



QUEST FOR FREEDOM AND EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S MOVING ON

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Abstract

The issue of empowerment of women, which is a central concern for feminism, is conceptually interconnected with the concepts of identity and freedom. Unless and until the possibility of having a stable identity and freedom is assumed, all deliberations regarding empowerment become redundant. The concept of identity is crucially important as it provides a locus for freedom and fulfils a precondition of empowerment.



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Discussion: The term 'empowerment of women' emanated from the Third World feminists' and gained popularity during the years 1976-1996. The Third World feminists differed from Western feminists in the latter's anti-male thinking and attitudes. Their own situations and conditions differed from those of Western feminists because "in the struggle against racism, colonialism, neo-colonialism and class dominations the Black feminists and the Third world feminists felt a unity with their male counterparts and did not see men as... a warping and destructive lot. They agreed with the Western feminists that, at one level, there did exist a gender struggle, gender power play and gender politics to the detriment of women but they felt that the solution lay in the 'empowerment of women' in all spheres" (Parvin 72). Indian women writers such as Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Geeta Mehta, Namita Gokhale, Shashi Deshpande and many others in their writings have deftly portrayed the predicament of Indian women in a patriarchal society and have encouraged them to empower themselves. These women writers believe in the strength women have and motivate them to make use of this strength in dealing with the problems of their lives. As Shashi Deshpande states in her interview with Chandra Holm, "Yes, I do believe that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually we have reserves we are often unaware of. But for women the situation is made more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength, because a woman's strength seems to weaken a man"(Interview 5).

In her novels, Shashi Deshpande delves deep into the psyche of her female protagonists and lays bare their conflicts, tensions, dilemmas and problems. Her female protagonists feel themselves trapped between the stereotypical roles assigned to them by society and their own desires to have an autonomous self. Overpowered by one or the other crisis in their lives, they are forced to take stock of their lives and self-analyse themselves. On self introspection they find that they have no desire, 'want' and identity of their own, as they have merged it in the identity of their husbands. They have made themselves 'puppets', 'ventriloquist's dummy' (The Dark 22) and just the shadows of their husbands. This awareness prompts them to carve an identity of their own, have freedom to take the decisions of their lives and empower themselves to face life in all its complexity.

Stine and Karina explain the term 'empowerment' as "a process by which the disempowered individual and groups gain the power to control their lives and the ability to make strategic life choice" (www. artnet.)

In this paper I intend to trace the female protagonist Manjari's (Jiji) journey towards identity, freedom and self-empowerment in Shashi Deshpande's latest novel *Moving On* (2004). The story of this novel comes through the narrator protagonist Manjari who reads the diaries of her father after his death. As she views the incidents of her life in a new light, thrown open by her father's revelations, her own memories are also stimulated. So the story unfolds itself and provides Manjari a chance to review and analyse her life retrospectively.

In Manjari's life, quest for identity, freedom and empowerment began after the death of her husband, Shyam. Her married life came to an abrupt end with the early demise of her husband. She was just twenty one years old at that time and was burdened with the responsibility of bringing up her one year old son, Anand. She had got married at the age of eighteen, with the person of her own choice, against the wishes of her parents, specially against her mother's strong protest and disapproval. After a few initial months of bliss, conflicts arose between the two-due to Shyam's poor financial condition. The tussles and quarrels increased and Manjari began to stay with her parents along with her little son, Anand. The final catastrophe in their relations was brought by her younger unmarried sister, Malu, who blamed Shyam for her pregnancy. Manjari separated from Shyam as she feels, "To be with him, to listen to him, to understand him, to be reconciled to him, was to be a traitor to Mai and Malu" (318). After giving birth to her daughter, Malu dies due to some post-natal complication. Jiji gets the news of Shyam's death, perhaps suicide by walking into

the sea. Shyam's death precipitates the crisis in Jiji's life and she is forced to make a quest for her identity, freedom and empowerment.

Meena Kelker and Deepti Gangarane define empowerment as providing power to powerless group. "The identity of a group to be empowered is defined in terms of the similarities and differences it has with other groups, both powerless as well as powerful". They further state that "coming specifically to the issue of empowerment of women and that of gender identity, it can be said that gender discrimination and subordination of women resulting from it is the basic characteristic with reference to which an identity is bestowed on women as a group to be empowered" (Kelkar 23-24).

Women are generally placed in dependent-financially, emotionally and psychologically-category; having no independent identity of their own. But Manjari decides not to be dependent on anyone. She mourns Shyam alone, allowing nobody to share her grief. Her father asks her to come back home and forgive her mother but she flatly refuses. She decides to take the rudders of her life in her own hands. Henceforward she decides to be the architect of her own fate. To quote Henrik Ibsen, Manjari feels, I must take steps to educate myself/You are not the man to help me there/ That's something. I must do on my own" (Quoted in Sree 26). The first step which she takes in this direction is that of financial self-dependence. Rejecting all help from her parents she decides to bring up her one year old son on her own. Determined not to take anybody's help, she joins various jobs one after another as an ayah in a school, a salesgirl, a typist, a P.T. teacher and a nurse. After her mother's death, she takes Sachi's (Malu's daughter's) responsibility on herself as she had promised to her dying mother that she would treat Sachi as her own daughter. Jiji joins her father when she comes to know that he is suffering from cancer. He loves his grand children, Anand and Sachi, very much and makes Sachi the owner of his house. Thus Manjari succeeds in establishing her identity, as an independent woman.

The issue of empowerment rests on another assumption too: the assumption of freedom as an all important characteristic of human nature. Freedom is generally understood as freedom from injustice, suppression, exploitation and such other evils. It also signifies freedom to know, act and enjoy, capacity to do something, to take independent decisions. The feminists have correlated the issues of freedom and notion of gendered identity. Both the senses of freedom-"freedom from" and "freedom to" presuppose that freedom is something to be achieved, to be demanded or to be given. In order to attain freedom, to live one's life the way

one wants, empowerment at the basic level is always in terms of “freedom to” or “freedom from” (Kelkar 25).

The second step in Manjari’s quest for empowerment is her decision to live a life, full of freedom. She seems to feel:

Walk, and arise your fist

Affirm your decision to be free

Don’t walk three yards behind

It’s your place by right. (Quoted in Sree 69)

Manjari enjoys both aspects of freedom “freedom to” and “freedom from”. As her children have grown up and live in the hostel, she has absolute freedom to do what she likes and to live life according to her own wishes and desires. She does not allow Raja, her father’s friend BK’s son, to have his way in her matters. When she wants to have a car of her own, Raja questions her, “why do you need a car?” At this she says, “What do you mean *why*? I bet if I were a man, you’d never have asked that question” (65) When Raja says that she should be careful about spending her money, she retorts, “You forget I’ve been supporting myself and two children all these years. I can still do that. I’ll get a job” (65). She buys a car and joins a driving school to learn driving. She is bold enough to face the risks. She asks the instructor not to use the brakes on his side “How would I learn if I didn’t have to cope with the risks myself?” (84) She learns driving and gets a license. Raja sends a driver for her safety but soon she dispenses away his help by saying that she can manage on her own. Besides enjoying “freedom to” she fully avails “freedom from” also. She wants to have freedom from anybody’s dictates, restrictions and interference. That is why she rejects Raja’s repeated proposal of getting married with him. She wants to live life on her own terms and conditions without staking her freedom. In the words of Chanchala K.Naik, “Manjari’s struggle for freedom and for being autonomous is theoretically a challenge to patriarchy, not confronting it headlong but in discovering one’s own strength as a woman”(222). Slowly and gradually, she starts moving ahead towards self-empowerment. Observing Manjari’s life closely, it can be said that

Freedom is a state of mind where in one can doubt and question everything and therefore it is so intense, active and vigorous that it throws away every form of dependence, slavery and acceptance. Freedom in this sense is not

freedom from external things but freedom from our own internal prejudices that have created bondage for us. (Kelkar 25)

Manjari's real strength and self-dependence are put to test when she gets threatening phone calls from Mafia, who want her to sell her house to them. Her maid, Ratna, asks her to tell Raja about it but she feels, "I want the brakes under my feet, not someone else's. I don't want a dual control, the control should be mine, mine alone"(88). After a few days, she is physically assaulted by an intruder at night who almost rapes her. In a terrified state she informs Raja, who seeks police protection for her and installs some safety measures in the house.

Although Manjari is scared, she decides not to succumb to any pressure of under world people and wants to protect Sachi's house at any cost. "This is what they want; they are trying to reduce me to this shivering cowardly mass of fear. I won't be scared" (67). She plans to stab the person if he comes again. She wonders at the changes in her life. After Shyam's death she had become "implacable, unyielding, refusing to accept anything from her mai, .or from Baba..."and now to protect a house, she was ready to kill a person, "from where had this woman come? Had she been there all the while, concealed behind the so-eager-to-please Jiji? And now this ready-for-violence person" (142).

At night Manjari feels herself struck with terror but she decides to live alone instead of asking Ratna to sleep with her. "I don't want to become dependent, to get used to crutches"(145). Her attitude shows that she is on her way to self-empowerment.

She falters only at one point-when she is unable to resist the demands of her body. She is shocked at the sudden response of her body to her tenant, Raman's casual touch. She enters into physical relations with him, but here also she plays the game according to her terms and conditions. "He tries to speak, to say something, but I stop him abruptly, harshly... only the body, his body, only my body, my starved body. No thoughts, no feelings, only sensations" (275). She thinks about Raja's reaction, then immediately rejects the thought, feeling, she owes him nothing, "This is my business, mine alone" (261). She justifies herself by reflecting that she is not doing something wrong; she is just meeting the demands of her body. She asserts herself as an individual and freely expresses her sexuality. In the words of Kelkar, freedom enables a person

to look at oneself as a person and go beyond the various roles imposed by the society. Awareness of oneself as an independent person, as a free being will

liberate a woman and she will not expect that others will free her. The real bondage is within and once that is thrown there is the sunrise of knowledge.

(Kelkar 26)

Although Manjari does not feel any sense of shame or guilt for expressing her sexuality but she realizes that she has hurt Raja's feelings. Raja's hurt forces her to have a peep inside herself and understand her mistakes. Upanishads also stress upon the understanding of self.

To quote from *Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad*:

Verily, O Maitreyi, it is the self that should be seen, heard of, reflected and meditated upon. Verily, by the seeing of, by the hearing of, by the thinking of, by the understanding of the Self, all this is known.

(Radha Krishnan 197).

She undergoes self-analysis and recalls that her mother used to call her "Ghodi", meaning clumsy. "And I was that: dropping things, banging into doors and walls" (285). She feels that clumsiness has now shifted from her body to her behaviour. "Earlier, I'd been finally tuned to others' feelings, to their responses. Suddenly, I seemed to have lost that faculty; I became dense, uncaring of others' feelings, of Baba's and mai's pain, of Malu's hurt" (286). She realizes that she could not understand even Shyam's feelings and now she had badly hurt Raja's feelings. "Today I saw his anger and grief. The anger of a rejected male, the grief of a lover." This realization of her insensitivity towards the feelings of others paves her way to emotional empowerment.

She answers Raja's all accusations and feels herself unburdened. Her revelations help her to resolve her own doubts also. She observes that her daughter, Sachi, is happy in Raja's family.

She thinks

It is a dark night but I have no fears.... It is as if the terrors have gone back to where they belong, to their subterranean shelter.... And I think, even if it is over between Raja and me, there's something salvaged from the ruins, something remains: Sachi has found a family. (334)

She realizes the importance of inter-personal relations and reflects that she "can't go on shedding people, it is time to stop that" (312). In the words of Chanchala K. Naik

Individual autonomy involves one's identity as an independent individual that constitutes one's selfhood and is organized around one's

consciousness/awareness of oneself in relation to multiple other selves in society. (Naik 223)

This realization makes Manjari emotionally empowered too. The novel ends on an optimistic note as Raja again proposes her and she seems to think positively about it. She accepts Raja's offer to accompany him, as he is going to visit a site. She intensely feels the need of overcoming fears and prejudices in order to move on in life.

The word empowerment means to have power. Shashi. S. Narayna defines power "as control over resources and control of ideology and it is exercised through a series of orders or decision-making capacity. The resources over which control can be exercised fall into broad categories such as: physical resources (land, water, forests); human resources (people, their bodies, their labour and skills); intellectual resources (knowledge, information, ideas); financial resources (money, access to money); and self (that unique combination of intelligence, creativity, self-esteem and confidence) (Narayana 12).

In *Moving On* Manjari enables herself to have control over all types of above mentioned resources: physical-she protects her house from underworld people; human-she has right over her body and mind; intellectual-she has various plans for her future; financial-she is self-dependent; and self-she begins to understand her mistakes and decides to be careful about others' feelings too. Thus Manjari attains self-empowerment at multiple levels. Chanchala K. Naik also wants women to be autonomous which means

Instead of being economically, emotionally and psychologically dependent on men, they would independently nourish ambitions and pursue goals for self-fulfillment. (Naik 225)

Conclusion: This type of empowerment is possible only if the individual undergoes self-analysis, self-introspection and is willing to transform herself/himself. Manjari succeeds in attaining an independent identity of her own, having freedom to take decisions of her life and finally empowers herself at multiple levels-individually, financially, psychologically and emotionally. She can move on in her life boldly and energetically and work consistently for self-enhancement and self-fulfillment. This multidimensional empowerment enables Manjari to realize her full identity and power in all sphere in life.

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