provided with the same situations, the reactions of her women characters differ. Some women are passive, pliant and submissive and some women are rebellious, revolting and vociferous in the same set of circumstances. Her women characters are a whole gamut of realistic portraits — mature, immature, submissive, rebellious, passive as well as assertive. The common thread that binds them together is their search — search of their autonomous selves — through self-realization, self-identification and self-actualization. In their odyssey towards their selves, some reach their goals of selfhood and some are still in transition and some perish during the journey

A deep study of her works convinces the readers that her protagonists are modern women - urban, educated middle-class women — trapped in hostilities and dilemmas. Her characters lead the women of today to self-identification with her characters, to the parallel running complexities in their life. But Deshpande has a confining attitude towards women as she does not allow her characters to walk out of the traditional norms of the society. Human emotions and interrelationships are important to her. In an interview to Geetha Gangadharan, she says:

Human relationship is what a writer is involved with. Person to person and to society relationships — these are the two primary concerns of a creative writer and, to me, the former is of immense importance. My preoccupation is with interpersonal relationships and human emotions.

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Shashi Deshpande's feminism has a very assimilative and emotional core to it. Her characters don't walk on the relationships in spite of all the hostilities and dilemmas. The beauty lies in their efforts to seek a reconstruction rather than deconstruction; a seeking of self-realization from within. It is the inner journey that a woman is grappling with and searching for a panacea to the complexities of life. Her protagonists undergo a transition and accept the situation to the extent that is bearable but simultaneously they chalk out a path for themselves that grants them freedom in the traditional mould itself. Her women are epitomes of readjustment, co-ordination, sacrifice yet confident and assertive of self in the end.

With the leaps of time, a marked shift is being perceived in the themes and the issues that had been subsided for a long time. And with more woman writers coming to the front, feminism, generational divides, acclimatization, acceptance and rejection of new culture which were not the core issues to be dealt explicitly earlier are being discussed by the contemporary writers today. Transnational Indian authors have started writing over earlier prohibited issues such as homosexuality, infidelity, sexual dissatisfaction, marital rapes, spinsterhood etc.

Manju Kapur mostly deals with the new woman — educated, aspiring and struggling woman who is trying to demolish the traditional societal confinements

granted to her and searching for her autonomous self against the oppression through ages. She is on her path to self-actualization and self-identification, exploring herself in the myriad of issues like immigration, sexual dissatisfaction, cultural alienation, infidelity, disastrous marriages etc. Her oeuvre include *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody* (2011).

There are rarely some writers in literary coterie of India who touch upon the radical themes of homosexuality, infidelity and sexual dissatisfaction of a woman. Manju Kapur belongs to that coterie of radical writers whose women, unlike Deshpande's women, dare to challenge the rigid constructs of society to follow their own volitions. Their desire for autonomy drives them towards lesbian relationships, infidelity and rebellion against the society. Her women are the strong women who free themselves from the clutches to seek satisfaction and self-actualization. Locating the issues in contemporaneity, Kapur creates her characters that shift with the contours of contemporary society and defy the patriarchal norms rigidly without compromising on their identity. Her woman is the new woman taking on challenges thrown at them by the changing times and its generations.

Her protagonists are women stranded in multiple complexities under the garb of morality, ethics, familial relationships, fidelity, modesty and infinite compulsions. But all her women protagonists are women of grit and determination who cross the threshold to assert their self. They don't belong to the category of women who keep wailing and whining in the closets of domesticity. They prefer to demolish the hegemonic masculine barriers and start afresh to give a new lease to life. Against the passive, tolerant, mute women, her women are active subjects who have the voice to

raise against the subtle atrocities committed on them. These psychological atrocities are so subtle that they pass unnoticed by the society and most of the times even women accept those atrocities to be an ordained deal.

The women of Manju Kapur's novels are emblematic of new women who have transgressed the traditional confinements and patriarchal constructs of hetero-normative sexuality, marital codes and societal norms spun around them to imprison them. She locates her characters in contemporaneity and traces the psycho-dynamics of women. Her core areas of exploration are the issues of a woman in a transnational habitus, woman trapped in marriage but seeking sexual gratification in a lesbian relationship and woman trying to retain their dignity in hostile environment. Kapur very beautifully traces the turning of a woman's struggle from outer turbulences to inner conflicts. The real conflict that the women are now facing are not against the antagonistic forces they are surrounded by, rather the search is within – directed towards their inner self. This inner self-questioning leads them to question their satisfactions and dissatisfactions in marital life, in sexual life, in professional life and love life too. The women of today do not desire for equality, rather they are seeking equity. In post-feminist era, there is no monolithic to represent women's issues, rather issues sprung up with new situations wherein the response of a woman too is new with the new challenging situation. The self-dependent entity of woman is a matter of complexity in our society. But these major and potent voices of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur have tried to bring the matter to the fore and simultaneously, have endeavored to solve it through their writings. Through their innovative and challenging writings they have explored almost all aspects of the experiences and conditions concerned with women in India.

Through their recent writings, Deshpande and Kapur have attempted to blur the rigid divide between femininity and masculinity, male and female. There has been a marked shift in the male characters from role of being a masculine patriarch to the feminist male who accepts women as their equal. To substantiate this fact there is a section of men in the postmodern era who promote women in their search for autonomous self. Male exclusion is being replaced by male inclusion in the post-modern era underneath which lies the fact that a woman's progress can be facilitated by a pro-man approach and not an anti-man approach of western feminism. And this complementarity is required for man too. The society is a closed-knit group of individuals wherein mutual support is required from all the components of society. And this mutual co-existence is of utmost importance for the dignified survival of all the components. Kapur and Deshpande have acknowledged this fact and thus their recent writings have created space for pro-women men who recognize and acknowledge the new woman of today.

An alternative narrative is being created in the contemporary feminist discourse that traces and witnesses the shifting repressed sexuality to uninhibited sexuality, from desire of others-recognition to self-recognition, from compliance to rejection of the patriarchal normatives. The women are rejecting their status as an object of victimization to the position of an agent of transformation. Deshpande and Kapur have brought such self-actualized women to the forefront that could serve as role-models to the society. We may thus conclude that a woman's search of her autonomous self is in process at multiple levels and Deshpande and Kapur have substantially projected the vicissitudes and triumphs of women who have struggled to evolve into self-actualized individuals.