

## **POSTMODERN FEMINISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS**

**Dr. Abha Sharma**

*Associate Professor, Dept. of English  
Agra College, Agra.*

---

The postmodern feminism is an extension of the postmodern movement in literature. It arguably started in the early 1980's, later it was termed as postmodern feminism. The Postmodern feminist thoughts challenge and discard various conceptual interpretations and definitions of femininity coined by earlier feminists. As per the modern feminist theory, the social and cultural systems are responsible for the present state of women, i.e. system makes a woman "a woman." The postmodern feminism breaks away from this thinking. It takes the woman as a debatable class, which has to confront issues of ethnicity, sexuality and other facets of identity. Thus, postmodern feminists deal with a broad range of global and culture specific issues like female genital mutation in some parts of Africa, rape, specifically in marital relations, incest, prostitution and female infanticide. The postmodern feminist thoughts are based on individual experiences and it gives expression to various specific issues related to a woman in a particular culture and society. Today, woman is at loggerheads with the reality where she cannot identify herself with the traditional feminist theories, albeit she broadly agrees to gender equality and seeks end of gender discrimination as the goal of feminism.

The women participate in the postmodern feminist movement strictly on their personal life experiences making it an experience-oriented movement. Feminism in its postmodern colour thus becomes highly flexible, which accommodates differing experience based thoughts of women belonging to diverse casts, cultures and religions. It presents life in all its true colours. Every woman-who confronts an abusive relationship or feels discriminated against in her workplace or desiring recognition of her identity or seeking financial independence- feels attached to this movement where aligns herself with expressions of other women in the society.

Thus, the movement broadens the scope to include several burning issues related to race, religion, class or gender. While advocating emphatically the human rights for entire femininity, it has been associated with several other social and political movements and the environmental concerns as well. It seeks equality of gender and liberty of individuals. Gender equality is one of the most propounded ideologies of the movement, which seeks equal civil and legal rights for all, irrespective of genders. . This proactive approach securing well-being of women is a fundamental ideological shift, no more portraying them as victims needing a preferential treatment.

The traits of Postmodern feminism are very deep and all pervasive in Indo English Literature, as Indo English Literature expresses sensibility both thematically and stylistically. There is a harmony

in the blend of the Modern and Postmodern framework. It has its deep roots in the tradition beginning from old civilization. It is not merely artistic but also of sociological, cultural and philosophic worth. It depicts problems of society, domestic front and sex. Stream of consciousness is most prominent technique in the literature of later twentieth century. The modern novel of 80s paid attention to the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class urban Indian woman. They attempted to reconstruct Indian womanhood which has been characterized as ideally warm, gentle and submissive and grown up with the assumption that they deserved only to be kept in subordination of males of the family. The new trend in fiction delineated the psyche of modern woman, her suffocation, and exposed her plight to come out of the shackles of the false relations which she has been supposed to carry with full devotion.

Shashi Deshpandey who is a strong voice in Indian English Fiction, is foremost in depicting the traits of postmodern feminism. Shashi Deshpandey has emerged from her rootedness in middle class society and her work, of course, is woman oriented but as Naik says, “it would not be correct to term her a feminist because there is nothing doctrinaire about her fiction; she simply portrays, in depth the meaning of being a woman in modern India.”<sup>1</sup> In an article she says that three things in her early life shaped her as a writer- “that my father was a writer. That I was educated exclusively in English. And *that I was born female*”.<sup>2</sup> About the impact of her being a woman on her writings she observes, “Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my ideas of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman, all this makes my writing very clearly woman’s writing.”<sup>3</sup> But at the same time she observes, “But these gender related experiences are a part of human experience. And as a writer I deal with these experiences the same way any writer does with experience. I expected such writing to be of interest to all human beings.”<sup>4</sup> Characters are the experiences of every human being and that they are of interest to every human being, shows Deshpandey’s belonging to the ideology of postmodern feminist movement. This very thought that the experience of her female characters is the experience of every human being shows Deshpandey’s belonging to the postmodern feminist movement. She further says, “To categorize literature on the basis of gender is ridiculous. And if we have to separate writers on the basis of gender, we need to have two categories- men’s writing and women’s writing.”<sup>5</sup> Her confession of the thought of gender equality makes her a postmodern feminist. Her experiences are of a woman as she herself is a woman but she never wants literature to be divided on gender basis. This ideology again marks the postmodern thought of hers. Her work is definitely woman-oriented but she believes that the presentation of women’s experiences in her novels is not exclusively women’s experiences. In an interview with Chandra Holm she emphatically says, “I write about human beings”. About her philosophy of life as a writer she says that it is “the aloneness of human beings.”<sup>6</sup> Elaborating the idea she says, “basically we all are alone. In this world where we think that relationships are important,

when we come to the roots we are alone. That thinking is there in most of her novels”<sup>7</sup>, but this is a generalized feeling of alienation.

The themes of her major novels also depict the thoughts related to the postmodern feminist thought. As she deals with the theme of rape in marital relations in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980). Sarita, the heroine of the novel, is a modern girl rises against her parents and marries Manu, a boy of other caste. Sarita rises in her profession as a doctor yet Manu stagnates in his. Her social rise and her husbands stagnation results in unbearable bitterness between them. To add fuel to fire, Sarita’s financial ascendance renders Manu impotent with the result that he turns into a rapist and inflicts sexual assaults on his wife to prove his manhood. Tired of her husband, Sarita returns to her parents’ house as an unwelcome guest. Here also she feels guilty for the family’s mishaps. The wheel finally comes full circle when Sarita stoops to compromise with the situation. The depiction of torture of Sarita by her husband and finally her compromise with the situation after her plight of not getting solace with her parents makes her typical post modern heroine, who is suffering, wants to change the situation but ultimately compromising it finding no solutions.

In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Indu, an educated girl is also caught in the same predicament. After ten years of her marriage, her married life dotted with family peace and war, she returns to her parental family only to commit adultery with her childhood friend, Naren. She then feels marriage as a trap and “a caged place” and in the prevailing situation, a ray of hope for a careerist woman lies in a sort of compromise between tradition and modernity. This compromise and carrying the old tradition with her is again typical of post modern literature which always try to imitate the old not only in ideas but also in technique. There are many other examples where we find the traits of Postmodern feminism in the themes of the novels of Shashi Deshpande which make her a true postmodern thinker.

Not only the themes, regarding her point of view of technique of narrating the story also we find the postmodern outlook. As she says that she sees herself from a distance. Thus she has been able to separate two distinct strands, her experience and her awareness of that experience. Commenting on her double perspective Ritu Menon observes, “This twinning of ‘myself’ with ‘us’ of being ‘inside’ with ‘being detached and distant from my own soul’, this alternating of the first person with the third person, simultaneously allows Deshpande never to leave the home ground on which she is more comfortable, and creates double perspective that is characteristic of all her novels.”<sup>8</sup> In each of her novel past is presented in the first person and, the present in the third. This alternating technique takes Deshpande very close to stream of consciousness technique. Her novels also have complicated plot-structures. They have digressive patterns with the present juxtaposed with flashbacks from the past. All her novels are first person narratives, with the protagonists returning to the past, like a typical postmodern protagonist, to find solutions to chief present problems. The past and present are strongly bound to each other. As the narrative proceeds, the protagonist moves to a more positive state from the given one so the structures of Deshpande’s novels may be called the **Order- Disorder-New Order** structures. Thus we find that Shashi Deshpande has her own art of. novel writing and has her own vision of life which makes her a true Postmodern feminist writer

**REFERENCES:**

1. M.K.Naik and S.A..Narayan, **Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey**, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2001, p.88
2. Shashi Deshpande, "Of Concerns, Of Anxieties", Indian Literature No. 175 (Sept.-Oct. 1996),p. 103.
3. *Ibid.*p.107.
4. *Ibid.* p107.
5. *Ibid.* p.109
6. Chandra Holm, "An Interview with Shashi Deshpande"
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ritu Menon, "No Longer Silent" : An afterword published in **A Matter of Time** ( New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996).