



The Liberation of Woman in the Works of Shashi Deshpande

Dr. Astha Gupta,

Assistant Professor Dept. of English, GJU&ST University, Hisar

Email Id- asthaxprozer@gmail.com

To die in the struggle against oppression was better than to live without freedom.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Abstract: This research paper related to the Liberation of Women. The data related to this paper is primary. The source of data is mainly books, research articles, Newspapers and research paper. This research articles discussed about the liberation of women and working of women in all filed of life. Freedom is one's birthright. Every person is bom to be free and likes to live freely. But the problem is how to define the term "liberation." "Liberation" in its dictionary meaning means "having the freedom to do what one wants." The philosophers have debated on the meaning of freedom for over two millennia, and just about every major philosopher has had something to say about it.

Keywords: Liberation of Women, autonomy, Shashideshpande, feminists struggle.

The philosopher, Rene Descartes, for instance, identifies "liberation" with the freedom of choice, that is, the ability to do or not to do something. He, even, goes so far as to declare that "liberation" can "never be constrained." He maintains that such freedom is present on every occasion when we make a conscious choice or even "when a very evident reason moves us in one direction." David Hume defines "liberation" as "a power of acting or of not acting, according to the determination of the will." And we find in Jonathan Edwards a similar account of free willing as those which proceed from one's own desires.

In approaching the question what is meant by "Liberation," let us discuss the distinctions already worked out by Stanley Benn and William Weinstein: (a) freedom as a social principle, (b) man as a chooser, (c) autonomy.

- **Freedom as a Social Principle:** A person has to live with one another and move differently in the society. If we say that a person is not free to do something then it means that one cannot exercise one's freewill due to some hindrance. The laws and regulations also close a person's options, by giving him commands, and subjecting a person to a variety of social and personal pressures. If there are no leveling constraints like those of law and custom, a person does not in fact live unconstrained lives. Those, who are physically or psychologically weak, are constrained by those who are strong.

Thus, freedom prevails only if there is a general system of regulation which safeguards these spheres against interference from others.

Man as chooser: In various spheres of authority, individuals are not free to do as they please but they still remain choosers. For instance, if a person is playing football his freedom of action is limited by the rules and by the referee's decisions. But he can choose not to play football. It would be an act of disobedience, but a person still remains a chooser.

Autonomy: Autonomy suggests that a person accepts or makes rules for himself. The rules which one lives by are not just those that are laid down by custom or authority. A person, gradually, emerges with his own code of conduct. An autonomous being is one, who has thought out his own code and he is



capable of sticking to it in the face of oppositions. Autonomy, in other words, suggests executive virtues such as courage, integrity and determination.

To gain additional perspective on the nature and significance of autonomy, we shall discuss what philosophers have sought to distinguish as "positive" and "negative" freedom. The philosophers equate "positive freedom" with "rational choice or action and with individual liberty," and "negative freedom" with freedom from "[...] constraint or coercion, thus characterized, to have both positive and negative freedom is, by definition, to be an autonomous individual."

Hence, liberty can never be absolute. Once a human being steps into the societal structure, one eventually becomes victim of the various factors subjugating one in innumerable ways. The slightest account of the liberation is the ability to select a course of action from among numerous options. The free choice is an activity that involves both our intellectual and volitional capacities, as it consists in both judgment and active commitment.

Freedom relates to the question of moral responsibility. How can people be held responsible for what they do if they are not free to act otherwise? Any moral decision of the do's and the don'ts can be relevant only if one accepts that the human beings are free to make the decision and the choice. Interestingly, the moral judgment is not passed upon the natural phenomenon and the behavior of the animals for they do not possess the freedom to perform these actions.

The significance of the liberation is not only exhausted by its connection with the moral responsibility; liberation also lies in self-determination. Every decision, taken by an individual, is selected by one's "self from among several alternatives available to that person and it is only in this context that the moral responsibility can be said to have any implication.

Our survey of several themes in philosophical accounts of freedom suggests that the root issue is that of "control." The human soul, naturally, chooses that suits its own nature. In this manner, volition requires self-control, while there is no external control which determines volition. When the human beings are restrained by the external circumstances, they become dependent. Freedom lies in performing in accordance with one's own reason, after having gained control over one's mind.

What Cowley wrote, in 1835, on the meaning of liberty and its personal and social dimension is also relevant today:

The liberty of people consists in being governed by laws which they have made for themselves, under whatever form it is of government. The liberty of a private man, in being master of his own time and actions, as far as many consist with the laws [...] of his country. (Thomas Hutchinson, *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, 412)

Truly, in social domain, personal liberty can only become a reality if it is restrained and if it allows others to exercise their liberty. Joe Andrew observes that in all societies, there exist two basic discourses, one is the "dominant group," and the other is the "muted group." Taking the sexual categories, this would mean the male and the female discourses. Both these discourses make certain statements about human experiences and express certain values. So long as there is inequality, it is argued that there cannot be liberation.

It would not be out of place to mention here that the feminists struggle for liberation can also be looked upon within this framework of the freedom-crisis. Woman, too, tried to liberate herself from the customs and the age-old taboos that have obstructed her way towards liberty. Boom as free as man, woman finds



herself shackled in the chains of society. From time immemorial, her images have been molded, reshaped and reoriented by man and only for man. All over the world, man still continues to conceive of woman's nature as weak, inferior, dependent and emotional, and designate her as "second sex." She is relegated to an incredibly low position, and she merely acts as a puppet in the hands of man who has associated her with the childbirth and the child bearing. The reproductive and the domestic roles did not guarantee her an equal dignity.

The patriarchal culture of the world, often regards woman as the "angel of the home," and this attitude never allowed her to play definite role in the decision-making at all the levels. Shulamith Firestone rightly observes that the "culture is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes." Woman has reconciled to this kind of slavery because of her economic dependence on the males and lack of proper education.

In the western world, the moment of awakening came in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when women became conscious of their dilemma and a need to shake off the yoke of the male ideology was felt. "Feminism" emerged as a world-wide movement in support of the principle that "women are human beings like men and therefore ought to be granted equal rights" in legal, political, economical and social fields. One of its chief concerns has been to ascertain for women the status of "being," not merely as an "appendage" to the males. Over the past three decades, certain issues have dominated the feminist theory - firstly, the patriarchy is all-pervading; secondly, the public and the private distribution of the works underestimate women's experiences, and thirdly, the women's unique experiences and diversity are necessary part of liberation.

Initially, the feminists identify the disparity and the discrimination confronted by women along with the disabilities and the disadvantages which arise from these, in the patriarchal society. The means employed by them to change the condition of woman include the political action, that is, to change laws and to increase the participation of woman in the political life. The feminists maintained that the "two sexes are (at least) equal in all significant ways," and argued that "this equality must be publicly recognized.

The mid-twentieth century saw the upsurge of a new awareness about the women's marginalized position resulting into the birth of "Women's Liberation Movement." Literature, being the mirror of society, does not remain unaffected but explores the "woman's question" extensively and vociferously. In the nineteen sixties, the intensity of woman's activism for the liberation spread to the reading of literature. The feminist critics argued that literature has traditionally been the male-governed sphere of study and women were systematically eliminated from it. Virginia Woolf, one of the early twentieth century feminist writers wrote, "Until very lately women in literature were the creation of men," and the men's magnified stature was attained at the price of the women. The woman was usually depicted as the creature without mind, having only body. The women writers assault and dismantle the stereotyped-images of the women in the male literary canon to reveal the bitter reality of their status in the patriarchal society.

Moreover, the notable women novelists of the nineteenth century, including Bronte sisters and George Eliot, published first under the masculine or equivocal pseudonyms, presuming that the author's sex influenced the critical reception of the work. Dale Spender points out that approximately hundred female authors and their five hundred novels after Eliza Haywood have not been granted any place in the literary heritage and "it is not difficult to pinpoint as to who is responsible for this massive denial."



The feminist literary criticism is, thus, an ideological protest against the male dominance. It is, essentially, the woman-centered approach to the literature in which woman is at the centre of experience. As Patricia Meyer Spacks remarks, "there seems to be something what we might call a woman's point of view [...] an outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the centuries." Elaine Showalter points out that the "Women's Liberation Movement" in the late 1960s, awakened the female writers to the feminist reading of the literature. These women writings, thus, encouraged "Great Awakening" in the women, making them conscious of their servile and deprived conditions, so that they would rise against their oppression.

The steady growth of the women towards emancipation in the social and the political sphere, discarded the traditional image of the woman as an inferior being. The stereotyped submissive female gave way to a more rebellious one and with the passage of time, the rebel was substituted by the self-assertive woman sure of herself and her rights. French feminists turned to the psychoanalytic and social theories about the gender difference to interpret issues such as the sexual violence, the female sexuality, oppression and the power-relations. Their social theory and psychoanalytic theory have a significant influence on Anglo-American feminist theory. The feminists interested in social theory focus on the ways in which social institutions shape our notions of sex sexuality, and gender roles, while feminists interested in psychoanalytic theory focus on cultural representation of sex, sexuality and gender roles and the way, they affect the psyche.

Before feminism sprung up as a socio-political movement, certain women writers voiced their resentment on the biased treatment meted out to women by the patriarchal society. The first voice in the support of the women's right was, in fact, raised much earlier. Mary Wollstonecraft, inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Mary utters about women's liberation for men's sake, for if men crave to have a suitable partner, they have to spare space for women. She insists on an equal opportunity for women in the field of education and training. Through her book failed to generate any instantaneous reforms still it is a significant milestone pertaining to woman's rights and has since become a feminist classic. In addition, it served as a model for the nineteenth century women's movement.

The period from 1920 to 1960 is known as a period of intermission in the history of women's right movement. In the field of literature, Virginia Woolf carried forward the debate. She insists that women should reject the principles of the patriarchal society and should rebel against victimization and authoritarianism. In her well-known books *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), she abhors the women's subjugation and advocates the necessity of the financial independence for the women. Moreover, Woolf insists on the mother allowances, reforms in divorce law and also gave the proposal for a separate woman's college and newspaper. Additionally, Woolf was actively involved in the Pacifist Women's Cooperative Guild and refused national honors.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir came up with her widely read book *Le Deuxiema Sex*, later translated in English as *The Second Sex* (1953). Beauvoir detests the word "Other" that has generally been used for woman. She exhorts women to discard their "otherness" and assert themselves. Beauvoir opines:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other another." (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 686)



Responding to the social changes, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, women constituted their own organizations to discuss their status and the ways for advancement. Social reformers and educated men supported and at time even guided such endeavors. Several women leaders took up the cause of social and legal status of women. In 1927, All India Women's Conference was set up to fight for the cause of women. Eminent women like Sarojini Naidu, Aimie Besant, Begam Hasrat Mahal and others tried to give direction to the Women's Movement.

The Gandhian whirlwind and the Freedom Movement catapulted Indian women into the for front. Feminine issues and freedom movement were submerged in the tidal wave of the nationalist struggle. Mahatma Gandhi's call to women to step out of the confines of their homes to join the prabhat pheris, satyagrahas and other related activities was one of the first attempts to draw Indian women out of the restricted circle of domestic life into equal roles with men. The influence of Gandhian philosophy gave rise to a new humanism and a new morality based on human values rather than religious orthodoxy. The trend was towards a positive, brave and outspoken effort to find out a new way of life for women.

The national leaders rendered yeoman service for the amelioration of women. Jawaharlal Nehru exhorted women to make their own efforts to change their social position:

Women should address themselves to local programmers of self-defense and self-sufficiency [...]. Public moral depends greatly on how women feel and act [...]. I am against treating women as helpless human beings who cannot look after themselves and who must run away from the danger zone [...]. So the only way to tackle the problem is to make women realize they have to and can face it.(B.R.Nanda, ed., *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity* , 12-13).

With the passage of fame, there was a gradual retrogression in the status of woman. The one work overwhelmingly assumed to be responsible for relegating the Hindu woman to an inferior status is the *Manu Smrithi*, a compendium of codes on living in society. But the codes of Manu are replete with contradictions. While one section states that "woman is the instrument of prosperity, a source of joy to the gods, and she deserves honor from all." Yet, another section disallows any freedom for a woman:

Pitta Rakshati Kaumaree, Bhartaa Rakshati Yauvane; Putroo Rakshati Vardhakee, Na Stri Swaantryam Arhati. (Acharya Jagadishlal Sastri, ed., *Manusmriti*, IX, 3)

"In childhood, a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons. She should not have independence." Resultantly, the woman's self is smothered in order to subsume other roles. She became a feeble being caught in the whirlpool of family-bound life. Under the pretext of protection, she became a bonded servant.

History rarely gives space to woman and yet it is woman who keeps history alive by carrying on the burden of the past and samskaras. In the Koran, a woman is "described as a 'fitna,' one who tempts man and brings trouble." The disparity between man and woman is further highlighted in *The Bibl.:*

Then the Lord God made the man fall into deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of the man's ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him.(Good News Bible, ed.. *The Holy Bible*, 5)

The Indian social setup reinforces its negative outlook towards woman in several respects. It gives priority to such qualities as being submissive, self-sacrificing, a liable homemaker and an asset to her



parental as well as husband's families. If she does not meet their expectation, her position deteriorates further in the society. She, thus, engages herself in the task of making others happy and upholding traditions and conventions. Vem Bullough observes:

The very word woman [...] emphasized [a] passive anonymous position. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon woman literally 'wife-man,' and the implication seems to be that there is no such thing as woman separate from wifehood. As individuals, with few exceptions, women did not count. They were mothers, wives, daughters, sisters.(V.Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Towards Women*, 3).

Woman rarely has led an independent life. Wifehood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women complete in themselves. In such a smothering scenario, woman has not been granted due respect and rightful status, thereby compelling her to seek her own individuality, irrespective of the repercussions it might have.

Rightly observes Swami Vivekanand, "the best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women."^ Woman in her slots as a mother, a daughter, a sister and a daughter-in-law, is a crucial link in her family. She is one who gives vital input to the future generations. It is asserted that if you educate a man, you educate an individual whereas if you educate a woman you are educating the entire family. However, there has been a major attitudinal shift from earlier times when the new woman started perceiving the necessity of education and economic independence.

The working woman has to confront the problem of marital adjustment as well. Most of the husbands are reluctant to share the domestic responsibilities like looking after children. These duties are, however, considered to be solely that of the wife who after completing the household task rushes to the working place. Unable to amalgamate the twin-roles of the housewife and of the working woman, the feelings of guilt, anxiety and stress often pervade her being. Not only this, the man likes his wife's salary but it hurts his ego to accept her as his equal. The situation becomes so crunchy when the earning of a woman is higher than that of the husband and when she is more competent in her work. The bulk of employed women have to hand-over their earnings either to their husbands or to their in-laws. Oftentimes her working hands remain invisible. Usually, her contribution to the survival or betterment of the family and the society is viewed as a natural outcome of her caring, nurturing and self-effacing nature.

During the late sixties, as the socio-political scenario started changing, woman's question cropped up again. Gradually, the various problems pertaining to woman like eve-teasing, family violence, female sexuality, sexual harassment at work place, sexual violence like rape, dowry-death, wife-battering and other gender-related matters started surfacing under the garb of modernization and making the life of woman torturous and traumatic. According to the National Commission for Women's report (based on data given by the Ministry of Women and Child Development):

Every 26 minutes a woman is molested. Every 54 minutes a rape takes place. Every 48 minutes an eve-teasing incident occurs. Every 4 minutes a woman is kidnapped. And every 10 minutes another is burnt to death over dowry. One act of cruelty every 33 minutes and one criminal offence every 7 minutes against women take place in our country.(R.D. Sharma, "Crime against Women, 1)

According to the findings of an extensive survey conducted by Delhi based women's group, these statistics do not include the cases of sexual abuse by the members of family and known persons



amounting to 87.4 percent. Victims rarely report such crime to the police for fear of shame, humiliation, and guilt and self-blame.

Irrespective of the socio-economic status of parents, the girl child is at a discount. She is even denied the right to be born the female feticide has increasingly replaced the female infanticide in thousands of families, which actually explained why there is an adverse sex ratio in India. Some women voluntarily joined various groups and organizations and emerged as support groups to help the needy. Subsequently, magazines, journals and media engrossed in the issues concerning woman generated in the Indian homes the winds of change. The declaration of year 1975 as the International Year of Women, led to spate of activities on and questioning of woman's issues.

Undoubtedly, the change in the perspective and the end of apathy that has emerged over the last century assures that someday there could be perfect equality for woman in India and the world over. As Namrata Joshi comments:

You make a break as you did with so many other things that became redundant with the passage of time. Now you don't commit Sati. You are also not getting married very early. You have also emerged from behind the purdah. If you can do all this, you can do more."(Namrata Joshi, "You are as strong as you think, 3)

Attitudinal change is also a vital step in ensuring an honorable status to woman in society. The discrimination against boys and girls must fade away at the earliest. They have to be brought up in a genderless milieu so that their sensitive minds are kept chaste and undefiled by the pollution of sexism. Society in general and man in particular must comprehend that woman is not a commodity but a human being in want of humane treatment. It should not be blind to the fact that she has yet to traverse a long way towards her destination of taking up her position abreast of man.

The Indian English Literature has recorded this shift in our social paradigm. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century in India, women writers like Torn Dutt, Cornelia Sorabji, Krupabal Sathianathan, Shevanti Bai Nikambe and Mrs. Swama Kumari Ghosal made the novels an instrument for the social amelioration and social regeneration. Their theme was invariably the Indian woman in the rapidly changing social scenario.

It is, however, after the Second World War that the Indian women novelists have enriched the genre making it comparable in the context of the world literature in English. Since independence, the novelists have shifted their focus from the public to the private sphere. From 1950 onwards, one witnesses three phases in the growth of the novels by women writers. The novels of the first phase project the tradition-bound women who are cognizant of their emotional requirements but in case of crisis they lack strength to discard the yoke of conventions. The second phase began in the sixties and the prime thrust is on the steps one takes to search one's identity despite hostilities. In the third phase, the emerging perception of the self appears more to be the outcome of an intellectual probing. In lieu of searching outside themselves, the protagonists find their inner selves to be of clinical interest. Thereafter, the novelists portray the "women who aspire, attempt and strive to be their true selves."

In the hierarchy of Indian English women novelists after independence, Kamala Markandaya is the senior-most. With great dexterity and conviction, she writes about the predicament of woman in her relationship with the family and the social group. Markandaya's older women are steeped in tradition



and the younger generation becomes very independent in their decision and fight for their liberation. Ruth Praver Jhabvala enables her woman to recognize her caliber in order to confront all the oddities of the life. Nayantara Sahgal delineates with keen perception and sensitivity the problems and sufferings of women in marriage. Most of her women gasp for freedom and decide to come out of the stifling bondage by opting for divorce.

In the galaxy of the Indian women writers in English, Shashi Deshpande has carved out a niche for herself in the realm of novels and short-story writing. The unknown and unfathomable inner-world of the human psyche that fascinates Anita Desai also intrigues Shashi Deshpande. Both the novelists dive deep into the inner working of the protagonists and bring forth the hidden depths of the human psyche. Their fictional world can be compared with an "ice-berg" which is mostly hidden and partly apparent. The dissimilarity among these novelists, however, lies in their basic approach. Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. Her women characters try to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Contrarily, Deshpande's world comprises of those women who strive and seek their self-hood only within the ambit of the family and the relationships. Her protagonists are not like Desai's Maya or Monisha. R.Mala opines:

Following Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and others writers who documented this female resistance against a patriarchy - maintained Indian culture, Shashi Deshpande [...] has re-incarnated the new Indian woman and has reinforced the female dilemma in her novels."(R.Mala, "Sexual Predicament and Shashi Deshpande's Women," *Indian Women Novelists*, ed. R.K.Dhawan, I, V 50).

Undoubtedly, in women's fiction, one can see the female protagonist in all shades, "the power of women. The deviousness of women the helplessness of women. The courage of women. Compared with the other women novelists of twentieth century, Shashi Deshpande is much more candid in voicing the fears and concerns regarding the future of women in uncongenial surroundings. In all her novels and short-stories, Deshpande writes about, "[...] every India. A society in which we breathe, a culture to which we belong. Her major concerns emerge from our own environment from our immediate world, holding up mirrors to our own lives." She is, thus, acquainted with Indian temper and endeavours to bring forth in her works, aspects of the changing Indian society.

Conclusion: In the preceding chapters, an attempt has been made to critically examine and analyze "the liberation of woman in the works of Shashi Deshpande." In this concluding chapter, an effort has been made to coalesce and combine the different findings into a single unit. We have tried to explore the various forces, which drive Deshpande's protagonists to struggle and strive for asserting their liberation. The term "liberation" has been construed in various ways: firstly, "as absence of constraint, inner or outer or both;" secondly, "as release from ties or bonds or duties;" thirdly, "as personal rights and social and political liberties;" fourthly, "as freedom of action." Whatever meaning we attach to the term "liberation," its "one indispensable characteristic is that it should be open or available to all irrespective of their difference in respect of class, sex, education, etc."

Today India is a nation of women, who are ready to buck that trend, stand up for what they believe, in the face of hostility. Let us take a look at those liberated women who stormed male bastions. India got Pratibha Patil as its first woman President in 2007. In 1886, Anandibai became India's first lady doctor. Anandi became an object of curiosity and determination and went on bravely with her studies. Her



success inspired women for generations afterwards. Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India, was not only the first governor of Uttar Pradesh after Independence but also the first-ever woman governor of any Indian state. The state was also first one to have Sucheta Kriplani as a woman chief minister in 1963. In 1984, Bachendri Pal became the first Indian Woman to conquer Mt. Everest. According to a report, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Chairperson and Managing Director of Biocon Group, is the richest woman in India. These women are setting a global example by paving the way for other women. The day - March 8* - is meant to honour women, celebrate their achievements and focus attention on the continuing challenges facing the realization of the full potential of women as equal citizens with equal rights to men.

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