Shashi Deshpande’s Observation on -Marriage in a Traditional Patriarchal Society

Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist (in the story: “The Intrusion”)

“I certainly hope that the struggle for gender justice has made an impact on literature as well. Nevertheless, sadly enough, there is still a constant need to convince myself that my writing does matter and that it is not less important because it is about women’s lives…”: Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande’s stories and novels generally centre round family relationships, particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the latter’s dilemmas and conflicts. Through her stories she comments in several issues which are normally the concern of the feminists- the girl child and the society, rape and society, woman as obsession to man, marriage in Indian society, woman and household chores, mother and daughter relationship and so on.

She focuses mainly on the world of a woman-the struggle of woman in modern Indian society. Her women characters try to preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings. Among all her short stories where Deshpande throws significant light on predicament of women in India, ‘The Intrusion’ stands out for its intuitive imagination, lucid, observant and sensitive narration. The story is tightly constructed with the narrator’s focused eye on the story telling. The story writer in it also focuses on the position of woman vis-à-vis marriage in a traditional patriarchal society. She explores how a woman becomes subject to subjugation and social control after her marriage in such a society. To Deshpande, the identity of woman in the traditional ambience of Indian society is less determined by her selfhood. It is ironically her flexibility to yield to subjugation and social control determined by patriarchy, which becomes the determining factors of her identity.

‘The Intrusion’ makes the readers to understand that a marriage in which the girl’s feeling or choice is not taken into consideration can be disastrous. The story centres on the experience of a honeymooning couple, especially that of the wife, at a sea-side guest house. Though her marriage has brought about a break with her past, she looks upon the man married to her as one who can be admitted into her life only by getting to know him intimately. But the man only laughs at her and brutally takes her when she is mentally unprepared for it, which is tantamount to a “legalized rape”. The effect of all this on her is heart- rending. She feels deeply hurt and humiliated and rather it has turned her traumatized. But though she cries within herself at the violation of her right to herself, she can’t help but to feel helpless as it seems to be sanctioned by the marital convention. The social norms are so blind and so strong that she can neither protest against it nor pass a verdict on it. Marriage thus to the woman in the story proves to be something incapable of giving her the dignity which she expects as a wife. She is subdued by the norms of the society. It is patriarchy which has put these unfair conditions or norms, which the women have to endure at any costs.

“Marriage” says Simone de Beauvoir “is the destiny traditionally offered by society”. And it is in this context that in “The Intrusion” a young woman is shown to have meekly submitted herself to the savagery and insensitivity of her husband. Indirectly, though, Deshpande, in her story makes an educated and assertive woman define marriage afresh even as she is shown realizing through her own experience that it is sexual freedom which can only guarantee mutual fidelity in man-woman relationship. Indeed, it is the question of how far a woman is free to act on her own is the premise of the story. Her stories create both a web of loss and despair and existential trauma for her protagonists and thus leave enough cause for concern over the accepted logic of matrimony. It is in this context that in this story the writer reflects upon a marriage in which the girl’s feeling or choice is not taken into consideration by her family members.

An important area of Feminism as a theory is its consideration of what it is meant to be a woman, of how much of what society has often deemed inherently female traits, are culturally and socially constructed. Feminism got a fertile ground for debates and discussions during the twentieth century which is conspicuous by a great number of canonical texts on the subject. In the academics there is a field of interdisciplinary studies known as Gender Studies, which analyses the phenomenon of gender. It is sometimes related to the study of sexuality also. In Gender Studies the term ‘gender’ is used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities. Feminist theory of psychoanalysis is very influential in Gender Studies. The ‘Women’s Studies’ is also a genre devoted to topics concerning women, feminism, gender, and politics. Feminism, for one, is a social movement that seeks equal rights for women. Milestones in the rise of modern feminism includes Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” (1949) and Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique” (1963). The theory about Feminism besides other things also emphasizes the role of gender in the formation of the traditional philosophical problems and concepts and the ways in which traditional philosophy reflects and perpetuates bias against women. In Feminism, Liberal Feminism advocates making women’s political and economic opportunities equal to those of men. The Feminism has also brought a great deal of influences into the Indian literature by making it felt in the fictional works of a number of writers. Shashi Deshpande is a name to reckon with in this regard. In her short stories, she shares Simeon de Beauvoir’s philosophy that social and political control over women begin with their bodies or on the physical level, while it is extended to all other areas gradually. Of course, Deshpande asserts that she is not a feminist. But to the readers of her stories she may not be writing for any school of thought like Feminism, but the emotions, attitudes and reactions of her characters definitely suggest that her stories have been constructed from the feminine point of view.