

**Discovering India through Language,  
Literature and Culture**

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## A study of selected short stories of Shashi Deshpande

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In most patriarchal societies, women occupy a marginalised position. Women are bound by social norms and constructs which reinforces her subordinate position. Gendered notions of masculinity and femininity are so deeply entrenched in the social psyche, that every member of the society internalizes these social constructs. However, these socio-cultural constructs are what reinforces subordination among women: "the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences" (Morris 1). Obedience, docility, subservience, coyness etc. are universally considered to be the positive attributes of women. India is a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic country. However, amidst all the diversity, it has a common patriarchal social system. A country where goddesses are worshipped, it also has a high rate of crimes committed against women—rape, dowry deaths, female foeticide, acid attacks, illegal trafficking, domestic violence, and the list goes on. In many cases, the wishes, aspirations and voices of women are silenced.

In case of women, subordination results usually from factors like sex-discrimination, economic dependence, traditional customs, unfavourable environment, ignorance, superstitions, prejudices, and so on. These factors conspire together to mould her mental makeup in such a way that she has to accept the subordinate role in the given socio-economic context (Bamane 174).

Various texts and literatures also subscribe to such representations

of women. They formulate and gives shape to patriarchal ideologies. A study of women's magazines in the 1960s in America exposed how literatures promoted and reinforced gendered definitions of women:

This image—created by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularisers of sociology and psychoanalysis—shape women's lives today and mirror their dreams (Freidan *The Feminine Mystique*).

Most often, the marginalization and subordination begins in the family itself. This paper is an attempt to read and analyse how Shashi Deshpande, through her short stories, manages to deal with the harsh realities that Indian women face within the household. In most of her stories, Shashi Deshpande explores the inner world of women—their insecurities, fear, anguish, anxieties, helplessness etc. Although her stories are set in a typical Indian context, the themes are universal.

In the story 'A Wall is Safer', the protagonist Hema, gives up her career to shift to a rural location with her husband, because of her husband's dream job in an 'Agricultural Research Station'. A woman's career becomes a secondary option after marriage, and sacrifice becomes a natural choice. The duty of a woman as a wife and mother takes precedence over career and dreams. She grudgingly feels as if she is gradually being erased by the monotony and drudgery of her existence. She never openly accepts it in front of her friend, yet when she speaks of her daily work, the dreariness of her life is obvious: "I'm busy', I tell her 'I have enough to do. I cook, I clean, I wash, I iron, I read, I listen to music, help the kids with their lessons..." (Deshpande 120). Her life is reduced to cooking, cleaning, washing, etc., and she herself feels devoid of the joy and satisfaction that her husband has when he returns home from work. Career sacrifices are expected from

married women since traditionally, a married woman's duty is solely invested in the family.

In 'The Stone Women', we see how men visualize women and impose their will and in the process erase their individuality. A couple is shown around an ancient temple with numerous carvings. They are shown various stone sculptures of women:

They're women, lush-bodied, high-breasted women carved on rectangular stone panels, leaning provocatively out of them, towards us, it seems. Women in all kinds of poses—looking into the mirror, doing their hair, playing on musical instruments, dancing, hunting (Deshpande 142).

The young woman, however, is repulsed and wonders whether it was possible for any woman to look and be so perfect and happy. The carvings of those voluptuous, near-perfect women is actually an externalization of the fantasies of men, and how they carve those fantasies into the sculpture. In the beginning of the story we see that the husband does not care about her opinion and takes every decision himself. She is made to remove her silver bracelet (which she has been wearing since childhood and was an integral part of her life) just because he finds it ugly. He even has problems with the clothes she wears, meaning that she should dress up as per his whim and fancy; and the young woman's anxiety is well expressed in these lines:

For some reason, when I look at him, eyes narrowed, mouth pursed as he gazes at me thoughtfully, my mind leaps back to those stone women in the temple. This is how they must have looked, I realize, the men who sculpted the women in stone, as they shaped them from their imaginations. As if I have evoked the sound, I even hear the tap tap of the hammer as the men chipped away at the stone, working out their fantasies on it, creating women with unreal bodies, women who played and sang and danced

all day. For a moment, while he looks at me, I am overcome by a sudden fear, as if I am becoming one of them too, women frozen for all time into a pose they have been willed into (Deshpande 145-146).

'The Intrusion' as the title suggests is an invasion and intrusion into a woman's sense of self-respect and sense of self. The protagonist in this story is a young bride who is tensed about the honeymoon trip that she and her 'stranger' husband have embarked upon. It is almost an internal monologue where she expresses her fear and reluctance to open herself up to her husband. She rather suppresses her desire to know her husband better. But he disdainfully refuses to understand her, and by the end of the story he forcefully has his physical consummation with utter disregard to her wishes and her sense of shame, humiliation, and deep pain is evident: "And the cry I gave was not for the physical pain, but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself" (Deshpande 41). In a marriage, sometimes a woman even loses control over her own body: as she becomes a property owned by the husband. In the recent Covid-19 pandemic, when entire nations went under lockdown; serious issues of mental health and domestic violence was reported across the globe. Cases of domestic violence increased at such a rate across the globe that the United Nations had to declare it a 'shadow pandemic'. This goes on to prove that 'home' is not a safe place for many women. The fact remains true that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the condition of women have hardly changed.

Social expectations are mostly limiting for women. Patriarchal ideologies permeate through every social fabric determining and defining the lives of women:

... The political and ideological relations of patriarchy serve to maximize and justify the dimensions of marginalization... Women are on the margins of employment; they are peripheral

to the main paid workforce and many suffer from structured and long-term unemployment... Politically, women endure discrimination on the grounds of sex in many of the institutions they encounter; the family, work and state agencies... Institutionalized attitudes and responses effectively serve to politically marginalize women. Reputations and stereotyped images are not only constructed but also are transmitted through patriarchal ideologies. This provides a consistency and permanence at a structural institutional level which is beyond the potential of small-scale reforms or legal adjustment. Through the transmission and perpetuation of common-sense images and ideologies women learn the role, the place and the acceptable forms of behaviour to which they must adhere in order to gain status, respectability and protection. The strength of ideology is that it becomes internalized and, therefore, manifested in and through the daily lives of the people it categorizes. (Chadwick and Little 327-328)

Be it novels, poems, oral literatures, epics, fairy tales, advertisements, movies or even jingles—they have the agency to promote certain stereotypes of women; but also expose the inequalities that exist in the society. It is the need of the hour to constantly question patriarchal ideologies and set out new norms. Betty Friedan's assessment of a 1960s women's magazine shows how such stereotypical and gendered denominations of a woman's life can affect an entire generation:

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home... It is crammed full of food,

clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit?... This was the image of the American woman in the year Castro led a revolution in Cuba and men were trained to travel into outer space; the year that the African continent brought forth new nations, and a plane whose speed is greater than the speed of sound... the year artists picketed a great museum in protest against the hegemony of abstract art; physicists explored the concept of anti-matter; astronomers, because of new radio telescopes, had to alter their concepts of the expanding universe; biologists made a breakthrough in the fundamental chemistry of life; and Negro youth in Southern schools forced the United States, for the first time since the Civil War, to face a moment of democratic truth. But this magazine, published for over 5,000,000 American women, almost all of whom have been through high school and nearly half to college, contained almost no mention of the world beyond the home. In the second half of the twentieth century in America, woman's world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home. And this was no anomaly of a single issue of single women's magazine (*The Feminine Mystique*)

While women were confined to the sphere of 'home', the outer world was considered to be the man's space. Literatures and other medium has a lot of potential to either promote or expose the gross inequalities and injustices that has existed since time immemorial. Social and cultural constructs inflict a lot on the condition of

women:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 295)

As we can see from the three stories, the wishes and desires of women are not of essential importance for men or for society in general. Their sense of individuality and personal freedom is always sacrificed at the altar of family needs and responsibilities. As Isabel Garcia Lopez says "The conflict between duty to the family and personal fulfillment will always resolve itself through self-sacrifice and submission to the patterns of society" (126). Shashi Deshpande paints a realistic picture of marginalization and subordination of Indian women within the family and these stories are a reflection of how centuries of adherence to patriarchal norms have made such silences, sacrifices, and marginalization of women a regular affair.

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