



“ The enigmatic interlude: Tracing the threads of Quiet Rebellion”.

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Indian fiction in English has a galaxy of Women novelists starting from Kamala markandaya, a galaxy that includes among others, such widely acclaimed novelists as Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. In the changing scenario of postcolonial In-dian society that observed crosscurrents of traditional ideals and newly imported ones, these women novelists were burdened with the task of giving their women characters the specific roles that would fit in the social-cultural modes and values of the changed society. A new generation of women emerged, embracing the changed values according to which women have a voice of their own, a voice that had been suppressed for centuries. These women, who have the capacity to make free choice and need not therefore depend on the choice of the male, are portrayed in the novels of the new generation women novelists. These new women characters are not however the same everywhere: they react to the particular situation they are in, and their psychic and moral dilemmas are exposed accordingly.

Shashi Deshpande, a well known name in Indian literature in English. After a hard struggle for a footing in the literary world, Shashi Deshpande is now acclaimed as a representative women writer of India all over the world. It would not be right to put here novels in simplistic slots labelling them feminist. A large chunk of the novel does seem to be concerned with the portrayal of the women caught in the web of orthodoxy. There are critics who choose to see the novel as reflective of the existentialist's angst of modern man, irrespective of the sex of the person concerned. We have a fictional universe which is distinguished by corruption, betrayal, deceit, treachery, misery, toil and suicide. In a highly evocative scene the novelist describes the plight of the Nair family which haunts Jaya and recurs to disturb her equanimity of mind. The Nair's – a family of a man, his wife and two

children discover how they are alone in the wild and vast world. People find it so difficult to take even ordinary decisions and therefore such a fatal decision must have been preceded by lots of intense and agonized thought. She is troubled by the report that the daughter in the family somewhat attempted to wriggle herself free off the strangulating bond but she could not escape her fate. “That Long Silence” at this juncture reveals the existential isolation of man, the absurdity of all human relationships and the very phenomenon of life. Deshpande’s approach to women’s problems, as depicted in her novels, is quite distinct. She did not choose the way of protest as such, although she is loosely described as a feminist, one who is influenced by the individualistic feminism propagated by the Anglo-American feminist tradition. Deshpande’s protagonists, who are educated women and most of whom are financially independent, have not necessarily developed an anti-male attitude. In other words, we can say that Deshpande shows the contemporary women’s struggles to attain an “autonomous selfhood.” As it is realized by Jaya towards the end of the novel, “That Long Silence” Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita suggests this free choice for His devotees. To quote a few lines from the novel, The final words of Krishna’s long sermon to Arjuna, ‘Do as you desire,’ I’d thought it something of a cheat. Imagine the Lord any master telling his disciple..... ‘Do as you desire’! What are Prophets and masters for if not to tell you what to do? But now I understand. With this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. ‘I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire.’ (192) Shashi Deshpande keenly observes the nature and the causes of the plight of an Indian women writer who is suppressed both at home and in the literary world outside, in various ways. There are psychological fears and physical suffering along with the demand that a woman, “must always be a few feet behind her husband”, and in order to maintain a happy married life, she should not “try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal-teacher role.” As it was quite natural that Jaya was selected by Mohan as his bride who could satisfy Mohan’s special liking for a convent educated girl. Mohan was an engineer in a steel plant and Jaya was persuaded to believe that to reject such a groom would be sheer madness. Jaya did not object to the proposal and got married. At the time of marriage she was given a new name ‘Shuhasini’, and surprisingly, her personality got changed after marriage.

She found that in Mohan’s home, a woman’s work was sharply differentiated from a man’s work. A man was never to sew or to mend or to cook even for his own sake. At first, Jaya could not follow the norms of her in-law’s home, but it took no time to get used to everything. And Jaya began to be happy when she was praised for her cooking and would

feel ashamed if there was any flaw in her work. She tried to be a perfect housewife; as she said, ‘ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier man,’ (30) During the early years of their marriage, jaya was so much attached to Mohan that she was not ready to be separated from him even for a moment. But gradually, a vacuum was created between them or rather, the halo having gone the hard reality was visible. When Jaya’s realistic story of man-women relationship won a prize, Mohan was critical, for, according to him, Jaya had disclosed their personal relationship to the world, dishonoring thereby the sacred vows of marriage. Jaya was crestfallen at this accusation, but she could very well understand that Mohan was unable to distinguish between art and life as he had no artistic sense in him. ‘I had known then that it had not mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it mattered that people might think that the couple was us, that the man was him. To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist.’ (144) In order to keep up their relationship smooth, jaya stopped writing realistic stories and tried her hand, instead, at imaginary incidents of a housewife’s life under the pseudo name ‘Seeta.’ Surprisingly, Mohan liked those stories and even began to take pride in her wife’s calibre as a writer. The stories under the ‘Seeta’ column were appreciated by the public and Jaya became famous as a women writer. But jaya was not happy inwardly; she knew that her Seeta column had nothing to do with reality or with her real self. A drift in Jaya’s relationship with Mohan ran parallel with her struggle with herself for coming out of the disguise of seta. The rude shock that Jaya received from Mohan shook her very existence. And this shock compelled her to make a self analysis. She felt that she had been wrong for remaining silent about Mohan’s activities. She never questioned his ways, never argued with him, as she felt that Mohan was keen on doing what he had intended to do. Her self –analysis revealed her own flaws and she gradually prepared herself for facing the reality. Looking at it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces. She also found that “the ghost most fearful to confront is the ghost of one’s own self.” (13) In the solitude of the Dadar flat where life did not follow the daily routine- Mohan was to stay at home and the children were not there to draw attention – Jaya had enough time for self –analysis. As she sat with her pen and paper, Mohan thought that she was trying the Seeta column, having little idea that both Seeta and Suhasini had died and a new self of Jaya was on its way to emerge. As it was quite natural about the worn-out relationship, there was total misunderstanding between

the two. Jaya attempted to sketch a picture of that time: “ each relationship evolves its own vocabulary. Ours had been that of the workaday world. The vocabulary of love, which I had thought would come to as naturally and inevitably, has passed us by: so too had the vocabulary of anger. “(116) Jaya the protagonist has no faith in afterlife. Nor is she a supporter of any particular party. She is a writer in the truest sense of the word and the novel records her self-analysis. The novel also contains her assertion that she would start a new life, making an end of her long silence. She was like Sita who never questioned her husband; and now she had decided to take up the role of Maitreyee who wanted to question everything and even challenged her husband. The novel ends with Jay’s assertion that she will start a new life with her husband. “But it is no longer possible for me. If I have to plug that ‘hole in the hart.’ I will have to speak, to listen. I will have to erase the silence between us.” (192) Shashi Deshpande’s sincere attempt to break the silence of women has been widely acclaimed in home and abroad. Her clear understanding of human relationships, her close observation of the way of the world, her unbiased attitude to dogmas and movements and her hold on English language explain her success. She presents all individuals – male or female – caught up in an indifferent universe. That long silence can thus be read as a humanistic document, free from sexual polemics but conveying and awareness of the marginalised position of women in contemporary Indian society in particular. It is thus a feminist text within the broad humanist framework, or to put it differently, a novel espousing the Indian version of feminism wherein both men and women are seen not as competing entities but as beings who complete each other.

References:-

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