



The Plight and the Harrowing Experiences of the Women in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

* B. Balaji Reddy ** M. M. Gopi

* Associate Professor of English, Department of HBS, SVP College of Engg. & Technology, RVS Nagar, K.N.Road, Puttur-517583, Chittoor (Dist), A.P. (State).

** Asst. Professor of English, Department of HBS, SVP College of Engg. & Technology, RVS Nagar, K.N.Road, Puttur-517583, Chittoor (Dist), A.P.(State).

ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist with four volumes of short stories, four children's books and eight novels to her credit. Though not an avowed feminist, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Deshpande feels that women have a tremendous inner strength, but so much of that strength is used up in merely enduring. The present paper attempts to explain the harrowing experiences of the women in the male-dominated society in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande.

Keywords : Shashi Deshpande, male-dominated society, protagonist, feminist.

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist with four volumes of short stories, four children's books and eight novels to her credit. She was born and brought up in Dharwad, Karnataka, and is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Sriranga, who is described as the Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre. Though not an avowed feminist, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity.

While it may not have been Deshpande's intention to propound any particular theory, even a cursory reading of her novels displays a tremendous amount of sympathy for women. Most of her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle.

A close study of Deshpande's novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. The relentless probing of man-woman relationship by the author intrigues the reader enough to question her stand on feminism.

The First full length novel of Deshpande's – *Roots and Shadows* highlights the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She finds herself alienated when she refuses to conform to the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings only disillusionment when she finds her educated and ostensibly progressive-minded husband no different from the average Indian male. She is even contemptuous of herself when she realizes that she has all along been unconsciously aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. The novel gains its feminist stance from Indu's persistent exploration of herself as an individual. An extra-marital affair helps

her to break free from the emotional bondage of matrimony and makes her aware of herself, and realizes that it is possible to exercise autonomy within the parameters of marriage. *Roots and Shadows* also offers us scope to observe meaningless rituals and customs all of which help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority. Seen through the novelist's eye, insignificant everyday details take on a new dimension and highlight the gross inequalities present in society.

Deshpande's another novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* seeks to discuss the male ego which refuses to accept a secondary position in marriage. The novel narrates the harrowing experience of the protagonist, Saru, who enjoys a greater economic and social status than her husband Manohar. The trauma of being the victim of her husband's frustration which manifests itself in the form of sexual sadism is vividly portrayed. Deshpande also makes the readers aware of society's reaction to the superior status of the wife in a marriage, which leads the husband to develop an inferiority complex. The novel also seeks to discuss the blatant gender discrimination which is shown even by parents towards their daughters. Deshpande effectively conveys the craving by parents for a male child and the disastrous effect it can have on a sensitive young girl. Denied of parental love and victim of her husband's frustrations, Saru undergoes an arduous journey into herself and liberates herself from guilt, shame and humiliation to emerge in full control over her life.

In the novel, *The Binding Vine*, Deshpande uses the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmi to focus attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira – victims of man's lust and woman's helplessness. The novelist makes a bold attempt to portray the agony of a wife who is the victim of marital rape – a theme which perhaps has not been touched upon by any other Indian writer in English. Urmi tries to reconstruct the pathetic story of a bright and attractive girl, Mira, who wrote poems in the solitude of an unhappy marriage to alleviate her suffering. Urmi also crusades for the cause of another victim, Kalpana, who is brutally raped and is on her death bed. The novelist deftly handles the juxtaposition of the two situations—rape committed within the precincts of marriage and outside it. The

novelist gives a moving account of the plight of women raped outside marriage, who would rather suffer in silence than be exposed to the humiliation involved in publicizing the event and that of married woman whose bodies are violated by their legally wedded husbands but who would never dare reveal this to anyone. They would rather stifle their voice of protest for the sake of social and moral security. Deshpande, through the voice of Urmi, also offers us a glimpse into the lives of myriad other women, who are ostensibly more liberated than their predecessors but, who, nevertheless, are victims of some form of violence or deprivation.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of all her work leaves one in no doubt about where Deshpande's sympathies lie. It would be unfair to label her 'feminist' and categorise her with several other writers who differ from her in varying degrees. She can at best be called an articulator of women who are caught at

the crossroads of change in a society which is undergoing the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. It is a difficult job, indeed, to give voice to women who themselves, are not sure of their own suffering and who stand in an unenviable position today. They are acutely aware of the injustices heaped on them but are condemned to live the life of suppression which was the lot of their predecessor. In many ways, their condition is even more pitiable than that of women of earlier generations who unquestioningly accepted their secondary position in society. All Deshpande's Protagonists are extremely intelligent, introspective and hyper sensitive women who embark on a quest for identity and the true meaning of life. In fact her fictional forte happens to be the exploration of the psyche of her women. Deshpande feels that women have a tremendous inner strength, but so much of that strength is used up in merely enduring. She has added a new depth, a new dimension to English Fiction.

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