

EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's name is synonymous with Indian writing in English. Everyone has read her. She presents a realistic plight of middle class women who are torn between tradition and modernity and face a crisis of life internally. They are intellectual women who are confronted with existential problems like loneliness, emptiness, insecurities and disorientation. The present paper aims at analyzing in detail the existential concerns in some major novels of Shashi Deshpande.

Keywords: *Identity, Loneliness, Insecurity, Agony, Emptiness, Predicament.*

In the galaxy of Indian women writing, Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant position not only because she has raised feministic issues but also because she has provided a philosophical and intellectual colour to it. Being the daughter of a great Sanskrit scholar, she has a speculative bent of mind. In all her novels she tries to present her views about life and its problems.

Existentialism is a form of philosophical inquiry that explores the problem of human existence. It is a philosophical theory that people are free agents who have control over their choices and actions. The restrictions of society inhibit free will and proper development of a person. Existential perspectives are found in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* & his novel *No Exit*. Existential stance is displayed in the *Theatre of the Absurd*, notably in Samuel Beckett's famous work *Waiting for Godot*. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* also deals with the question of existence and man's dilemma in it. The writers apply this existential philosophy in their texts to describe the efforts of alienated and tormented humans to find a way in this hostile and irrational world.

Shashi Deshpande contemplates about human predicament and existential concerns. Loneliness of human existence haunts her constantly. She tries to probe deeper into the problems of the human psyche and unravel the mystery of life. Very often she expresses her views about 'self', 'soul', identity, loneliness, sorrows, and objective in life. Her novels *That Long Silence*, *Roots and Shadows*, *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *Matter of Time* and *Moving On*, etc. delve deep into the roots of existence itself crippled down by existential insecurity and uncertainty, It is the concept of self-awareness and self-identity of female protagonists which provides an 'existential strain' in her

novels. Many critics point out that feminism leads to existentialism. One of the primal concerns of feminism is to declare that a woman is a being. She is an autonomous being, capable of, through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. She writes:

“ From the limited perspective of women’s rights and suppression of women, feminist literature has moved a step ahead in the right direction– that of painting up, through a study of “feminine mystique,” that whether it is woman or man, the world we live in is disintegrated and all of us are alone. Loneliness, one of the concerns of modern society, is not a disease, but a symptom of man’s condition and this awareness is the first milestone in one’s journey into oneself.”¹

In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Saru, the heroine, leaves her parents’ home to find happiness and later she moves out of her husband’s house to seek an escape. But she is unable to achieve what she desired either time. Ultimately, she lends into the feeling of homelessness. She disintegrates from within and occasionally longs to be released from the existence itself. Confusion, she utters:

“ To be alone? Never a stretching hand? Never a comforting touch? Is it all a fraud then, the eternal cry of...my husband, my wife, my children, my parents? Are all human relationships doomed to failure? Would it always be a failure, any attempt to reach out to another human being? Had she been chasing a chimera all her life, hoping for someone? Perhaps the only truth is that man is born to be old, and lonely and alone.”²

Though Saru is a doctor by profession and is aware of the reality of the human body, she has no answer to the painful isolation that a human being confronts at some or the other point of time in life.

Indu in *Roots and Shadows* breaks away from her family, marries a man of her choice yet finds herself unable to detach herself from her roots. No matter she is independent and enjoys a social status, yet she is bogged down by a sense of loneliness. She finds herself in a vacuum in the midst of ‘shadows.’ It is not only conventional marriage that begets loneliness, but detachment is perceptible in marriage of choice too. The concept of merging together of two souls proves to be only an abstract idea and the concept of complete surrender transfers into the truth of separateness.

Jaya’s marriage to Mohan, instead of giving her a sense of completeness, alienates her from herself. Her frustrations and her dull attitude towards life indicate that she is facing an existential crisis. She believes there is escape from life’s monotony, not even death. Talking about the futility of life of

¹ P. 116, 1991

² P. 36, 1990

her seventeen years' marriage with Mohan, she says: "We loved together but there has been only emptiness between us."³

Alienation emerges as a natural consequence of the existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms and it is a natural feature of the human condition. Alienation is a feeling that one is a stranger in one's own life, a stranger in the world from other people as well as himself. Deshpande depicts her characters especially female protagonists suffering from this trait of alienation.

Deshpande's novel *Matter of Time* is so different in the sense that here the novelist makes a strong use of a male character, Gopal to depict an important aspect of her vision of existential crisis. The renunciation of Gopal's Sumi's husband is not due to saturation and contentment achieved in life but due to the pain he suffers in finding the meaning of life. He is scared of emptiness he suffers from within which becomes the reason for his stepping out of the family life. Gopal agrees with Camus' view, "Camus is right, we carry our places of exile within us. It entered into me too."⁴ He believes that a man is always an outsider. He finds all human fellowship useless and undergoes a feeling of stepping out of his body, you of this plane of existence. Gopal's wife Sumi also feels that emptiness is waiting for us and human ties are inky masquerade but she gathers strength to go and fulfills all her responsibilities.

The novel *Moving On* also presents the fact of mortality of human beings. According to her, we as human beings find it difficult to accept the truth of mortality and try to fool ourselves by indulging in things like our work, our attachments and our relations. Majari's father writes in her diary: "We live as if our existence is endless, as if it matters, as if the 'I' is of infinite significance."⁵ He feels that we are freak occurrences in a universe which itself is a freak occurrence. Manjari abodies by her father's views. She feels that we shall never find what we are looking for in other humans but we shall continue our process of search because it shall help us to move forward. Life is meant to go ahead.

Thus after reading Shashi Deshpande's works it becomes clear that she is not limited merely to the feminine issues in her writing. It is life in general that she studies and describes. It is the presence of isolation and hollowness in human existence that she deals with and this distinguishes her from other woman writers.

³ P. 185, 1990

⁴ P. 217, 2004

⁵ P. 15, 2004.

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