

The Self - Effacing Role of Woman in Shashi Deshpande's

Selected Short Stories

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Abstract Human civilization is divided into two parts- Man and Woman. Woman occupies nearly half of the civilization. Hence, woman and her travails, predicaments, turbulences have become the core part of Indian Writing in English in the hands of writers like Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimbkar and so on. Indian society, being a male-ordained society causes the self-effacing portrayal of woman in literature. Shashi Deshpande, the most widely acclaimed Indian woman writer in English majorly probes into woman's issues through her novels and short stories. The present paper is a modest attempt to analyze the image of woman in a self-denial mode as reflected in some of her short stories. The paper aims at studying the four selected short stories from her short story collection, **The Intrusion and Other Stories (1993)**, which deals with a variety of women with their both bashful and forceful appearances. **The First Lady** depicts a story of a woman, who is agreed with her husband's decision to adopt a celibate lifestyle on the ground that the purpose of sex i.e. 'procreation' is served. Being a wife of a political leader, she desires to be in her withdrawn status, as she is fed up with wearing masks in different occasions. **The Intrusion**, a title story deals with a newly married woman, whose self respect is dishonored by the appalling treatment by her husband, whom she thinks as an intruder. **The Wall is Safer** reflects a woman, who is willing to resign into isolation and rejoices at the wall as a symbol of safety. The woman in **Death of Child** appears to be little different comparing to the previous three female characters. Her being uninhibited while taking a decision of abortion finally makes her diffident and weary of herself. Thus, Shashi Deshpande emphasizes the self-effacing role of female protagonists in the short stories under study in a trenchant manner.

Keywords Woman, Male-Ordained Society, Predicaments, Self-Denial Role

a) Shashi Deshpande as an Indian Author

The widely-acclaimed and an award winning woman novelist, Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad, Karnataka, India in 1938. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangacharya. She completed her graduation in Economics from Bombay's (now Mumbai) Elphinston College. She holds a degree in Law too. Being interested in journalism, for a couple of months she worked as a journalist for the magazine, 'Onlooker'. She began her writing career in 1970 after the birth of her two sons with a collection of short-stories, **The Legacy** published in 1978. Her stories first appeared in the magazines like, *Femina*, *Eve's Weekly*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Deccan Herald*, *J.S.* etc. Till the date, she wrote twelve novels of which her first novel, **Roots and Shadows** though published after **Dark Holds No Terrors** won prize for the best Indian Novel of 1982-83. For her another novel, **That Long Silence**, she received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 and Padmashri Award in 2009. She has four books for children and a book of essays to her credit.

Shashi Deshpande, though was familiar with both Marathi as her mother's language and Kannada her father's language, she chose English for her writing. Being an Indian woman writer, she specifically writes about Indian life in Indian language. The beauty of Indianized English has been enhanced through her writing that comes in various forms of literature. Deshpande's advocacy of 'Indian English' primary aims at unravelling the inner landscape of man-woman relationship in India. She explicitly talks of her desire to write of 'people, who were waiting inside her.' The other women writers for instance, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai and Jai Nimbkar too have contributed to Indian Writing in English with their major thrust upon the study of fluctuating status of Indian middle-class woman through their novels and short-stories.

b) Woman: Her Role and Subservient Status

Human civilization is divided into two parts- Man and

1. Introduction

Woman. Nearly half of the world's population has been of woman right from the dawn of civilization till today. The cultural height of a society depends on the kind of status the society offers to a woman, that is, the attitude particularly of the male members of the society to a woman. Though changing, the condition of woman in India is still far from satisfactory on account of sex, caste, class and traditional value system. In the conventional caste system of India, woman herself has always been looked upon as a caste. **Vrinda Nabar (1995:50)** says, 'To be *caste as woman* in India is to live out this triple-layered existence.' The disparity in the role of man and woman in various walks of life has always created a social imbalance all over the world. While examining the sex-role, the society has been compared to a bird, whose two wings **Prabhati Mukherjee (1978:01)** says,

... represent two sexes, the balanced and smooth functioning of which are absolutely necessary to both these cases. The two wings, to continue to simile are very ill proportioned in India, which prevent Indian society from progressing smoothly.

Woman's social role and her social status are interrelated. That is why woman's role, which is, what the 'mighty' sex wants her to do that determines her status. Therefore, the status of woman has to be seen in the socio-cultural, economic, political and psychological contexts. It is the woman who is supposed to be the custodian of social and religious conventions. Apart from being a machine of perpetuation, she also has to be 'a show-piece.' It seems that even God has done a great injustice to woman by attributing to her the function of reproduction. In case of woman, subordination results usually from factors like sex-discrimination, economic dependence, traditional customs, unfavorable 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. Hence the study of woman and her travails, predicaments, turbulences in comparison with that of man as projected in literature could offer the proper diagnosis of the ailment.

2. Aim of the Study

The present paper is a modest attempt to analyze the image of woman in a self-denial mode as reflected in some of Deshpande's selected short stories from her haunting collection of short stories, *The Intrusion and Other Stories (1993)*. She explores a world blighted with 'despair and unhappiness' of women characters through these stories. The paper aims at studying the four selected short stories which deal with a variety of women with their both bashful and forceful appearances. The analysis carries its focus on the deepening inner urge of women characters to break out their predestined roles completely. However, they are forced to face their failure due to their self-effacing stand. Thus,

through her writings, Shashi Deshpande provides an insight into various aspects of man-woman relationships and emphasizes the self-effacing role of female characters in a trenchant manner. *The Times of India (1993: cover page)* summarizes Deshpande's art of studying human relationship:

Deshpande's finely-honed sensibility infuses the delicate interplay of human relationship with a realistic ambience which serves to crystallize our thoughts, and all at once we see in her a natural extension of our own cognitive parameters.

3. Methodology

In order to understand the image and role of woman in general, it is useful to study her projection in short stories in particular. Four of Shashi Deshpande's short stories are selected for the present research study. The textual analysis is further strengthened by the supportive references of a few feminist critics' observations. For instance, the image of women in the stories under study can be studied to certain extent within the framework designed by a feminist thinker, **Simon de Beauvoir**. Her famous writing, *The Second Sex (1997)* is a record of an argument on the 'interpersonal relationships between man and woman.' In the introduction to this writing, **Beauvoir (1997:13)** probes into a question, 'What is woman?' Further she states, 'It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life.' (P-69) In her interpretation of Beauvoir's feminist thoughts, **Vidyut Bhagwat (2004: 63)** says: '... the woman is the other against which man defines himself as a subject. In expressing men's otherness, women are denied their own individuality.' In short in a man-made society, man exists with a consideration of 'transcendence' as 'normal' behavior whereas woman normally is compelled to exist with alienated, passive and immanent position.

4. Discussion

a) The First Lady

The first story under study is *The First Lady* that depicts a story of a woman, who is agreed with her husband's decision to adopt a celibate lifestyle on the ground that the purpose of sex i.e. 'procreation' is served. Being a wife of a political leader, she desires to be in her withdrawn status, as she is fed up with wearing masks. The story opens with woman protagonist's rejection to the compliment given by her servant. Instead, in a self-consoling mode she signifies her own physical appearance. Further she denies the beauty of mind and says, '... what can you expect when you're nearly seventy?' (P-1) In spite of her disappointment with the 'austere atmosphere of her husband's home', she appears to be a satisfied receptive of public award of 'gracious and

dignified first lady' which is rather mechanical. She views their life 'too exalted, too uplifted for too long a time.' (P-5) Hence, she finds everything around 'futile and meaningless'. She denies life that 'has lost its meaning because it relates to nothing but one's own petty concerns.' (P-4) Her judgment of their present life invites her husband's aggression. Consequently, quite meticulously she trains herself to attend the more 'irksome' public functions. It seems to be true what **Simon de Beauvoir (1997: 19)** investigates about women:

*They don't authentically assume a subjective attitude
the women's effort has never*

*been anything only what men have been willing to grant,
they have taken nothing, they*

have only received.

For instance, wife in the present story easily gets agreed and grants her husband 'a kind of perverse satisfaction in denying oneself pleasure, a kind of hysterical urge for self-denial..' (P-7) As a matter of fact, her husband's decision of abstaining from sexual relations deprives her from the male touch and reduces her to long for the same by her husband's most devoted disciple. As per the reference of Juliet Millett's evaluation of Freud cited by **Vidyut Bhagwat (2004:208)**, it can be stated that the husband in the present story promotes a Freudian theory (actually blamed by Millett) of 'treating the female character as a static thing ordained by nature.' And further as Freud intends 'to limit female life to the sexual-reproductive level and also to persuade us that women live at a low cultural level because this is the only level that is possible for them.'

B) The Intrusion

The Intrusion, a title story deals with a newly married woman, whose self-respect is dishonored by the appalling treatment by her husband, whom she thinks as an intruder. The story is replete with no of instances where a newly married woman on the day of her honeymoon is made aware of her sexual role with which she is forced to identify herself. Gradually, she gets sickened with the fear of impending disaster in the form of 'sex' with a man, whom she hardly knows. Her husband's emphasizing 'complete privacy' deadens her almost with 'Fears, Tremors.' Consequently, she averts her face from the beds. Woman in the story is shown as a silent acquiescent, as she accepts the marriage proposal quite mutely. Friendship, which is the basis of husband-wife relationship, is found lacking here. In her narration, it is quite perceptible to sense her withdrawal feeling at the moment she admits her denial 'to hear the intimate sounds that were seeping through the thin walls and flimsy door.' (P-38) She finds it almost disgusting to see herself 'with a strange man in strange room.' (P-39) It becomes quite convincing when she narrates, 'And at present we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but only a husband and wife.' (P-38) The acceptance of her husband-wife relationship intensifies her denial for her autonomous being as friend, woman or an individual.

Woman protagonist in the story appears to be a victim of 'body-mind' conflict. Even 'the slightly glazed look' in her husband's eyes she finds revealing and demanding. Nevertheless, she desperately tries to underline as **Vidyut Bhagwat (2004:81)** expresses in her analysis of Simon de Beauvoir that 'body and sexuality are concrete expressions of existence.' Woman in the story reads out her husband's eyes and narrates her understanding, '... how unaware he was of everything but of what was to happen between us, making us truly husband and wife.' (P-38) She finds it to be extremely startling and reproachful to see him, 'a nameless stranger' calling out her name with so familiarity. She is reluctant to acknowledge his attempt of maintaining the mundane affair of husband-wife relationship which is still under construction. Out of fear of rejection that crouches in her, she eats all her fears of 'exposing the mysteries of her body to him.' (P-40) However, her stammering attempt to convey their little acquaintance with each other receives a cold, little violent reaction by her husband, whereas for her it brings 'a light-hearted sense of escape.' (P-40) Her relieved state of existence evaporates only to throw her into a daylight humiliating fact of his merciless bodily assault on her. She cries out 'not for the physical pain' but she says, 'for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself.' (P-41) Thus, the husband draws the boundaries of her sphere even within marriage, where the sexual act for man is legal but for woman it is rape. In order to support woman empowerment, it is necessary to consider a feminist thinker, **Tiffany K. Wayne's (2008:50)** discussion of Margaret Fuller's views on the need for the acknowledgement of woman's need and ability to pursue her own individual interest expressed in her writing, *Woman in the 19th Century*:

What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded ...

C) The Wall Is Safer

The third story, *The Wall is Safer* reflects a woman protagonist, Hema, who is willing to resign into isolation and rejoices at the wall as a symbol of safety. The story is a depiction of highly subservient woman, whose existence is genuinely valued not more than as a cook by her husband, Vasant. Her conscious understanding of their visitors' look without any expectation or their getting uneasy with her underscores her denial to enforce her existence. She narrates, 'Unnatural, forced smiles flicker across their faces as they talk to me, staying on even when there is no need. They turn away from me with almost audible sighs of relief...' (P-116) The presence of woman protagonist is made visible 'not out of choice, but because there was none.' (P-116) Sushama, a friend of Hema perfectly describes the woman-narrator, 'And here she is, the woman behind the successful man, the one to whose support you owe everything, the devoted, self-effacing wife ...' (P-120) The word, 'self-effacing' keeps Hema awake, completely aware. She relates the 'cry of

the new-born' to the 'triumphant assertion of being. Of existing' (P-120), which she lacks and consequently allows her cry to be stifled. Deshpande demonstrates her female protagonist to be a victim of self-abnegation. For instance, in one of the incidents, Hema eats out her genuine expression and invalidates her professional status as lawyer with indistinct utterance: 'Oh, I'm all right as I am. After all, I'm a good housewife now.' (P-119)

Vidyut Bhagwat (2004:65) refers O'Brien, who underscores the importance of 'the notion of a real female collective consciousness...' which in fact is missing but enables women to build up a strategy of cooperating each other in 'resisting male domination.' Accordingly if judged Shashi Deshpande, it is noticed that she hardly allows the notion of 'female collective consciousness' to be developed in her stories. For instance, Sushama's initiation to resist the male-domination is sternly rejected by the female protagonist. The acceptance and the confession of her unexploited position can clearly be marked when she finally blurts out on Sushama's cross-examination, 'For God's sake, Sushama, don't make me out to be one of your exploited women. I know all my legal rights.' (P-120) She veils her being contemptuous at her husband, Vasant's coming home 'tired, satisfied and full of what he has been doing.' (P-120) She unnecessarily judges his being callous and reasons out in her narration, 'Maybe, it's because I have nothing to offer in exchange. The small cash of my day seems paltry in comparison.' (P-120) She resists unfolding the truth of the 'tenuous peace' she has built around herself. She is shown contended with her walled state and status. She limits her scope for flourishing as a transcendental being with her secret agreement with building a fence with a 'wall' rather than with a 'barbed wire.' Thus, she throws away her sense of aspiration to be a part of the outer universe. Despite the awareness of the truth that the danger is lying inside, she resigns to the world inside the wall, which hassles her subjectivity.

d) Death of a Child

The fourth story under study is *Death of a Child*. The female protagonist in the story appears to be little different comparing to the previous three female characters. The story begins with woman's appearing with agitated mind due to unwanted pregnancy. She expresses a strong aversion at the thought of pregnancy, which for her husband it is nothing more than a matter to be managed rather than to be welcomed. His 'reasonableness' is reflected when he says, 'But if it has happened, why not accept it?' (P-44) Though Simon de Beauvoir's observation of bodily condition in pregnancy is convincing that in pregnancy woman is bestowed with narcissism, in case of present woman it seems to be contrary. She doesn't want to imagine 'that the main purpose of (her) life is to breed.' Her urge 'to live with a new 'yes' to life' (2004:161) invites a sharp criticism of her predefined wife-mother role. She is asked, 'Your life- is that matters to you? How can a mother be so selfish? What about

that life?' (P-45) She denies determining the concrete significance of motherhood for woman, as she says emphatically, 'Children stifle your personality. You become just a mother- nothing more.' (P-45)

Shashi Deshpande demonstrates the woman in *Death of a Child* with a different kind of framework of her mental constitution. She is shown infuriated at the thought of carrying the load of thrust maternity for the third time in less than four years. Woman in the story supports the authorial thought of individualism by bringing some change from being 'inessential' to 'essential'. She expresses her thought: 'Now I want to reserve some part of myself, my life.' (P-47) The story carries author's message that becomes valid in the course of time that a sexual love of wife should not be mingled with her desire of motherhood. Though, it is understood that 'motherhood' confers the honorable status to Indian woman, woman in the story educates herself and the readers too with the other side of it. We are told that-'Marriage, childbirth destroy something in a woman. A reserve. A secretiveness. An innocence.' (P-46) However, her being uninhibited while taking a decision of abortion finally makes her diffident and weary of herself as she carries 'the ghost of 'her' dead child in an unconscious mind. However, **Coomi S. Vevaina (1996: 265)** explicitly states, 'We all are born to a state of unconscious wholeness. ...'

4. Conclusions

In short women projected by Shashi Deshpande in above stories get adapted with the given circled life. They don't believe in extermination of their male-counterparts for their comfortable moving. The problem with her women is to reject the mask and give a full vent to their unconscious feelings and assign themselves a conscious and visible status. However, the stability for their life is offered at the cost of suppression of their individuality. **T.N. Geetha (1991:170)** summarizes the position of women characters in Deshpande's stories, 'Her stories suggest that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run of the middle-class women in India.' Hence it causes to develop the self-withdrawal tendency. However, the author supports the need of surpassing the polarization and attaining the new 'human wholeness.'

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