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Scratching the Labels:

A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's Select Short Stories

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Abstract:

Short story as a genre in itself came to be seen on the literary horizon, somewhere during the Pre-independence period. Women writers from the Indian subcontinent realized the potential of this form and with the power of their knowledge started portraying the Indian life, with all its different hues. This form was more suited to the women writers because it was less painstaking like the novels, and this allowed them to write and express their thought processes during their free time from the household chores.

The works of Shashi Deshpande, one of the prominent short story writers, are written by keeping in frame the socio-literary themes and institutions such as family, home, society of middle classes in India. Gender is central to all her writings. A change in the current scenario of

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things is seen to be required but the thrust is never to reject any social structures or institutions. A desired transformation is wished for in her works, with the accommodation of interests and welfare of women along with men. My attempt in this paper will be to talk about a handful of her stories, there by trying to show how women characters are in the clutches of patriarchy in one or the other way, but each one of them makes their Identity known by trying to break free from patriarchal shackles. The feminist theoretical practices intervene in the writings of Deshpande thereby projecting the idea of being a woman in a common middle-class family set up. The characters of Deshpande's works are common individuals. They are pretty identifiable, and undergo identifiable situations, like we do in our daily lives. The special thing to note in her writings is that she remains on the grass root level, but the elevation her characters experience through their actions makes the reading a pleasurable and self-evaluating experience. On both the thematic and stylistic levels, her stories reach a high watermark.

Keywords: *Short Story, Gender, Patriarchy, Identity*

As a genre, short story appeared on the literary horizon, somewhere during the Pre-independence period. However, its complete emergence, as a dominant mode of writing is only after the 1960s. Women writers from the Indian subcontinent realized the potential of this form and with the power of their knowledge started portraying the variety of Indian life, with all its different hues. This form suited them because it was less painstaking like the novels, and this allowed them to write and express their thought processes during their free time from the household chores.

The short story writings of Shashi Deshpande are written by keeping in frame the socio-literary themes and institutions such as home, family, society of Indian middle classes. A change in the current scenario of things is seen to be required but the thrust is never to reject any social structure or institutions. Deshpande makes gender central to her writings. Her works deal not only with ordinary, urban situations, but stem from a firm belief that our lives are to a great extent governed by gender. A desired transformation is wished for in her works, with the accommodation of interests and welfare of women along with men. The revolution is not iconoclastic every time, but it is surely visible; the tone of her stories appears to be reconciliatory. She did not write with a specific reader in mind, nor are her works slanted to an

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International market place. Her writing has an ease and a lack of self-consciousness because her intent is not to present India or Indians. She writes about people and the reality of their lives.

Her stories can be categorized as those which mirror the reality examining the subjugated position of woman in Indian society. They are an attempt to mend the situation depicting the woman's positive reaffirmation of herself. But in all the short stories, Deshpande hardly allows her women to move away from the traditional norms of the society. Her stories are primarily centered on family relationships— the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter. The conflicts faced by a woman as a wife, a mother and a daughter are given importance. Talking about the importance of human relationships, she says that being a wife or a mother is not an imposition. According to her it becomes an imposition only when the woman is laid rigid rules of how she should behave. She says, it becomes necessary for a woman to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid for her that, as a wife or a mother, that she should do this and no further, then unhappiness and uneasiness dawns for a woman, who finds herself in a new set up after marriage. This is what she has tried to conveying through her writing.

My attempt in this paper will be to talk about a handful of her stories there by trying to show how women characters in her short stories ultimately emerge as a being, independent and powerful. No doubt they are in the clutches of patriarchy in one or the other way, but each one of them has the potential to break the shackles, thereby emerging as a free spirit altogether. They are adept enough to scratch the labels which they are forced to have due to societal pressures and demands. All the characters of Shashi Deshpande's work are individuals who belong to the common folk. They are pretty identifiable, and undergo identifiable situations, in which all of us are a part, some or the other day. The special thing to note in her writings is that she remains on the grass root level, but the elevation her characters experience through their actions makes the reading a pleasurable experience. In agreement to Deshpande's opinion, the view of Elaine Showalter appears to be correct, when she articulates that, "Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex." (Showalter 11-12)

In the opinion of Shashi Deshpande, Western feminism is entirely different from that of Indian feminism. For her, Feminism is not a matter of theory. She feels that the Western Feminist theories cannot be applied to the real life situation in India. It is because the societal set up, the way of life and the traditions of the Western lands are very different from that of Indian subcontinent. Feminism in fact is more of a misnomer in the context of narratives of women. The reason for the same is that, it is a representative of a specific ideology which presumes a change in existing system and at the same time formulates politically alternative structures of equality and autonomy. Deshpande believes in the fact that Indians have a wrong notion of feminism, and clearly argues that walking away from tradition, and throwing tantrums do not constitute feminism in the real sense of the term. She says that many women have feminism in their lives without knowing that they actually possess it. Hence they should have a clear idea of what feminism is in their lives and what it is not. For Deshpande, feminism is using the stamina to endure the anguishes for the betterment of life and this is what she tries bringing out through her short stories. She strongly believes and propounds that, it is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or any other Feminist writer to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. Deshpande tries making this point very clear through her writings that Feminism is much more than rebellion and it is actually a realization of self and a respect for that self. For her feminism is translating what is used up in endurance into something positive: a real strength. Like any other woman writer, Shashi Deshpande's focus is on women. But the difference lies in the way she looks at them as human beings and not as mere women and also writes about the various problems they face, both at personal and social level.

Being an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a caring and loving mother are the three ideals of womanhood in Hindu society. Shashi Deshpande confronts the reader with a set of situations in which living up to this ideal is far more important than women's personal rights. The wife's duty is to fulfill her husband's expectations, allowing herself to be modeled by him, even if it is at the cost of losing her own self and personality (The Stone Woman). Becoming a devoted wife means submitting to the wishes of a husband, who is very often a total stranger for a young bride, and who will take her regardless of her fears and emotions (The Intrusion). A woman who has a successful profession career must be willing to give it up in favor of her

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husband's and this sacrifice is taken as a matter of fact (A Wall is Safer). In such a context the decision to get on at work implies doubts, remorse, and a deep sense of guilt (It Was the Nightingale). A Hindu wife may even sacrifice her sexual life if her husband's ideals require it (The First Lady).

We find that since ancient times, women have been segregated, codified and victimized on the basis of their sex. Their sex has been a site over which patriarchy is relentlessly playing out its game of discrimination and discernment. Chandra Nisha Singh refers to this idea in *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*, where she is expressing Manu's thought regarding marriage:

The institution of marriage is the most glorified and sacrosanct pattern of existence socially, religiously and sexually; hence, it is treated as an ideal form for a civilized social organization and for the propagation of the species. But it is also, significantly, the patriarchal weapon that finalizes the complete subversion and social obliteration of woman and although constructed as the apotheosis of fulfillment for both man and woman, it acquires centrality in woman's life only and contains both her space and her identity. The phallogocentric hold on the institution determines her code of behavior and the boundaries of her space, exclusion and invisibility become strategic devices for patriarchy to foreground the image of ideal femininity. Patriarchy permits no alternatives to marriage and holds in pity and contempt those who attempt to thwart it. (49)

Marriage becomes an important event in a girl's life where her groom is chosen according to her family members irrespective of her saying regarding the same. It is presented as trap from which liberation is difficult with the end result as a collapse in the entire system. The female characters are alienated in their own private worlds, where their husbands take them for granted.

Deshpande's "I Want" and "The Intrusion" are two stories advocating this very ideology of getting trapped in an arranged marriage. Alka in "I Want" and the unnamed protagonist in the "The Intrusion" undergo almost similar fate, where their lives take a drastic turn once they are married off to strangers, in real sense of the word. Women bound in traditional male oriented society and who inevitably suffer from loneliness and a sense of guilt and failure. Shashi Deshpande is not a feminist writer and has no intention of becoming the spokeswoman of the predicament of the middle class Indian woman. Her short stories portray social reality the way it

is, without any explicit critical claim on the way it ought to be. None of her female characters put the stability of family unity in danger, even though they suffer from the deep feeling of isolation and frustration.

Failure in obtaining security, identity and social status that otherwise marriage provides is very well taken up by Shashi Deshpande in her short story “The Inner Rooms”. This is a story of a legendary woman Amba from the Mahabharata. Caught in the rigmarole of man’s world, she loses her identity. Having been denied the identity, which in a patriarchal set up is only through the institution of marriage, she decides to end up her life. Marriage as depicted by Shashi Deshpande is an important social and economic institution of the family 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. Marital rape is again something on which Shashi Deshpande ponders upon, and “The Intrusion” gives us an example of it. Woven around the experiencing of a honeymooning couple, the story is about the emotional and physical shock which the female protagonist has to undergo, when her husband sexually assaults her. She finds to her agony that her body has been intruded in the process. “A Liberated Woman” is another story demarcating the physical abuse in marital relationships. The title itself is ironical, because here the wife even lacks this freedom to earn more than her husband. “Love making for her becomes an exercise in sadism”.

“An Antidote to Boredom” shows another dimension of a marriage where a married woman is seen to be alienated from her husband who loves being in love with his rigid schedule of work. She gets involved in a new relationship, but remains doubtful about its various pros and cons. For all these reasons she checks her emotions, stifles her longing for adventure, and finally settles back as a docile wife for fear of disturbing the calm tenor of her life.

Kate Fullbrook remarks in this context that “Women are born into social structures which they did not make, but from which they nevertheless benefit or suffer, and which place boundaries around them making it hard to alter who and what they are, what they can say, what it is possible to think and do, or how they perceive ethical decisions.” (309)

Sexuality has become one of the most contentious and contested concepts of both academic interest and socio-political movements because it has become a site of strife and struggle over which major political battles are fought between the repressive ideologies of the state or fundamentalist groups and the creative forces of Nature and human life. Women’s

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writings bear the authentic signatures of their experience, open before us a new vista, and where in one can find how societies and traditions have played a subversive role in relegating a woman to a secondary position. The short stories taken up in this paper depict home as microcosm of society, that how it becomes the nucleus around which the female protagonists revolve; at times willingly, at times unwillingly, at other times, unwilling; sometimes out of compulsion and at other times, out of helplessness. Role of mother can also be rife with conflicts and problems that are not too different from those of any western woman. Deshpande portrays mothers, who due to a strong feeling of self-devaluation consider themselves intruders in their own family and strangers to their own daughters (Why a Robin?). They are perceived as warning signals by their daughters, who will try to break away from their model (Can You Hear Silence?). Shashi Deshpande's female characters are women with a rich inner world which seems to be of no interest for their husbands, and children. Nevertheless they do not rebel or protest against it and would rather choose self-sacrifice so that their familiar structures remain intact. The conflict between duty to the family and personal fulfillment will always resolve itself through self-sacrifice and submission to the patterns of society. The author does not intend to suggest any solutions. She prefers to act like a camera, recording emotions and situations with realism and sensitivity. The picture shows the fact that tradition is deeply engrained in the society, and for those women who have a mind of their own and a clear perception of the disadvantages of their position, one way to come to terms with the surrounding reality is the acceptance of loneliness, as a factual part of their existence.

In conclusion, we can very well say that all these women are not always happy and contented, but they succumb to pressures, some internal and some societal. Jasbir Jain's observation can also be taken up here while concluding the paper and that is, she explicates, "stepping outside the given" has not been easy, especially in a society which believes in giving with one hand and taking back from the other. She holds the opinion that women writers in India only add new dimensions to conventionally accepted relationships, seeking not a reinterpretation, but making an attempt to make those relationships more comfortable for the woman. Though Jain feels the need of drastic change, still is aware of the fact that, the change cannot be thrust from outside, but must be from within. What we can observe through all these stories of Deshpande is that the holy triad of home, family and society become for women in the Katyayani

model, a source of their nemesis as well as an agent of catharsis. Through her writings, Shashi Deshpande has been able to show women characters constructing their own subjectivity by reworking on their sexuality, which emerges as a vital and foundational to understanding of one's identity. One more interesting thing to note in the short stories of Deshpande is that she has shown patriarchy operating not only through males but also through the economic conditions, which force the women characters to abide to it. There is a sense of monotony and even though the female characters remain in the system trying not to make things fall apart, still they are able to scratch the labels which society has put on them, through her stories Deshpande makes us know the characters as who they are as individual, and not under the societal labels. By scratching the labels, which are forcibly put on a woman in Indian society, Deshpande displays a feminist stance in a new unseen light. This attempt is conspicuous because it helps in a new understanding of woman as a being in Indian context. The western feminist lenses are kept apart, but the feminist ideology is taken up by Deshpande to be explored and ascertained in a novel manner.

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