

## Existential Dilemma of Women Characters in the Short Stories of

**Shashi Deshpande**

*Dr Alpana Gupta*

*University of Allahabad*

Shashi Deshpande is a well known and widely acclaimed Indian woman novelist and a short story writer. She has made a special position among contemporary Indian writers in English. Shashi Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of women – the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in a Brahmin family at Dharwad, in Karnataka, India. Her father Adya Rangacharya, was a renowned Sanskrit scholar and famous Kannada play writer, better known as Sriranga. She graduated in Economics from the Elphinstone College, Bombay, and then she moved out to Bangalore where she did her graduation in law from the Mysore University. She has also done a diploma course in, Journalism from Bhavan's R.P.College of Mass Communication. Later in 1984, she completed her post graduation in English Literature.

Apart from novels and short-stories, Deshpande has also published several children books in English and written a screenplay for the Hindi feature film Drishti. She began writing rather late in life after the usual marriage-children break. She started writing at her father's insistence. In her words:

After never having written anything all my life, suddenly, one day, on my husband's urging, I wrote a piece on our one-year stay in England. I can still remember the moment; I can see myself coming out and shyly, tremulously

offering what I'd done. And the feeling of both pleasure and triumph. I gave the piece to my father when we next visited him. Without my knowledge he sent it to the Deccan Herald, our local paper, and sent me the cuttings when it came out in three parts, with the title "Innocent Abroad" .(Deshpande,2003; 4)

Marriage is one of the very important events in the life of a woman. It plays a crucial role in determining the fate of a woman than it does to the fate of a man. Men take care of the outside of the home and women take care of the family is a social conditioning that starts from an early age in Indian society. Women are perceived as mother, daughter, wife or sister. It becomes an integral part of a women's identity.

Shashi Deshpande in her stories deals with the woman's dilemma between her career and family life. This dilemma is a situation that most of the working women face at one point of their life or the other. In this conflict family emerge as a sole priority in women's life.

The story "*It Was the Nightingale*" examines the problems of the working woman who has to make a choice between her home and her career. The protagonist woman Jaya is an ambitious careerist. She opts to go abroad for advancement of her career. The story begins with her coming home late and apologizing to the tolerant husband. She is young and loves her husband. She gets an opportunity to go abroad for two year training. Her husband agrees to let her go, but he also expresses his resentment through silence and withdrawal. She is emotionally steady, economically independent and psychologically strong, yet she is not a dehumanized woman devoid of all emotions and softer feelings. She feels guilty for her husband. She thinks:

I 'm aware of what I'm doing. I'm putting two years between us. A fearsome period. Two year of experience we will not share. And each one a brick that can ultimately become a wall between us. It isn't quarrels that shatter a marriage, it's doing things apart. Can we stand two years of separateness? Confronted with this thought the link between us seems tenuous." (Deshpande,2003;64)

In fact she is made to feel guilty because she is not confined to normal "womanly" role. She tells her husband, "I wish, you had refused to let me go." But the husband who is sensitive and

understands her, replies that he cannot. Both are trapped in their own self-images, which are different from middle class social role models (Jain,2003;165). The protagonist is conscious of her inner feelings and thinks that her husband will never understand how much she is fighting with her own feelings. She realizes that each day of the two years may become a brick between them that can become a wall. Her struggle between blissful surrender and an independent achievement is sharp and divisive. As Jain explains, “the female psyche goes through the need to be loved, to merge, and the need to be on her own. Freedom and love somehow do not seem to be going together” (Jain, 2003;164). Jaya says:

He does not know, he will never know, how I have fought myself. How I have longed to give ambition and success to go by and stay with him, throttled by his love. No not throttled that is not fair. It's a soporific, his love and mine, which makes me long to lie down in lethargic bliss.” (Deshpande,2003;72)

She often thinks of submitting herself to her husband's wishes but fears for her own self-image. She knows that generations of women have laid their all at the altar of domesticity and have finally found themselves empty handed at the end of the journey with nothing to sustain them, nothing to hold on to (Jain, 2003; 165). She is conscious of her inner fears and thinks, “If I give in once, I will walk that road of self-abnegation forever”. (Deshpande,2003;91). Women are so overloaded with the fact of motherhood and with the social approval of the role, that any emergence out of it becomes guilt-ridden. For the narrator, “it is a need to rebel against the pattern of lives of her mother and mother in law. Marriage is not a merger; further it need not become a power-relation of control and submission” (Jain,2003; 165). She says about their life:

“Our lives are intertwined, yet they are two distinct strands. They are like two lights that shine more brightly together. But to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone”( Deshpande,2003;92).

Jaya thinks of her mother and tells:

A woman who had nothing of her own, who tried to live her life through her husband and daughters, who was shattered by any tug at the bonds. Who tortured

herself and tormented us. Who made her own hell and gloried in it. And so for me, each step out of home had been a battle, each success a treachery towards her. (Deshpande,2003;93)

She is not going to foreign country for any monetary gains, but to realize her “unique” self. She wants to preserve her inner life and gain a sense of her own strength. “Though she tries to be faithful to herself, she cannot help feeling guilty for having gone against social norms. Her work is important to her yet she feels the pangs of conscience” (Atrey & Kirpal,1998;104 ). When she quotes Shakespeare’s Juliet “ Believe me, love, it isn’t the lark, it’s the nightingale,” her husband counters, “ you would ever say that, would you” If it is lark, you’d say it is the lark. You wouldn’t ever fool yourself, or others, and say it’s nightingale, would you?

In the story protagonist is well educated and aware of her own self and wants to build a space of her own in society, though she misses her role and responsibilities of wife towards her husband.

Another story “*A Wall is Safer*” shows the plight of a woman who has sacrificed her career as a lawyer to look after her husband and children. She is a housewife who would arrange the sheets, wash the utensils, prepare food and send children to school. And sometime her weakness to defy such a bonded existence makes the readers feel disgusted at the helplessness of her position. The protagonist Hema’s husband is posted in a remote village. If Hema continues with her career in the city she would not been able to look after her family, so she resigns from the job.

The story opens with these lines:

It is narrow ribbon of a road. A little earlier, it had been only an incision in the full – grown sugarcane. Sitting in the minibus, you could hear sibilant whispers as the cane brushed against its sides. With the cane gone, there is nothing to demarcate the road from the flat expanse of land on either side. The lone cyclist is like a marker now, showing me where the road is. I know he is coming here, not

only because I can identify him as Ram Chandra, but because there is nowhere else he can go. The road ends here with us. (Deshpande , 1993; 95-96)

The description given by Hema shows that she is not satisfied with her new role of housewife. She makes a compromise for her family in order to save her marriage and also avoids the risk of annoying her husband.

One of her friend, Sushma comes to meet her. She is a lawyer and working for constitutional and social awareness among woman. Her friend's visit stirs up the pain of sacrifice in Hema. When Sushma says, "Peaceful. All the same I wouldn't like to live here. Terrible." (Deshpande , 1993; 99) Hema knows what she wants to say. She does not have a choice and that if she wishes to preserve her status as wife and home maker she will have to stay by the side of her husband and children. However, Sushma does not like the idea of Hema wasting her law education and talent in a remote place playing a good house wife's role for the advancement of her husband's successful agricultural research-oriented career. Sushma argues with Vasant and says that he has a good job in Bombay and if he will go in a remote place, what will Hema do there? To this question Vasant replies, "She can teach. Or something. There are schools in the next town." Sushma fought again and says, "for God's sake, man, she's a lawyer, not a teacher. Would you change your profession that way overnight? It's not the same" ( Deshpande , 1993; 100).

The attitude of the husband shows the pseudo - liberations of the middle – class Indian male. Despite his education, he is not ready for "role reversal" where the woman is in a socially superior or equal position to him.

In the case of Hema the situation of the woman is more oppressed than other protagonists of Deshpande's stories because Hema has willingly sacrificed her career for the sake of her family. And she is painfully aware of her lost opportunity. Sushma's visit shakes her monotonous routine and threatens the tenuous peace Hema had built around herself. The narrator says,

“Sushma threatened the tenuous peace I’ve built around myself. ... A wall? ... Five rows of barbed wire. And only then I understand Sitabai’s words. A wall is safer. With a wall, you can’t even see what’s on the other side. But suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then? (Deshpande , 1993; 102)

The image of the confining “wall” illustrates her plight, the wall not only conceals the outer horizon from her sight but also traps her within itself, thus doubly annihilating her identity.

The story ends with a clear message that a wall is safer than hurtful wire. Whatever happens, the family ties are not severe. Deshpande does not let the family disintegrate. The narrative wonderfully expresses Deshpande’s view point that:

It is necessary for women to live within relationships, but if the roles are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further than one becomes unhappy. This is what I’ve tried to convey in my writing. (Vishwanath, 1987;13)

In her stories, women have the tendency for survival. They suffer numerous losses but rise above with each crisis with the passage of time. Shashi Deshpande’s women characters have strength of their own. In spite of their challenges they work for the betterment of life.

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