

Gauri Deshpande: A Trend Breaker in Indian English Poetry

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“She (Gauri Deshpande) is a mature poet, aware that neither passion nor disillusionment are simple emotions and the texture of her best poetry is accordingly complex. Most of her verse is marked by a sense of sadness and loss”

- Sherwyn T. Carr

Abstract: A strong vein of sexuality is what makes Deshpande similar to Kamala Das, but unlike Kamala Das, Deshpande believes that love is bliss and conjugality. In Eunice de Souza’s observation, there is, in the poetry of Deshpande, “a great deal about blood and sweat and clenched teeth, and about “lashing” and “throbbing”, the final effect for the reader is not one of intensity but embarrassment” (de Souza 86). Deshpande explores conflicts, problems and complexities between man and woman. She also explores how marriage creates troubles in life of a married woman and marital bliss in her works. She talked about how marriage turns out to be a suicidal web for woman; they become enslaved by their husbands and marriage turns out to be an unpleasing experience.

Introduction

Gauri Deshpande, born in 1942, is a famous bilingual poet, short story writer and novelist in Marathi and English. She writes poetry in English, fiction in Marathi and journalism in both. She has published three volumes of poetry: *Between Births* (1968), *Lost Love* (1970) and *Beyond the Slaughter House* (1972). She has edited *An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry* (1974) and translated sixteen volumes of *Arabian Nights* into Marathi. She writes short

stories in Marathi and also has written three novels in Marathi. She was born to Irawati Karve and Dinkar Karve. After finishing her high school education in Poona, she received an M.A. in English Literature and her Ph.D. in English from Poona University.

The main reason for her writing poetry is to release the tension which builds up in her and does not find any other outlet and her poems freely express her thoughts, ideas and feelings. She is regarded as a trend breaker in Indian English poetry, by breaking conventional attitudes. Deshpande explicitly expresses a woman's psychology in her poems (Tamhankar).

Poetry is a channel through which true identity and spirit of a woman can be revealed. Deshpande has a highly feminist voice. She has said : "I could still churn out Indian English poems by the bushel, but I began to see, thanks to Nissim (Ezekiel) that what I have is a knack, a talent, not a calling. My calling is narrative fiction, mostly in Marathi, and thanks to Nissim, I discovered it" (Rao 155).

Her poetry at its best involves a passionate involvement with the existential angst of the modern woman confronted with her inability to find meaningful relationships in society. She belongs to the group of confessional poets. Her 'love' poems bring out the eroticism in her whereas her 'death' poems show us her feminist side. In order to get relief from pain, she uses momentary escape and for permanent relief, death is an ultimate way. Like Keats, she too suggests that the final respite in life from pain is only through death.

She discloses her feminine sensibility in various forms and different roles- as a wife, beloved, mother, daughter and a sister. She is a woman and knows the bond of womanhood. Her poetry deals with the life, problems, experiences and expressions of woman. She emphasizes individual identity and freedom. She extends feminism to humanism. Deshpande's work deals mostly with everyday life. According to C.P. Singh, her poems:

show an artist in making, a struggling towards the happy blending between deep experience and a congruent poetic form that makes a gem of art out of the raw metal of personal life.

(Tamhankar)

Keki N. Daruwalla also comments on her poetic style and adds that:

Gauri Deshpande's poetry deals with the minutiae of everyday life, the coming of a lover, the death of a puppy dog, ingratitude of children. Everything is grist to her mill, from city with greasy caress and harsh endearments to a trees cape.

(Daruwalla 44)

Women's psychology in Deshpande's poetry

Between Births (1968), her first collection talks sensitively about the frustration and loneliness which comes from the meaningless relationship. Lost Love (1970) breaks the sensuous handling of love and talk about a bold encounter with sexuality. Her major preoccupation with man-woman relationships finds expression in a series of poems. These poems range from the sexual treatment of love to abortion, barrenness and old age. She also talks about the dilemma of lost love. In Beyond the Slaughter House (1972) she talks about the employed women in a busy city like Mumbai. In "The Eclipse" she is forced to accept her alienation, and in "December" she accepts love but 'hesitates because it chains her'. "Workaday Women" explores the predicament of a woman who has lost her responsiveness to love.

Her poetry is full of sensuality, and deals with the rebellion of modern Indian women against male dictatorship. Her works are mainly focused on: man-woman relationship, death, sense of alienation and frustration, identity crisis, recognition and urge for feminine sensibility. She employs the theme of love

and human relationships in her poetry. She is at her best in short poems. She is bold enough to interpret the man-woman relationship in terms of sex.

“The Female of the Species” is a simple poem about the female world conveying feminine feelings. In this poem she simply communicates with the world as a woman. A woman is able to comprehend the feeling and experiences of other women, rather than a man. When a woman needs to have a heart to heart talk on love, despair, and sadness along with the ungratefulness of children, she prefers a woman companion as talking to men has no value. Men can never understand a woman’s feelings:

Sometimes you want to talk
 About love and despair
 And the ungratefulness of children
 A man is no use whatever then.
 You want then your mother
 Or your sister
 Or the girl with whom you went to through the school (Paniker 55)

Women crave for the company of the same sex to talk about their emotional feelings, as they have a common feminine language to share. A woman is able to get involved and experience the equivalent sensations. As they drink tea and talk, they talk about how they manage house by telling how they are affected by the hike in cost of provisions. They know each other’s position and condition in the family, but still they never discuss such things, but they simply know. The children are the last hope in the life of a woman from where she can expect some respect and love, especially after suffering in marriage, but the children here are ungrateful and do not love the mother. This situation is very common in India; women chat with each other which makes them happy and content, but their hearts hold the secret desires and pains of their family life. They are communicating silently, and this silent communication gives them relief and makes them happy.

... Speak of the rate of rice
 And the price of tea
 And the scarcity of cheese.
 You know both that you've spoken
 Of love, despair and ungratefulness of children. (Paniker 55)

In her poems, one finds man-woman relationship described in many ways - love they are subjected to, search for identity, love and its loss and pain, sensitivity of the female world, memories of love and also experiencing loneliness. Like Kamala Das, man-woman relationship and its frustration and tension are one of her major themes apart from isolation and lost love. A strong vein of sexuality is what makes Deshpande similar to Kamala Das, but unlike Das, Deshpande believes that love is bliss and conjugality. In Eunice de Souza's observation, there is in the poetry of Deshpande "a great deal about blood and sweat and clenched teeth, and about "lashing" and "throbbing"; the final effect for the reader is not one of intensity but embarrassment" (de Souza 86). Deshpande explores conflicts, problems and complexities between man and woman. She also explores how marriage creates troubles in life of a married woman and marital bliss in her works. She talked about how marriage turns out to be a suicidal web for woman; they become enslaved by their husbands and marriage turns out to be an unpleasing experience. She explains the same concept in "Man and Woman":

...she could with such ease
 Be enslaved by your skillful hands
 Beggar's heart and form
 Himalayan heights
 Condescend to warm your bed
 Stiffen your motherhood
 And hear your spawn (Barbuddhe 267)

History has records of having woman only as sex objects. According to Karl Marx "marriage... is incontestably a form of exclusive private property"

(Nagar). After marriage a woman becomes a slave of the husband and lawfully he is her master. She is a sexual object for him and her wishes and desire do not have any importance and value for him or any other family member. She has to be a mother and bear him sons.

“On a Lost Love” deals with her experience of love and sexuality. In this poem she metaphorically presents a meeting between the donor and the receiver in the sexual intercourse. Earth and rain are used as metaphors to denote the act of consummation. Deshpande finds correspondence to her painful sentiments in nature. Nature connects the loose ends of memories and emotions. She writes:

I am earth
 Vast deep and black
 And I receive
 ...
 Yellow daisies burst out
 On my breast and thigh
 At its every touch (Deshpande, Lost Love 22-23)

A woman has to take part in the sexual act either by her wish or forcefully. Her husband has full right over her body and he can use it the way he wants and wishes to. Again, here Deshpande has used the metaphor of nature to express her feeling and mood. Most of her love poems create the effect of embarrassment in love and not of its intensity.

“Summer” reflects the desire and passion which Deshpande has yearned for. For Deshpande, ‘flowers’ are the symbol of sustenance to life. She articulates her pain of separation from her lover through the image of dry trees that:

Refuse to fruit or flower
 and birds don’t nest in them.

...

While I wait with infinite patience
 The blooming of disenchantment. (Deshpande, Lost Love 22)

Like many other female poets who use weather to display their mood and emotions, Deshpande also does the same. By speaking about rain in the drought stricken land she uses a typical classical idea. Rain is a symbol for joy and relief. In “A Change of Season”, changes in her emotions are displayed as the change in the seasons:

All the time that day in June
 I shivered

...

And I dreamt in the night of long travels
 When I woke up the sky was heavy
 And then it rained. (Deshpande, Between Births)

The rain relieves her of all the exhaustion and heaviness. The month of June in India is the hottest month of the year and Deshpande even shivers in that hot weather. She even enjoys the rain in the month of June. In this poem she recapitulates the bodily malaise, the uncouth emotional fits and ever-prevailing sense of fear and despondency.

She deals with love and sexuality in such a way that it shows how dissatisfied she is, with the society, which demands silent acceptance of women. She is not as aggressive as poets like Mamta Kalia and Eunice De Souza, but her suffering and pain is clearly visible in her writings. Her wish for a heaven-like world is shown in “Integration” when she says:

I'm affected by a prowling unrest
 And know not what to do
 With my fists that clench and unclench
 Thoughts come pouring in my eyes
 And drain away leaving a whorl of dirt.

If only it'd rain
 If only I'd die
 If only there were someone to fall in love with.
 If only the day was all done with. (Rana)

She wishes for her death because of the failure in her married life. Her attitude towards death is not steady, it keeps on changing. Death is a reliever, friend, lover and brother. She personifies death as a man, which symbolizes her attitude towards man as she does not find difference in death and man, also her dealing with death poems shows the normal attitude of a man somewhere is killing her. Instead of using “she” or “it”, she uses only “he” in most of her poems while talking about death. “In Absentia” is a poem dealing with love and the tension of parting. The issue is handled with sincerity. The lover is the ‘death bringer’ as well as the carrier of pleasure. His absence results in unhappiness. She writes:

Breath held
 I wait for your coming
 For, from that moment
 I must start to live
 The coming of your departure. (Deshpande, Lost Love)

Meeting of lovers is directly related to their parting; as soon as they meet, they know they have to be separated. The same thing is with death. As soon as a child born, with its every breath, it is going closer to the death and this is same with every human being. We know death is there as soon as a life started. She is talking about the same thing in her poem.

For Deshpande, love has to be a communion at the level of heart and mind. “Poems in Winter” is a long poem of three cantos, and talks about the rejection and disappointment in a woman’s life. The barrenness of her life does not allow any seed of love to grow and she remains depressed and disheartened at this absence of belongingness. “Poems in Winter” deals with

how emotional satisfaction, tenderness and care remained unfulfilled in her life:

In the autumn of my life
(is spring so far behind?)
I can stand no more
Anguish..... (Deshpande, Between Births 23)

For her, the presence of the lover is more comforting. When he is present, she feels the emptiness of his presence and so, finds his absence more fruitful. She says:

When the vast barrenness
of your presence confronts me
I feel your absence fruitful.
In you personified were all
My loves unreached. (Deshpande, Between Births 23)

Deshpande defines love in terms of sex only in a limited number of poems. The awareness of sex gradually becomes an integral part of her total awareness of love only in her later works.

“Laying of Ghosts” communicates her sense of guilt for the aborted children. In honest and frank tone she said:
But what of those I rejected,
Those that are dead
Those accidental sowings cleaned out
In minutes without pain? (Paniker 56)

Women are forced to go for the abortion if they become pregnant before marriage and for many women, this incident haunts them for the rest of their lives. It is again something which is forced on them because society does not

allow a woman to be pregnant before marriage or to indulge in sex before marriage.

In “Death” the female persona is shown as waiting for her “lover” who is death in reality but she has presented it as her husband. She waits impatiently for death and cannot wait more for the meeting. According to Rashmi Bajaj: “she has not revealed a consistent attitude towards death” (Bajaj). Sometimes death is her friend, sometimes a lover or brother, in her words:

... you are my friend,
My brother who held my hand at every bend,
My lover about whose neck I must fall now. (Rana)

She knows that love is a route to death - of freedom and individuality. With the entry of love in a woman’s life, she loses her identity and freedom and has to work and live according to her lover or husband. She further describes that her mourning for lost love is useless, and the certainty of death:

Without wondering how,
When, why, or where
We live and meet with death
Turning a street corner.
But I want to see him coming scan his face joyously. (Rana)

She knows one day death will come, but what she desires for is meeting with death and wants to see how it feels and looks like. She further adds the question for the time for meeting the death, because she cannot wait anymore and is impatient for the meeting. She invites death by saying:

How long must I walk
These long and wind some streets
Before I meet
You? (Rana)

When she finds that death is approaching her in “The Habit”, suddenly she finds she is a stranger to death:

Now when I see him crossing a street
 To me, coming swiftly
 How am I going to get used to him,
 It’s the first time
 And I’ve had no time. (Rana)

When finally death arrives, it does not give any warning or sign. It just comes suddenly and because of this, her wish to scan death’s face is unfulfilled. We know it is coming the very moment it arrives and not before it. So she cannot scan its face and there is no time for her to know or analyze it.

She knows very well the condition of normal Indian woman and how they compromise and adjust to their circumstances. But adjustment and compromise only make the man happy, but doesn’t let the woman lead a life of peace and tranquility. This gives birth to frustration and despair. This results in lifelong pain and suffering.

In Beyond The Slaughter House, Deshpande enters the life of employed women in Bombay (now Mumbai). Like Mamta Kalia, Deshpande interprets the experiences of working women excellently through her poems. The working women lose their identity when they come out of their houses. “Where Do the Lonely People Live” is a reiteration of the loss even of gender roles within a changing society. “Where Do the Lonely People Live” talks about this:

...And none
 of us bear any longer
 the usual marks, such as:
 mother, whore, matron, maid.

...

I have heard of the great
Silence of cities where lonely men
In garret rooms look upon
Falling main. (Deshpande, Beyond The Slaughter House)

In “Work A Day Poem” the poet remarks ironically how working women lose their natural sensitiveness to the impact of love.

The too solid flesh
Will refuse
When he demands that it melt
at a saturday touch. (Deshpande, Beyond The Slaughter House)

A normal woman has to do a lot of housework, but the burden of work is multiplied millions of time more for a working woman. She has to do her official work along her household responsibility and with so much stress and work, she is not able to enjoy her sexual life.

“To Shiva” deals with her quest for divine lover. She is always in search of lord, who is imperishable and invincible. In this age of modernism, god is dethroned and religion is dislodged, but still, she wishes for a divine lover and talks about her search:

Much have you made me wander
On the face of the earth
Looking at the face of men
When I searched for the face
Of a god to be burnt
In the glory of his third eye. (Deshande, Lost Love 13)

She is not satisfied with the love in her life and she demands from lord Shiva to come into her life and to be a part of her love life.

Conclusion

Like all other new women, Deshpande has emerged with her own desires, ambitions and quests to break away age-old customs and beliefs. Her poems not only give voice to her emotions and experiences, but also give birth to dilemma and conflicts.

Her poetry is full of sensuality, and deals with the rebellion of modern Indian women against male dictatorship. Her works are mainly focused on: man-woman relationship, death, sense of alienation and frustration, identity crisis, recognition and urge for feminine sensibility. She employs the theme of love and human relationships in her poetry. She is at her best in short poems. She is bold enough to interpret the man-woman relationship in terms of sex.

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