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Representation of woman in the short stories of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

Deshpande, in the story symbolically presents the conflict between the old and the new through the peacock and robin. This shows that a woman-mother does not want to come out of the orbit world. The research deals with the short stories of Shashi Deshpande-the eminent writer who has been successful in providing a window into the world of women through her novels and short stories. Through her stories, she has portrayed before the readers that howsoever people admire and appreciate the life of a New Woman; it is never easy. Her stories deal with the challenges which are to be won, the tough time of decision making and struggle to get whatever the woman desires. The ultimate goal is to gain freedom, respect and love, but still, she is despised for being independent and having a voice of her own. The struggle for identity continues throughout life. The choices that the woman makes decide her fortune, and due to this, she has to be observant of what happens around her in order to be able to make decisions that make her fortune. Shashi Deshpande portrays a realistic and authentic picture of woman in her stories. *“These characters are not just mothers, daughters or even women; first they are human beings living in different circumstances, conditions and personalities”*. The short stories talk about the condition of women in the Indian society who belong to different castes, region and time. In every story, we get a glimpse of the woman who possesses the characteristics of a new woman who has grown and matured because of the struggle of identity and has begun to have a clear perspective of things around her.

Keywords: Woman, feminist, identity, Indian society, self-discovery

Introduction

In the modern society the place of mother and the place of daughter have been rapidly changing. They have their own realms to wander. They have their own problems. Formerly education was not given to women in the Indian society. But as the time changed efforts have been made by various personalities to include women onto the process of education. Since then she has been experiencing a new world with new problems to face. Modernity at large has shattered the faith of a common man in the family life. There are many reasons for this but vast scale spread of education may not be neglected. Unfortunately only rights have been learnt by the learners, and they seem to have forgotten to learn about their duties. And hence problems seem to have been appearing in the society. The 19th century became a witness to the rise of the concept of a New Woman due to the drastic transition in the social and political set up. The war of woman for her empowerment became the greatest of all wars. The New Woman that emerged is not the woman who was born in the present time, age or trend. She is called New because one finds newness in her thoughts, her spirit, her new logic for her identity and several other characteristics. There is a misconception that says that a New Woman is only found in the present age. However, such heroic women were even born in the ancient age; Sita and Draupadi are the examples because they fought for their rights and dignity. In contrast to them, one even comes across women who are modern in every aspect-food, clothes and luxury yet are dependent upon others for their survival and decision making. A New Woman is like a lake fed by many brooks and all the new women out in the world have been successful in adding to this broad and fragile issue. A New Woman is like a hero who is an amalgamation of several characteristics. Deshpande has minutely tried to include the intricacies woven in her woman heroes by highlighting the newness in their personality.

Rationale of the study: Shashi Deshpande is not a feminist in a real sense but has carved a niche in her career by capturing the emotions and thoughts of the middle class educated woman that is dominated by patriarchy. She came into light when she first wrote her short story, 'Intrusion'. She was appreciated and found her voice through this. Her writing is strengthened due to the influence of Jane Austen, Bronte sisters, Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Drabkkble, Daris Lessing, Germaine Green and Erica Jong. While being interviewed by Vanamala Vishwanath during an interview, "I still read her (Jane Austen) regularly. But I don't think there have been any conscious influences on my writings as such." (Interview to Vishwanath in Pathak 233)

According to Deshpande, long after she began writing she read Beauvoir and Green. In her writing, we find a mirror to the society where we belong. It carries a real picture that is portrayed by Deshpande-the realist. The characters in her writing are genuine; not obscure. Her writings have a universal appeal as she presents India of the 80s as it is in real. She has no aim of preaching through her writing. She says to Dickman, "I write because it comes to me". (In Conversation to Sue Dickman) The centre of attention in all her stories is a woman-her struggles, miseries, stress and irritation, anguishes and torments. The stories speak of the social and familial structure where the woman is confined in along with the fights she undertakes to survive. All her characters are women who narrate their plight. All these heroes are middle class working women whose thoughts she has poignantly expanded with conviction by minutely weaving the intricacies of the life of that particular character. When questioned by Dickman on this, she says: "I know women better than I know man, so perhaps my books are more about women, and that, about it." (Interview to Dickman 32)

Shama Futehally has complemented Deshpande for her vivid description:

"Those who have read and reread Deshpande over the years are united in describing her as a 'middle class' writer. In this, they are paying her a great compliment; they are saying with truth-that her writing is inseparable from the milieu she describes, or indeed from the relationship she writes for. She writes as an insider, not as a viewer: that bane of post-independent writing which was so much more of a bane when Deshpande began her career". (Futehally 111)

According to Adele King, "Deshpande's strength lies in portraying uncertainties and doubts of women, who cannot see themselves as heroic but who want to make life possible". (King in Kirpal 167). The strength of her characters lies in the fact that even though their life is full of struggles, they all rise beyond the confusion and their search for identity. They adopt a familiar outlook based on a woman's perspective. All the characters are sensitive and aware; at the same time, they reflect over their position and destiny in the conservative society. The quest for 'self', the treatment they are meted with by the men around, the reasons for impatience and all the feelings that puts them into a frenzy are portrayed by Deshpande in an admirable and empathetic attitude towards the women. Deshpande tells Vishwanath,

"I have been able to feel more a housewife, who is most, devoted...Women who do not go out to work, who are

literally trapped, and who are scared to get out of family relationships. Without that, she feels she has no claim to whatever. Most women are still emotionally dependent on the family-they want to be good daughters/wives/mothers always". (Interview to Vishwanath 235)

Thus in all her works we come across such characters who are middleclass working women/housewives struggling to find a place of their own by battling the patriarchal norms.

Deshpande very admirably presents her stories by keeping the feeble and sad woman at the center and with progression in the story she brings out the inner qualities of the woman and finds her real identity.

The identity of a woman in India is judged by 3 factors- her marriage, her behavior as a wife & finally how she is a mother. Deshpande's women were characters who did not want to disturb the status quo of her family and sought individual identity. In the struggle of finding their identity the women are even left alone by their families. Yet these courageous figures finally get a space for themselves. Amba in 'The Inner Rooms' has discovered her identity during the course of battling with humiliation by Salva & Bhishma in the Mahabharat. She is a character that is portrayed as an angry & hurt woman who intends to revenge the humiliation caused to her. To erase this rejection caused by Bhishma & Salva she sacrifices herself. Her anguish is used as a symbol to highlight the state of many women of her time who did not have a voice of her own. Thus Deshpande's stories give as a visit into the psyche of a woman & how the women of India think. Indian women have been trained to be obedient, self-effacing & be controlled by a man in order to silently suffer in the tyranny of patriarchy. These women go through lot of introspection & emerge as liberated personalities in contrast to their biological nature by breaking the shackles of social conditioning. 'It was the Nightingale' is a story about a woman who chooses her career rather than choosing a family. For this she has decided to go abroad & has to leave her husband in India for a span of 2 years. Her husband feels that she will not leave him, but she becomes a stone to his pleadings & emotional ties and leaves him to go abroad. She is keen to prove him wrong despite of all the love she has in order to break free of this social conditioning. She is eager to break the conditioning set up by our society as well as from the bondages of love which kept her tied to her husband. The stories 'The Awakening & I Want' bring out the plight of women who have sacrificed their life & desires for better prospects. Alka in 'The Awakening' yearned for comfortable life with basic amenities. But sudden death of her father leads her to become a typist in order to earn a living & thus continue her "shoddy way of life." Alka has the spirit of a New Woman wherein she is flexible and acts as per the changing conditions of her family. Like a New Woman she yearned to have a place of her own where she had her privacy but taking the job of a typist due to the sudden demise of her father put a full stop to that wish of hers. In 'I Want' we came across a girl who is compelled to leave her job in order to get married. The groom is no match against her yet has a long list of 'I Wants' without even bothering to ask the girl-What does she want? She sought respect and understanding from the boy; instead he became a dictator of his 'I Wants.' In 'An Antidote to Boredom' we find a woman who is in a boring marriage & ends up by having an affair with a widower. This is a bold step & throws light on the fact that a

New Woman seeks companionship in marriage and years for respect & mutual understanding. But once she realizes that her husband knows about her affair she goes back to her boring life to become a submissive wife. She has no courage to rebel & give a voice to her desires. Women remain silent & blind when it comes to the infidelity of a man in order to save the marriage. She remains in the marriage because it provides her material comforts-a woman ready to suppress her individuality in exchange of materialistic pleasures.

Deshpande's women do not rebel openly, as they are afraid of losing their family/ causing inconvenience even though they hate the condition they are living in. This reveals that as women have limited freedom they continue their sacrifice silently & drudge along with life. Deshpande has beautifully depicted the relationship of a mother & her children in 'Death of a Child', 'My Beloved Charioteer' & 'Why a Robin?' 'Death of a Child' is a story of a child who has aborted her child. It was not that she did not love children but she needed a space than just be a mother. She already had children & did not want this child as now she was at a stage where motherhood seemed a burden to her. Her bold decision of aborting her child makes us aware of the New Woman who is the decision maker of her life- be it education/marriage/pregnancy. She takes responsibility of these decisions & sticks to them too even in the worst conditions. In the story 'Why a Robin?' is a mother who is battling with the hatred of her little daughter. The daughter follows suit the cold treatment meted out to her mother by her father. The mother tries hard to get close to her and break the barriers that hinder their relations but all in the vain.

The New Woman in her was eager to overcome her limitations. It is only when the daughter attains puberty, she wants comfort from her mother & both get close again. One common behavior noticed in Deshpande's women is that the women are very supportive of one another whenever any woman's issue/problems come up. In 'My Beloved Charioteer' a daughter very much in awe & respect for her father is slapped with the bitter truth of the 'inside story' of the relation between her parents. The father was an oppressor who treated her mother as a commodity. Thus the mother wins the heart of her daughter and brings her to have a better understanding of life. The mother like a New Woman forgets the past & its pain & moves ahead in life, which her daughter is incapable of. The mother is courageous and never loses hope even though she was in torments. She had a firm determination to endure and rise above her situation rather than bask in the pain of being a victim before the world. The reasons for which a woman is not able to break the ties of her relationship are varied. Some need financial & emotional support, some are not courageous enough to break the stereotypes and some even consider it as a life with no options and follows it as a mandatory code of conduct. The widow Lalita in 'A Man & a Woman' lives a life that is devoid of any pleasure after her husband. At every step she takes towards the fulfillment of her desires & plans, many issues are raised by the people around her & by the society. She is chided by her mother-in-law when she laughs & plays with her daughter. Her brother-in-law's physical advances towards her awaken her suppressed desire of sex. As per the code of conduct ruled out for a widow, it is a sin to think about such things. This makes Lalita guilty and she vents out the agony before the crippled friend of her late husband called Manu. Manu

consoles her by pacifying her and stating that it is natural for her to feel so & she need not be ashamed. After this incident Manu proposes her to make a new start of her life with him; which leaves Lalita in a shock & dilemma. Finally on deep thought she marries him-which brings out the trait of a New Woman wherein she takes the decision of her life to remarry without the pressures of people around her. The polio-struck woman in 'The Valley in the Shadow' is ignored by her husband who married her as she earned a huge sum compared to him. Initially it worked well but once she gave birth to a child, he stopped caring & literally ignored her. She craved for attention & love but did not get from him. He kept her hungry for sex by neglecting her. Due to this she weaved sexual fantasies & felt guilty. Ultimately reflecting upon her situation she became courageous & talks to her husband. She voices her opinion- a quality New Woman and stops getting into the self-pity mode/feeling victimized. She was no less than her husband/ any person as she earned more than her husband, was self-aware of her wants, likes & dislikes as well as the moral conduct followed in our society. In 'The First Lady' the heroine is a woman who was smitten by a freedom fighter who believed in simplicity & nonviolence. Both get married by neglecting the hurdles that came in their way. After sometime her husband once a freedom fighter becomes a politician after Independence and now has succumbed to all the pleasures of luxuries. She is called the 'First Lady' in their circle. She married him because she thought he loved her but on getting close to him she sees his incapability of loving anyone and nor did he have time for love.

Due to this she is attracted towards one of the young followers of her husband who had begun to follow celibacy after the birth of his children. The First Lady was compelled to follow him & this led her to the young follower. The story is a flashback where she keeps on reflecting over the fakeness she has developed and how exhausted she is due to it. She has many health issues and has become fat. The First Lady is happy that her lover is dead and is saved from seeing her in this condition. The thought process which she has now, represents a New Woman who wants to remain real to the situation rather than faking it. Radha's cousin is the narrator of the story "Rain". He is in love with Radha but she is married to another man. Due to her husband's sickness Radha goes to Bombay to consult her cousin who is a Doctor now. Her husband is admitted for treatment in the hospital. The weariness and gloom of her colorless life leads her to develop an intimacy with her cousin. The telephonic call which had the news of her husband's death is received by them on one of the evenings when they were making love. This puts an end to their relations and Radha returns to her paternal home and lives the life of a widow. The cousin unable to forget her convinces her and they get married. A New Woman is one who is liberated in her own thinking. She yearns to educate herself and seeks financial independence. She intends to rise above her limitations and bondages that hold her back in life. Pramila in 'The Cruelty Game' is one such character who is a widow and comes to live with the family of her husband. She has a daughter named Sharu is ill- treated by her cousins. The women in the family distance themselves from her and she is given a framed code of conduct by her in-laws. We witness the powerless position of Pramila as she is unable to react and save her daughter from the sinister remarks and tortures of the other children in the family. It reaches an extreme when

Pramila's plan to celebrate the birthday of Sharu is spoiled by her family members. Finally she takes the bold decision of abandoning this so-called family along with her daughter. She is going to remarry and become financially independent by working.

The idea of liberation and the deep hidden meaning of the word, 'liberation' is painted artistically by Deshpande in 'The Liberated Woman'. The story revolves around a lady who is doctor by profession. After many years of marriage she meets one of their common friend who supported and encouraged the boy and girl in getting married as they were very much in love.

"It had seemed to me an absurdity that two people so much in love should be kept apart because of something so trivial as caste." (CS-1: 38)

The lady met the friend after 12 years and narrated to him the plight of her love marriage; wherein her husband had turned into a sadist and beats her. He abuses her in the night, beats her and is totally a different man in the morning. The friend advises her to separate from him. She denies it as she is afraid that it will expose her husband before their children. To save him she suffers silently even though she is independent by all means. Towards the end, the friend comes across an article featuring the doctor with the title, "A LIBERATED WOMAN". He is shocked on reading it because he knows the painful truth of her life which denies her liberation from her misery.

Conclusion

Deshpande's stories are an example of courage and openness not found in other short story writers. She creates characters who become the creators of their destiny without any crutches. The dilemma of her characters is cleared by them on their own and they reach a stage of self-discovery. She has beautifully and thoroughly understood the psyche of a woman in every role—a mother, a daughter, a wife and most importantly as a person who is bounded by the conventional male-dominated India. The characteristics that come to light based on the above discussed stories are that—A New Woman is one who has a different mindset compared to other women around her. She is the decision maker of her life—for education, marriage/pregnancy or anything related to her. She is capable of voicing her opinion with a firm determination and courage. She is very intuitive and self-aware of herself and her surroundings. She never holds grudges—be it towards people or her past. She knows the art of moving ahead in life under all stress and struggles. She has the guts to take responsibility for her actions whatever the result is. She is adaptive to others and to situations. She is always hopeful and liberated in her thoughts. She is eager to learn and overcome her limitations. She is supportive towards women around her. When it comes to marriage she seeks companionship based on respect and mutual understanding. She does not deny her physical cravings and is aware of her body. She is fearlessly real and does not like to fake under any circumstances. She seeks financial independence and security.

To conclude, Deshpande's skill of writing with an unusual bent makes her stand out prominently from other writers. Deshpande's passion for reading has developed in her a maturity with which she deals with all her characters. Her transparent language and spontaneity make it easy for the readers to understand what she wants to convey. In all her

stories she has highlighted the plight of women on our Indian society. But she is not harsh or feminist towards the men nor does she portray them to be the reason for the problems in the life of her women characters. A superb chronicler of the man-woman relationship; she faithfully presents the interaction of the conservative and modern culture and the tensions that follow this clash.

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