

Portrayal of Man-Woman Relationship in Shashi Deshpande's Select Short Stories

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Abstract

In Indian writing in English, a large number of contemporary women writers like Nayanthara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Jai Nimbkar, Anjana Appachana, Prema Ramakrishnan etc. are giving their voices through their short stories. Their writings penetrate the predicaments and feelings of the middle class Indian men and women. Deshpande's stories generally centre on family relationships – the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter etc. The major concern of Shashi Deshpande's stories is the predicaments, the mental abilities and satisfaction and dissatisfaction physically and mentally in the husband and wife relationship. Marriage as depicted by Shashi Deshpande is an important social and economic institution in which a woman finds her security and identity; but at the same time, the irony of the situation is that her individual needs and desires become secondary in getting this primary motive fulfilled. This paper is an attempt to analyse the theme of man and woman relationship in Shashi Deshpande's select short stories.

KEYWORDS: Compromise and sacrifice, gender discrimination, mutual understanding, family and profession, burden of home, misunderstanding and incompatibility, ill-mated marriage.

Shashi Deshpande in her short stories attempts to intimately analyze man-woman relationship within the ambit of family and society. Her writing is based on the experiences she has gained in life, similar in the fashion of Jane Austen, with her narrow range and limited knowledge. G.S. Amur rightly remarks that, "Woman's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories" ("Preface", *The Legacy And Other Stories* 10). A special thing to note in her writings is that she remains on the grass root level, but the elevation of her characters' experience through their actions makes reading a pleasurable and self-evaluating experience. On both the thematic and stylistic levels, her stories reach a high watermark. Shashi Deshpande says, "I started off writing short stories and have written about 80 of them...I wanted to publish these before I get older and while I am still active as a writer." (93)

An obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a loving mother are considered to be the three ideals of womanhood in Hindu society. Deshpande has dealt with the theme of man-woman relationship in several stories such as: "A Liberated Woman", "The First Lady", "An Antidote to Boredom", "The Alien", "A Man and a Woman", "The Widow", "Anatomy of Murder", "The Intrusion", "The Stone Woman", "A Wall Is Safer", "It Was The Nightingale", "The Ghost", "It Was Dark", "The Cruelty Game", "My Beloved Charioteer", and "The Inner Rooms".

Marriage becomes an important event in a girl's life where her groom is chosen by her family members irrespective of her saying regarding the same. It is presented as a trap from which liberation is difficult with the end result as a collapse in the entire system, though in another aspect the woman's love and care is needed for the family and is glorified as a mother and transferred as a head of a family in a single parent family. Her female characters are alienated in their own private worlds or modified as per the wishes of the husband's family members who take them for granted. Deshpande's "I Want" illustrates this very ideology of getting trapped in an arranged marriage. "The Intrusion" deals with almost a similar fate, where the protagonists lives take a drastic turn once they are married off to strangers, in the real sense of the word. The one whose life changes drastically after marriage is that of a girl. For her it is a beginning of new life with husband and his family, but she remains doubtful about its various pros and cons. For all these reasons Deshpande checks her protagonists' emotions, longing for adventures of her life, but finally settles back as a docile wife for fear of disturbing the calm tenor of her life. She is even encouraged to build an 'invisible wall' around her in "A wall Is Safer". In the story, the protagonist tries to stifle her spirit and keeps herself confined inside a wall and refuses to be branded as a mere 'exploited' woman despite being a full-time housewife who cooks, cleans, washes in a deadening routine. Moreover, she has this 'fierce surge of longing to be a creative artist.

Deshpande's dealing with the life and relationship between a man and a woman is loaded with the honest articulation of pain and joy. In *The Intrusion and Other Stories*, women are shown to be exploited sexually.

An early short story, "A Liberated Woman" is about a young woman who falls in love with a man of a different caste, but marries a frustrated lecturer, a sadist who tortures his wife isolating the physical abuse in marital relationships. The lady doctor is an intelligent and hardworking, and becomes a successful doctor, but her marriage breaks up because of her success.

"An Antidote to Boredom" shows another dimension of a marriage where a married woman is seen to be alienated from her husband who loves with his rigid schedule of work. Their relationship runs on formalities which turn the home into a cage for the woman. Home for the male member is about certain privileges which he comes to expect and demand. As long as the home is not disturbed, daily chores are performed and things are where they should be, he is hardly bothered. She falls in love with a young widower meeting him at her son's school. The woman-persona says "and he, my husband, noticed nothing, not my excitement, nor my restlessness, just as my earlier boredom and discontent too had passed him by. For the first time I was glad of his passivity, his blindness, his stolidity" (*The Intrusion and Other Stories* 68)

The third volume of Deshpande's stories, *It Was the Nightingale* (1986), portrays man-woman relationship on a different footing altogether. In "Man and a Woman", a woman comes into physical contact with a boy of seventeen after her husband has been long dead. The boy is actually the younger brother of her dead husband, Jayanta. She is thirty years old, and yet she is full of beaming beauty and youth.

The women never fight for the rights but for their dignity and also for the freedom with adjustable family environment. The female gender is considered as precious and respected as nation, language, river and so on.

woman has a feeling of homesickness and wants to go back to her parents as she doesn't like the atmosphere of the house, the food served there and her husband's advances. He yearns a different experience altogether and expects his wife to co-

operate with him. But to his surprise, his wife reacts differently. On being opinioned, she replies that she wants them to know each other well before undergoing any type of experience. Notwithstanding the marriage has gone, the society has to permit to lead her life freely and before her wedding she reads a book on sex. Unlike the other girls who have their own dreams of their husband, she thinks of the realities of her would be husband.

The *Intrusion and other Stories* (1993) portrays a wide variety of women characters. The *First Lady* depicts a story of a fatty old woman and her adjustable temperament to her husband's decision to adopt a celibate lifestyle. she reveals: "I love comforts too. I wouldn't like to go back to being just any housewife, struggling to make ends meet, to get the ration and the milk, to run after buses"(*The Intrusion and other Stories*5)

In "Death of a Child" the protagonist and her husband have sharp differences with each other on the issue of the termination of the pregnancy. She does not want to carry the load of thrust maternity for the third time in less than four years. The story has a dramatic opening: "How does a woman know she has conceived?". The protagonist's husband adds: "You women have a phobia about Pregnancy" (*The Intrusion and other Stories* 43). Meanwhile, the wife is expected to submit herself to the wishes of her husband who take her for granted regardless of her fears and emotions.

Deshpande in her stories tries to bring to light the vulnerable feelings of married women when they are asked to submit themselves to their husband, thus breaking the wall they have built around themselves. She feels that a woman should not face the humiliation and vulnerability, which she has felt on the day of her marriage. Compromise and sacrifice in the life of a woman do not end with marriage. In fact they start from marriage. At every stage of her married life, a woman is expected to make some sacrifice. She has to sacrifice her personality for the sake of her motherhood and have as many as children as her husband wishes to have. If she refuses to do so, she is looked at as an adamant woman.

A woman wants her husband to become her friend and understand her before they undergo any of the experiences a husband and a wife undergo. But finding him keyed for a different experience, she is unable to communicate none of these things to him and as a result feels humiliated when her husband forces himself on to her. She focuses gender discrimination in marriage as central to all her writings to make small or right required changes in the current scenario of things but the thrust is never to reject any social structures or institutions.

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