

A Feminist Critique of Shashi Deshpande's *Why a Robin?*

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Abstract

Indian novelist and short story writer Shashi Deshpande has been researched from feminist point of view by many scholars. The researcher in the present paper aims at exploring the feminist aspects of Deshpande's one of the short stories i.e. *Why a Robin?* The paper sheds some light on how a woman's desire is suppressed and remain unfulfilled in meeting the expectations of family. The researcher explores the dimension of a woman's needs which are at two levels: intellectual and emotional, through a character of a mother in the story. The way a woman is looked at and the psyche of society towards her has also been explored. The paper presents how a woman feels alienated even after being the part of a family regardless of her character as a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife,. The paper deals with the sufferings of woman's life in the 21st century.

Key Words: Suppressed desires, Expectations of family, alienation, suffering etc.

The expression 'Gentle man' is more usual and common than the expression 'gentle lady'. A woman has always been considered inferior to man. The Indian society wherein we live has formed certain codes for women. The society expects the women to behave according to those codes. It expects woman to be very docile, and obedient. Even the history witnesses that women have always sacrificed themselves and their desires, dreams, goals, etc. for the good of the family and society. A short story *Why a Robin?* by Shashi Deshpande is studied from a woman's view point.

The centre of Deshpande's writing is gender. Her works deal not only with ordinary women in ordinary urban situations but stem from firm belief that their lives are, to a great extent, governed by gender. She feels that women have been deprived of partaking in the process of word-making. The stories, myths and legends in our Puranas, Epics, and Kathas have been written by men. Moreover, Deshpande personally feels that women have been conditioned to a great extent by myth as she quotes in her 'Forward' to *Collected Stories* that a woman expected to be

"as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapoorna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, and as strong as Durga."1

She says that these are ultimately the role models for the male dominated society that women have to be and they are completely helpless to terminate it. Deshpande is of opinion that women never start with a picture of themselves on a clean slate, their self-image is honed by the hegemonic influences of myths, movies, and current-day soap operas. Shashi Deshpande herself wrote,

"my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined on me by society..."2

Those formed and established norms and standards become a frame for woman's life and she has to live her life being in that enclosed boundaries. Women are expected to fulfil everyone's needs and desires however unfulfilled her own desires remain. A woman sacrifices her whole life for her family, for society, but her personal desires are not taken care of. She suppresses her desires throughout her life. She lives her whole life with bound by conventional shackles. Shashi Deshpande, as a creative writer, presents vividly the character sketch of the protagonist of the short story entitled 'Why a Robin?'

Isolation of a woman can best be seen in the short story 'Why a Robin?' In this short story Shashi Deshpande narrates the condition and state of women in Indian society through the character of a wife, a daughter and a mother. In the story the writer delineates the trauma of women's life in Indian culture. The story opens with a little conversation between mother and daughter. The daughter approaches her mother and asks to tell her something about an Australian bird Robin. As the mother does not know much about the bird except it is a beautiful and red breast bird, the daughter finds the mother of no use. The mother says,

"Why not a bird we know something about? A sparrow, or a...a...a... myna, or even a peacock?"³

The statement is allegorical. The mother raises a question but the daughter says that she has to write on a Robin as teacher said so. The implied meaning is why a woman cannot choose her life partner to a person she knows something about? Why an unknown? The daughter refuses the mother's idea and chooses to approach her father. Here, the mother becomes insignificant just because of not having knowledge of a bird 'Robin', at the same time the father gets importance because he is in a position to tell her daughter about the bird.

When the father and daughter talk to each other about robin at that time she feels that she is the useless corner of the house and the things happening above and around her but she remains untouched. She wants to be the part of the conversation but the gaps between them holds her away. The feminist elements are visible throughout the story. There is an implied meaning when the daughter says

"We can't choose the subject ourselves, you don't understand, you don't know anything."⁴

This can be taken as norms of Indian society where women don't have any right to choose their life partner on their own. They are not free to choose according to their wish. This situation prevails even in the 21st century when the women cannot exercise their own choice and they have to accept the choice of the male members of the family. Here, when the daughter judges the mother she (mother) feels insecure; she also feels jealousy from her own daughter's intelligence as well as her beauty. The mother feels the sense of guilt, she sees herself as complete failure whether be wife, a companion or a mother. She expresses her grief in following lines,

"Between my husband and myself, there is a blankness- we never even quarrel. And with my daughter, I am helpless."⁵

She feels inferior because she cannot cope with her daughter's fits of excitement, her questions, her rage, her tantrums, her ideas etc. The blankness between her and her husband is so established that she would not even quarrel with him. The daughter feels free and can quarrel with her mother whereas the wife does not have the freedom to do so. As her desires and wants are suppressed and remain unfulfilled, she finds herself alienated even after being a part of family. She can't describe her wants and desires in words.

"Without wants, there is no 'I'. That is why they often look at me without seeing me."⁶

She feels that without her wants she is nothing, but she scares to put it in front of her husband, her family. Her husband treats her as an object. He lives in his own world which is very painful for his wife. His desires and wants are true but his wife's desires and wants are nothing. Even at night the husband stays busy in listening to the music till late night. The wife wants to be his companion, wants to join him in his hobby but she can't. She expresses her pain in following lines,

"I cannot understand this music; it is as incomprehensible to me as he is."⁷

She finds her husband very incomprehensible. Therefore she fears sitting with him, sharing anything. She compares him with the music that is not comprehensible for her. The gape was so vast and no bridge can connect them. This is the very pathetic situation of her life. She is insignificant for her husband's family also.

The husband wanted to marry a woman of his own choice but unfortunately she died in a car accident. He marries this woman out of compulsion. He does not have any soft corner for this woman. The woman was not consulted about her choice. Here, the society does not care whether the woman is willing to marry him or not. The wife knows that she is not her husband's first choice, he only marries her under some circumstances and this bites her all the time. May be this is also the reason of blankness between husband and wife. The lack of knowledge, lack of interaction, and lack of self-confidence create a fear of rejection. For fear of being rejected by her husband she does not assert herself. Both the husband and daughter appeared like two closed rooms to which she has no access. The story does not make it clear whether she herself is responsible for this situation or not.

The story represents two levels of needs – intellectual and emotional. She (daughter) relies much on her father for the satisfaction of intellectual and emotional needs. Shashi Deshpande as a writer depicts the situation where the mother alone can come to her rescue and offer her some comfort she is looking for. Incident of the first menstruation it's an experience of trauma or psychological shock. Here the father or a male power gets failed to solve the female problem, mother is the only source to help the daughter. In the beginning of the story we can see that mother was not able to help her daughter intellectually but in the concluded part of the story mother is the only person who can help her.

Sashi Deshpande tries to outline the fact that only a woman can understand the woman's problems and the agonies. A woman's intellectual and emotional needs, in most of the cases, remain unfulfilled. The most of the women still suffer from sense of alienation. They are alienated. They want to assert themselves but somehow they can't because of the expectations that are imposed upon them by family, society and the culture in which they live. She presents the trauma of a woman's life which no male writer can bring about.

References

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