ABSTRACT

Women, their Role and their Problems, in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

Deshpande’s women protagonists are engaged in an unconscious struggle to release themselves from the stranglehold of a tradition-bound society. They try to transcend the hurdles laid in the way of self-realisation but mostly fail. Deshpande’s works may be seen as a search for an authentic feminine discourse in which the community of women with a common heritage of oppression are trying to understand themselves and also work toward a positive social change. Her novels give voice to muted ideologies, registering resistance. She provides her women characters a context to understand themselves. She consistently explores the nature of the female world and its outlook. She also reconstructs the lost or suppressed or muted records of female experience. Even the words used as titles of the novels speak volumes of pain or oppression that women have—Dark, Terrors, Roots, Shadows, binding, Silence, Matter, Small Remedies, Move and Deceit.

Deshpande’s fiction ambivalently projects deconstruction as well as reconstruction of gender roles as her protagonists are constantly in search of inner spaces which is instrumental in the reconstruction of gender identity. Deshpande is most consistent in her exploration of women’s role and their problems. Hers is gynocentric. She has dealt with practically every problem raised by the women’s movement in India regarding the subordination of woman: rape, desertion, oppression, gender discrimination, male domination, violence and bonds and bondages of domesticity. She explores the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities, the complexities and
the contradictions. The pervasive note is that of the discomforts, dissatisfactions, and discontent experienced by women in their situation. The recurrent themes explored are: responsibility, motherhood, isolation and the need for physical / emotional space, the awareness of the impossibility of a united, monolithic identity and the fixed narrative position.

Her fictional women reject the social norms, declare their independence and venture forth in pursuit of higher ambitions. Her women are mostly cultural hybrids. They struggle with the cultural conflict of native traditions. They have a predominant tendency to question their roles, functions, attitudes, and behaviours. They subject themselves to a long and painful process of introspection. They revolt to unshackle themselves from the bondage of the feminine mystique and wish to be valued as human beings instead of simply as the wives, mothers, daughters and caretakers of man. A clear scrutiny of her novels reveals that her women have their roles and problems and struggle to obtain selfhood by dissolving their pessimism, by inculcating the strength to survive with dignity and by analysing their problems rationally. They rarely surrender themselves to anxiety, indoctrination, social conditioning and resultant oppression.