



An Unending Quest for Self and Predicaments of Women in Indian Society in Shashi Deshpande's *If I Die Today*

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ABSTRACT

Deshpande's fictional achievement should not be seen in terms of her subscription or non-subscription to feminism, for a writer of some substance is committed to human situation and not necessarily to some ideology. She, for herself, chooses the path of conciliation without yielding either to absolute acquiescence or to the temptations of embracing the feminist mould which she would have with slight manipulation of her creative endeavour. Her works mediate between the existing state of women and the female feminist consciousness. However, her insights and depth of perception ensure that her fictional creations rise above the staple 'whodunit' sort of work or mere ideological subscription, and go on to become serious reflections on the human condition with particular focus on the perils and predicament of her sex in their world. The very choice of a marginal novel like *If I Die Today* (1982) by an established writer like Shashi Deshpande for critical study demands explanation. The perception with aims at analysing into Deshpande's *If I Die Today* in such a way as to establish centrality of this work in the entire corpus of Deshpande's writings.

Keywords: Ideology, Feminist Consciousness, Creative Endeavour, Predicament, Choice.

On the surface, Deshpande's *If I Die Today* appears to be a campus fiction, which was practised by the British novelists like Kingsley Amis, Tom Sharpe, Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge in the 1970's and 1980's. The centre of action in the novel is the S. D. M. College and Hospital established by the present and his father with a dream to make it "the best in the country" by snaring "the best he could" (2). Ironically of late the campus has been the site of murders. It is in this background that Guruji, a cousin of Doctor Ashok's, suffering from cancer, is admitted there for treatment. His illness, his attitude to life, his admission in the lives of the medical doctors and their families and his death add to the already disturbed, otherwise still, atmosphere of the campus. True to his name this Guru from Ashok's village has risen above "all human weak-ness and crossed that dreadful barrier... the eternal human fear of death" (9). He has come to accept his impending death, which other around him have not, in such a way as they find it impossible "to think of him as a patient" (6). His character is a potent novel. Brimming with multiple meanings it is read differently by different characters on different occasions. He is to Meera, Ashok's wife, "a rather peculiar man... a sadhu...or sanyasi or something... not really, but like that" (5), 'unusual', 'unique', 'horribly frank' (8), 'A brave man'. A saint ready to give himself, capable of 'breaking all barriers, ignoring all formalities and approaching you directly as a human being' (9). He is 'all of a piece with no false facade' to Manju, the narrator, and "an interfering fool" (83) to Cynthia, "a saint... a black-mailer" (68), "a sick guy" (16) and "either a malicious man or a silly fool" (101). Since he is 'different' from all around him and has begun to "see himself as a spectator" (9) of the drama on the campus, he becomes a disturbing and dangerous presence on the campus hunted by the death of Prabhakar Tambe, 'a leader of the workers in the Sethji's Mills' having genuine feeling for the workers. A man in a million (103), due to wrong diagnosis of his case.

Since his death is shrouded in mystery, the campus is raucous with whispers, conjectures and confabulations. At the party hosted by Rani, the Dean's wife who lives in a flat in Bombay away from her husband and joins her husband when her children come to visit their parents from the boarding schools, Guru and Manju discuss the case of a convict who has confessed the murders of more than forty people. A few days later Guru is found dead in his sleep, and involvement of some medical staff member is suspected. The doubts are further aggravated by the behaviour of Mriga, Dr. Kulkarni's hyper-sensitive daughter, whose insinuations suggest that her father is involved in Guru's murder. The death of Sumanta's wife adds to the on-going dance of death and an erstwhile nurse Vimala is implicated in it. When Mriga finds Tony "floating in the tank near the temple (28), the fear-ridden psyche of the campus gets worsened. Its impact on the sensitive soul of Mriga

is revealed by the novelist. Mriga becomes hysteric and dreams of an imaginary accident and her subsequent death in a hospital leaving her hard-hearted father heartbroken. It is only after murderous attack on Vijay, the narrator's husband, in the dark of the night that the true identity of the murderer is revealed, who is none other than Dr. Vidya, the sister of the Dean, whose psychic derangements caused by her secluded life and brother-fixation, compel her to behave, unlike others in her profession, in a way no better than that of "the insane animal of the night" (133).

Deshpande's preoccupation with death, murder, nightmarish suspense in the novel betrayed as it is in this novel, is discernible also in her novels like *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983) and *The Binding Vine* (1983). It attains dimension of existential dilemma in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) through Sarita, in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) through Indu, and in *That Long Silence* through Jaya. The novel seems to be a script of a popular movie combining thrill, mystery, suspense and horror in it in the manner of Agatha Christie. It is due to the anxiety of Christie's influence that the novelist differentiates her characters in the novel from Christie's.

Without disrespecting the authorial or narratorial intentions it has to be conceded, however, that Deshpande was to good measure influenced by Christie, and that she strives to exploit with considerable success techniques of popular fiction with a tight plot and plausible characters. The twists in the plot are brilliant. She builds the suspense regarding the identity of the murderer, and multiplies it by withholding its disclosure. She is a step ahead of her readers imagination. But what makes her different is perceptible in her marginal voices which contain her central concerns in them. But for these voices - be they regarding life and death or woman-hood or motherhood- the novel would have been a cheap popular hackwork. She exhibits in ample measure that her work is an acceptance of death, 'the fated journey of Plato, but in no terms celebration of murder. It is a candid rejection of murder, the narrator speaks of it as "hateful, a cruel rejection of a man's humanity, his right to live" (109). The death was inevitable in case of Tambe, Guru and Tony as it is in case of those whom they have left behind. But the realization of the way they prematurely reach their destination is tragic and utterly inhuman, for it is not only denial of their potentialities but of their right to live. The saving grace of the whole situation is that almost all reject rejection of life and that "life... goes on as before", which is another truth, and the people strain, if unsuccessfully, towards "becoming better persons", as they strive to "come through the ordeal purified and cleansed" having "learnt... [their] lessons yet another realization pertaining to fuller understanding of human predicament dawn on these people, life is never so definite as all

that. We can never change overnight. We are chained to our old selves, and can do no more than muddle on, coping with each day as it comes" (37). Definite it may not be, but life, as Deshpande presents it in the novel, goes on. After a string of tragic deaths life sprouts again through the narrator who gives birth to a baby girl the day after that terrible night (38). It is this assertion and celebration of life that makes Deshpande's work different from a popular writer - be it Agatha Christie or someone else, for novel as such is exploration of human situation and life in fictional terms with a rich imaginative fullness where the sole interest does not lie in the surprising turns of the plot and in mystery of 'whodunit' but in the life which it generates and in the active participation that it depicts.

As an excellent novelist that Shashi Deshpande presents the predicament of women in such a way as would voice her concerns for problems and perils of those of her sex. But she is not self-conscious, as for instance Anita Desai often is, or writing for effect. Further, her particular female characters on occasions more than one contain larger, if not universal, connotations. In *If I Die Today*, as in her other novels, one of the concerns of the novelist is to depict what happens to women after marriage. What they have been, what they have become, and what is in store for them. On the surface, all is well with her middle-class women. They have a relatively happy married life with their not so badly placed husbands and are blessed with children in most cases. Yet there is something rotten in the state of their domestic and married life, for which to a considerable extent their spouses are somehow responsible.

Education, economic independence, and motherhood to disturb the existing equation. The lives of Manju and Vijay is a telling instance of it. In this kind of relationship neither the husband (Vijay) is of an out and out bad sort, nor is the wife (Manju) a clingy woman who sets out to be a victim. She has been a loving, affectionate understanding wife before she turned into an emotional pretzel. Now she is neither content nor confident. She is in a rather miserable state and unable to see that her feelings of misery are not due to her faults. She seems to have become a victim of what psychologists call a passive aggressive husband who neither hits the wife nor says even a single angry word to her, but by his actions, words and sly comments makes her feel guilt-ridden and censured. It is through this tender trap that Manju and others like her are controlled by their male counterparts. Manju finds her married life fraught with silences and barriers. Even the second pregnancy which is supposed to bring husband and wife closer fails to deliver the desired result, as she feels being slowly silenced and distanced from her motherhood, and finds her first daughter against her wishes

growing up and clinging to her father like a vine. Her gynaecologist thinks it as "the case with a second pregnancy" when the husband "isn't cossetting you enough" (13). It seems that the mother-hood is the cause of Manju's misery, and it makes her "feel like a breeding animal" (12). The real problem, however, does not lie in womanhood, wifehood or motherhood but in the attitude of the middle-class male which deprivileges the woman against the man the moment she becomes a wife. Manju avers: "A marriage. You start off expecting so many things. And bit by bit, like dead leaves, the expectations fall off. But... two people who have shut themselves off in two separate glass jar? Who can see each other but can't communicate? Is this a marriage?" (24).

The marriage is almost on the verge of wreckage and "It's the Indian male" (27) who emerges as the villain and the fourth burden on the Indian Woman. Incidentally, the pattern of relationship remains more or less the same in various sets of relationships in the novel-be it the case of Manju and Vijay, Sumita and Shyam, Suman and Vimala, Shanta and Kulkarni, Meera and Ashok or Cynthia and Tony. Even the 'oh-so-Kulkarni after all is "just a traditional Hindu male" longing for a son and foreign' Dr. Heir, and has reduced his wife Shanta to a dull, colourless "shadow of her husband" (36). The narrator finds the 'given' motherhood as a burden. Womanhood without motherhood remains inadequate but it inveigles a woman into dependence, and reduces her to a shadow of her husband. In such a state she has no other place but her husband to go, which ironically falls short of becoming home, for an invisible wall stands between their hearts. Faced with the question "Are you going back home?" the narrator ruminates:

Was I? Yes, where else could I go? But was I going home because there was no other place? And yet, what could I do? There was Sonu. And this child to come. For a moment, I resented them bitterly. Motherhood, I thought. It's a trap. Keeping you in cage until you lose the desire for freedom; until you forget what the word 'freedom' means (47).

Even the issueless wives suffer in the novel. The novelist examines the plight of women from a different perspective by presenting the case of an economically independent non-Hindu family and thereby suggesting that the fate of a woman remains the same irrespective of caste, culture, religion or economic status. All was more than well with Tony and Cynthia before marriage. But with the cold touch of marriage new problems crop up. The question 'who earns more of the two? matters more than any-thing else in marriage, for Cynthia is a medico and her husband Tony just a Games master. At least Tony feels so (84). Cynthia also

understands the malaise that has crept in their marriage and the reasons behind "his going downhill".

According to her, Tony "had an odd complex too about my being a doctor. If I'd given up my job and become the pathetically clinging female, maybe things could have gone right between us" (95).

In most of these cases marriage seems to have failed or reached the point of wreckage, in spite of education, economic independence and material well-being. For Guru nevertheless marriage is a "relationship in which one dispenses with masks" (41). Ironically, women are at the receiving end. Although majority of them have learnt to live with their fate like Shyama has, and most of them like Meera have to suffer "despair" (4), their newly acquired consciousness prompts them to voice their agony and angst. It is their middle-class mentality that dissuades them from revolting against the tyranny. Even this is no mean achievement on their part because the mentality of the class they come from leaves little scope for its rebels. The "articulation of one's feelings and reactions are in itself heralding of a revolt and must be taken as such" (Chandra 1996: 61).

Shashi Deshpande explores in *If I Die Today* her favourite themes, of which woman's condition remains her principal preoccupation. She continues with it in her works like *That Long Silence*, in which Jaya examines the state of her existence, and resists from being defined with reference to her husband -as a footnote to him, that compliments but has no independent existence. The doctor invites her to visit him but only with Mohan, her husband: 'With your husband, of course'-what did he mean by that? Was it impossible for me to relate to the world without Mohan? A husband is like a sheltering tree.... Vanita mami, did you, without knowing it, speak the most profound truth I'm destined to hear in my life" (Deshpande 1989: 167). But as elsewhere, the novelist does not show the courage with which to explore the woman situation as would endear her to the feminist school. In *If I Die Today* also toward the end a baby girl is born to the narrator and is named Gauri, the name being her husband's choice. And she too 'let it be' (38). This is symbolic of reconciliation between the husband and the wife not only in the narrator's family but in all other families; the novelist intends to end the novel with an optimistic and conciliatory note.

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