

## WOMEN ON THE THRESHOLD OF CHANGE IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SHORTER FICTION

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**Abstract:** Women, who have the capacity to make a choice, are experienced in the short stories of Shashi Deshpande. Their inner strength emboldens their spirit and envisions for them a regenerative future, where salvation would not be partial but complete. Deshpande believes:

“Until women get over the handicaps imposed by society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will not have realized its full potential.”

**Introduction:** The modern Indian women, as portrayed in Shashi Deshpande's novels, are definitely working towards the goal of emancipation. The conflicting traditional and modern tendencies have been subtly brought out in Shashi Deshpande's short stories. The spirit of post modern Indian English literature, of bringing about a gradual assured change, has been aptly worked out in the works of Shashi Deshpande.

On the social level, the women of her short stories have been struggling since ages to assert themselves. The norms of the society, though unacceptable, have to be followed. Caught up between the devil and the deep sea, they are neither in a position to conform nor confront. Hence, they suffer from an existentialist dilemma. As K. Horny observes:

“We cannot suppress or eliminate essential parts of ourselves without becoming estranged from ourselves... The person simply becomes oblivious to what he really is. The person loses interest in life because it is not he who lives it; he cannot make decisions because he does not know what he really wants; if difficulties mount, he may be pervaded by a sense of unreality – an accentuated expression of his permanent condition of being unreal to himself.”

Staying within the ambit of cultural traditions and social norms fixed by society, Deshpande's women try to resolve their inner conflicts by meeting hassles with resolution and negotiation. Deshpande once remarked-

“It is necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy” One of the stories from “The Legacy” entitled “Intrusion”, presents a typical Indian family with three marriageable daughters. With two more daughters to be married, the elder one had simply nothing to say when the match was fixed. The protagonist had accepted that she was ‘simple and sophisticated’ (TL, 42) because her mother-in-law had demanded so. The question of her liking does not arise as she laments – “No one had asked me if I had agreed” (TL, 42).

Married with the man of her father's choice, she felt out of place, “a constriction in the throat” (TL, 41), “a

longing for all the things I has left behind me forever” (TL, 41), “a melancholy that always assailed one when away from home” (TL, 44). Even with her husband she had a feeling of being with a strange man in a strange room” (TL, 44). She wished to know her husband before offering herself to him forever.

It story records the agony of a married woman whose husband is altogether indifferent to her sensitivity. The protagonist is still unprepared to undergo any act of conjugality till she is given time enough to expose the mysteries of her body. An uneasy calm is experienced between them as they are, though they may have arrived into a legal bonding but the spiritual is still at bay.

The protagonist is utterly uncomfortable to offer herself to a man entirely oblivious of her wishes, desires and expectations. As it is a strange arrangement and an utterly strange association, she feels out of place, both physically as well as mentally. She wonders in desperation:

“They were not friends, not acquaintance even but only a husband and wife.” (38).

She just wishes to share some time with him to, at least, make herself comfortable with a man who had been thrust upon her and with whom she now has to be bound for years together, as per the societal verdict. The expectation of an amiable acquaintance with him turns sour. The husband is at the time just an animated being deprived of all emotional bondings, just bearing “a secret smile, a smirk on his face...” (35).

Her nervousness simply holds no meaning for him as he is too hardened a being to understand the softer feelings of life. Filled to the brim with manly comfiture, the husband regards all associations to be meaningless, so far as the ones related to his hunger and appetite is met.

But for the wife, the touch of her forced partner is no more than the “furtive touches and glances from faceless, nameless men in crowds” (38). The new entrant in her life has to have a bearing on her entire being i.e her physical, social and mental makeup. For her it is utmost significant to know, understand and accept each other through their views, opinions and similarities and even dissimilarities.

She wishes to talk to him, to sit with him the whole night, "so that in the morning we could smile at each other like old friends." (40) But the husband's calling her by name at the very outset, clearly has "a proprietarily air" about it. However hard she may try, he would always remain an utter stranger to those bondings which go in to make an ideal couple different in outlook but still walking together with a sense of dependency and belongingness to each other. She knows that her desires would never be fulfilled as the latter's "embrace had been too sudden, too rough (TL, 45) while she was too shy and frightened of "exposing the mysteries" (TL, 45).

The husband, as her type is, is all prepared for a forcible rape if he is denied the due accorded to him by law. He is simply wonder struck at the wife's wish of making inroads into each other's mind before entering into a physical communion. Denial of sexual access is what is unbearable for him. He rather contradicts and questions:

"Know each other? What has that to do with it? Aren't we married now?" (TL, 40)

She dreams of the waves pounding upon her but wakes up to find that it was not, as she says, "the sea that was pounding my body but he, my husband, who was forcing his body on mine." (41) The entire episode cuts deep into the psyche of this woman, who had once yearned for a world entirely different from the present one. Her voice gets choked. She had no other option left but to act as a mere spectator to her closely watched chastity being crushed by a stranger ruthlessly. The battering leaves those deep scares that she knew would worsen with the passage of time as no ailment had as yet been found.

As the emotionless dry hammering went on, she opined:

"There was no talk, no word between us just this relentless pounding. His movements had the same rhythm, the same violence as the movements of the sea; yet, I could have borne the battering of the sea better, for that would hurt but not humiliate like this. (41) The intrusion into her privacy and for the violation of her right to herself was what was next to impossible for her to bear. The newly wedded bride wished as she says—"I had a great longing to go down, to scuff my bare toes in the sand, to pick up shells and sit on the rocks, letting the friendly waves climb up my bare legs. He would swim, I thought, and call out to me in a lazy way and I would respond with a wave and a smile." (TL, 43) But again, as other female protagonists of Deshpande, especially during this period of her writing, she makes herself stand in the dock and imagines of "returning to her parents home, shamed and rejected" but at the same reverting her steps to find her "sisters marriage held up forever" and her "parents disgraced". Deshpande's protagonists are still immature women struggling to

find their own voice but towards the actual enactment, they "*become fluid, with no shape, no form of their own*".

'A Liberated Women' is another such story where the protagonist, a doctor by profession, fails to shed off her mental slavery despite the fact that she is economically free. As the wife indulges into a conversation with a man friend after a gap of twelve years, she narrates the agonized moments she had to pass every second of her life being married to a man, whom she took for a lover but who, most obnoxiously, turned into a master, who physical and mental whips she had to bear on her bruised body each day and each night.

The doctor wife is treading the similar path of humiliation, which almost every Indian woman is pre-destined to walk upon. The husband, a college lecturer, gets an inferiority complex from her wife to the extent that he begins to indulge in sadistic activities every now and then. So loaded is the wife with the burden of handling her married life that she bursts up all of a sudden:

"He's mediocre Shelley... And now he can't forgive me for succeeding when he's failed... A sadist... that's what I have for a husband." (25)

A split personality to the core, she is unsuccessful in liberating herself from the dominance of her husband. Though liberated and modern in her outlook, she has to endure the hard blows of male chauvinism. The very thought of liberation becomes the major cause of her slavery for the protagonist at the hands of her sadistic husband.

Deshpande, who has extended the similar theme to her larger fiction *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, wishes to delineate extensively upon the issue that though knowledgeable, but knowingly ignorant women, have to end up as morose creatures, as society has left simply no outlet for them to enjoy even a whiff of fresh air during the long miserable journey of tortures and humiliations.

Initially, a love marriage, "a romantic runaway marriage", leading towards a loveless life, forms the core of Deshpande's 'Liberated Woman'. The imaginary speech, delivered by the protagonist in a girl's college says it all-

"Listen, have you seen really old-fashioned couples walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? I think that's symbolic, you know. The ideal Hindu wife always walks a few steps behind her husband. If he earns 500, she earns 400. If he earns 1000, she earns 990 or less... No. It isn't just money. It's other thing too. Never overtake your husband in anything." (25)

A doctor wife, handling a husband, who turns into a savage being at night, silently and uncomplainingly, is the lone reality of majority of the so-called economically independent woman of the modern

century. "In what way I am modern? Just because I dress apart? All this is just because I don't have the courage not to confirm" (22), the wife confesses to her friend.

His romanticism has now degenerated into sadism. She says while talking to her friend—"You tell me what to say about a marriage where love-making has become an exercise in sadism?"(24) Incapable of performing on his own, he derives pleasure from the fact, that though superior in every way, he is still able to overpower her wife and crush her emotions, feelings and personality what-so-ever. "Earning not much more" (24), she is aware—"He's mediocre... And now he can't forgive me for succeeding when he's failed...(25). The silence seemed to be filled with the echoes of all the dreadful things she was trying to say (26). "I know how it sounds. But we've built up a wall of silence between us" she says. (27)

An interviewer at one instance innocently asks the husband: "How does it feel when your wife provides not only the butter, but most of the bread as well? (26).

These words injure the manlihood of the so-called husband to the extent that he tries to pour all his annoyance on the one who had been feeding her all through these years. The husband turns into a wild beast and tortures her wife in bed at night by inflicting bruises upon her tender body.

As a morose husband, he may be uncomfortable with his wife's social and financial standing but is more than comfortable with by inflicting bruises upon her tender body. She is very well aware as she says- "It's his way, the only way, perhaps, of taking revenge on me for what I've done to his male ego. Oh yes, I can

reason it out coldly, logically enough in the daytime. But at night, I become just a terrified animal. I can't scream, because the kids in the next room may hear. I can't cry, the kids may hear. I can't fight back, either, he's too strong for me.... And so I just endure."(27)

The wife then prepares to leave her job but the husband is too parasitic to allow her to take such a drastic step. The husband retaliates there and then – "Have you gone crazy? Do you know how much I earn? How do you suppose we'd live on that?"(27) he says. It is the same wife who shoulders the entire responsibility but at the same time has to keep herself on tender hooks to be degraded and smashed as per the whims and fancies of the crazy husband. She pours her agony in the statement, "How does it feel when your wife provides not only the butter, but most of the bread as well?"(26) When she consults her elderly friend, she advises her to divorce her monstrous husband. But she refuses to do so for the sake of their children. She even refuses the help of a psychiatrist for her sadistic husband.

The polished outer and traumatic interior has been aptly depicted through "her cool, poised face"(27) entitled "A Liberated Woman."(27) The title of the story is ironic in that she does not break away from her unbearable married life.

But Deshpande's women characters, though not wholly vanquishing the past, strive to voice their protest for their meek and the submissive gender. The women in her short stories, most of whom having acquired a professional equilibrium with their male counterparts, refuse to be cowed down and try to reconstruct a space for themselves in this oppressively conditioned social system.

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