



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. X, Issue No. XX,  
Oct-2015, ISSN 2230-7540*

**PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN: SHORT STORIES OF  
SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL**

AN  
INTERNATIONALLY  
INDEXED PEER  
REVIEWED &  
REFEREED JOURNAL

# Portrayal of Woman: Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande's Novel

Monali Mohan Rao Pohane

Research Scholar, Jodhpur National University, Rajasthan

**Abstract – The aim of writing this paper is to highlight the theme of helplessness on the part of a woman. Whether she is a mother, daughter, sister or wife, the society always desires that she should be docile, timid and submissive. Through Deshpande's novels for they are trying to highlight the change towards which our society is moving but still millions of miles need to be covered for this change to be visible. A major preoccupation in recent Indian Women's writings has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationship. In Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protests and concepts of rebelliousness have often remained alien ideas, as far as women were concerned. Women were not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice or question the already existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions. They have to merely exist subjected to the patriarchal system.**

-----X-----

## INTRODUCTION

The status of woman all over the world, particularly in India, has been undergoing a rapid change in the recent decades. So the image of woman in Indo-English novel is based on the traditional ancient literature of India, which showed woman as a devoted wife or a devoted mother. The imaginative and creative responses of the writers are related to the changing world view and the questioning attitude thereby developed by it. The attitude to women has changed in recent times. Their writings are based not only on observations of external behavior but also on the internal journey in the psychological realm of the feminine sensibilities. A few women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur make straight journey into the psyche of their women characters that are torn on account of the tensions generated by the discord between the individual and the surroundings. They have started trying to understand Indian women and portray her in their novels.

Indian English literature has established its credentials all over the world. Indian writers in English have been using almost all forms of literature. The Indian short story in English can be said to have begun to take definite shape in the 1920s, and is thus hardly more than eighty years old, but its development so far unmistakably indicates a distinct possibility of its becoming one of the most significant forms in the field of Indian writing in English.

If the Indian short story writer sought inspiration in his ancient classics, he has also come under the influence of the short story writers of the West to a considerable

degree. The Indian writer took to short story writing in English under various influences- spread of English education, birth of journals and periodicals as well as the writings of eminent men like Tagore proved to be a source of great impetus. The major Indian English short story writers to contribute to this genre include Shankar Ram, A.S.P. Ayyar, Manjri Inshvaran, Humayun Kabir, G.V. Desani, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, K.A. Abbas, Manohar Malgaokar and others.

It is only in the 1970s, over seven decades after an Indian woman first brought out a short story collection that our women writers have come into their own. It is now that all our major women writers made their appearance. Some who have written stories which can find place in any international short story anthology are: Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Jay Nimbkar, Bharti Mukherjee, Rajj Narasimhan, Shashi Deshpande, Sujata Bala, Anita Desai, Indriyani Sowkar and Jhumpa Lahiri. Jhabvala, acknowledged as "the most sophisticated novelist", is the most prolific of our women writers with four collections to her credit to date. She has given the best models of a finished short story.

The medium of English language, which they chose, has a lion's share in their popularity. Moreover their exploration of Indian feminine sensibility emanates from a thoroughly sensitive appreciation of the Indian woman. In this paper, I have examined one of the above mentioned prominent women writers, Shashi Deshpande, who has explored new sexual mores, fresh possibilities in human relations, marriage and motherhood. Based on the availability of the primary

sources, I have planned my study of the portrayal of woman in the short stories written by Shashi Deshpande.

### Portrayal of Woman in Indian English Literature:

Literature inevitably reflects the ever changing reality of life. The portrayal of the position of woman in society is no exception to this phenomenon. The status of women all over the world, particularly in India, has been undergoing a rapid change in recent times. And therefore the portrayal of woman is important in the study of literature all over the world. Woman has inspired literature and has been one of its pivotal themes too. She herself is also a creator of literature and therefore a woman's presence in literature is all pervading. A creative writer has the perception and the analytic mind of a sociologist who provides an exact record of human life, society, and social system. Among all literary forms, fiction reflects the contemporary social conditions. The portrayal of woman in fiction is also governed by the prevailing attitude towards women in society and the author's response to it.

Shashi Deshpande, an Indian English writer and Varsha Adalja, a Gujarati writer, have projected women in their writings with contemporary realistic approach. To study this aspect in their works, this paper has tried to analyse the portrayal of woman in the short stories by these writers.

Traditionally Indian society characterizes women as ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. In pre-Independence era, there existed this conventional image of woman in literature. Most of the Indian novels that dealt with woman's issue offered a peripheral treatment of the subject or end up glorifying the stereotypical virtues of Indian women, like patience, devotion and abject acceptance of whatever is meted out to her.

"One peculiarity of the images of women" says, Mary Ann Fergusson, "throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes. Another way of putting this would be to say that in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, and sex object their roles in relationship to men." The writers portrayed her in these traditional roles assigned to them in societal framework. Moreover, female characters are too distant from reality and too crude, moralized or sentimentalized.

There was no overnight revolution. The portrayal of the archetypal woman still loomed large on the horizon in spite of the fast growth and development of women's education. In actual literary practice, numerous women characters in fiction are found plying the role of classic prototype. They enact the suffering, sacrificing role of Sita and Savitry. However, the writers of the contemporary world came out rapidly from historical romance and mythic stories and presented the realities of the life of women. As the image of woman, family and society kept on changing all through the years, the

writer's views, too, were all changing resulting in a variety of realistic images.

In due course, Indian women writers aimed at portraying realistically Indian women's sense of frustration and their alienation. Kamala Markandeya very successfully portrays the double pulls that the Indian woman is subjected to- between her desire to assert her dignity as human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother. Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala is mostly preoccupied with the travails of the white woman in India. Nayantara Sahgal writes sensitively of the way women suffer owing to sexist bias in a patriarchal set-up. All these women writers have portrayed woman in Indian society and her problems and plights from time to time as well as her efforts to achieve a harmonious relationship with her surroundings. These writers have also tried to analyze the socio cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their role and image. Moreover they get more and more psychologically intended and try to assess the sociological effect on the psyche of their women protagonists.

### SHASHI DESHPANDE: AN INTRODUCTION

Indian women novelists in English constitute a significant group today. They, willingly or unwillingly, are drawn into an exploration of the forces which shape the experience of women. The nature of reality for Indian women has been expanded and changed due to far-reaching changes in cultural, social and economic patterns in India in the last three decades. It is inevitable that the changes in the status of woman in India are reflected in women's writing of the period. Women writers try to trace in their writings the feminine sense and sensibilities, responses and reactions in the Indian social milieu and arrive at the possible trends of the coming era.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique position among contemporary Indian novelists in English. She deals with the struggles and adjustments of the middle-class Indian woman who represents the overwhelming majority of Indian women. Gifted with a rare literary bent of mind, Shashi Deshpande has made a niche for herself among Indian English novelist.

Shashi Deshpande was born and brought up in Dharwad in Karnataka, South India in the year 1938. She is the second daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Sri Adya Rangcharya (better known as "Sriranga") who is described as a Bernard Shaw of Kannada theatre. Shashi Deshpande got writing as a legacy from her father. He was a cerebral man who wrote plays of ideas. Literature was a common fare at her early childhood. She grew up surrounded by books and literary personalities.

The number and variety of books at home ... and their accessibility. To

read soon became as necessary as to breathe or eat... and there was the atmosphere in our house, the company my father kept, the kind of friends he had, the conversation and discussion that went on over endless cups of tea, the play-reading and rehearsals that took place at home – all this created a world of words and ideas I was happily submerged in. Shashi Deshpande received an English education at a protestant mission school in Karnataka. As a schoolgirl, she read the great British classical novels in English, and particularly liked the works of Jane Austen.

She received her graduation in Economics from Elphinstone College, Bombay and in Law from the Government Law College, Bangalore. Much later, she took a post-graduate degree in English from the Mysore University. She married Dr. Deshpande, a neuro-pathologist (now Professor of Pathology) in 1962. The initial years of her marriage were largely given over to bringing up her two sons. After marriage, she obtained Diploma in Journalism from Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine "Onlooker".

Shashi Deshpande has been contributing her literary jewels in Indian Writing in English for more than thirty years. Short stories and novels being Shashi Deshpande's forte, her major works include six collections of short stories, seven novels apart from the books for the children and several articles. Thus her output is by no means inconsiderable.

Shashi Deshpande began her literary career in 1970, with the publication of a collection of short stories. Till now, she has published near about eighty stories. Her first collection of short stories, published in 1978, was called *The Legacy and Other Stories*. The title story "The Legacy" has been prescribed by Columbia University in its literature syllabus. In his Preface to this volume, G.S. Amur aptly remarks: "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories." (Amur in Deshpande: 10) Her other collections of short stories are: *It was Dark* (1986), *The Miracle* (1986), *It was the Nightingale* (1986), *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993) and *The Stone Women* (2001). Some of these stories were later developed into novels, and share many of their concerns. In respect of technique also these stories contain the germs of most of the strengths and limitations of her novels.

Shashi Deshpande, in her novels, deals with certain recurring themes, like – inner conflict and identity crisis, parent-child relationship especially mother-daughter relationship, and the concept of marriage and sex. Above all, the theme of silence rooted in the

complex relationship between man and woman holds a great fascination for Shashi Deshpande.

In all Deshpande's novel, except *Come up and be Dead*, the protagonists are married women. Shashi Deshpande succinctly presents the inequalities and injustice heaped on woman because of her subordinate position as a wife. The inferior position of wife in any marriage is made obvious through glimpses into the marriages of Indu's numerous aunts and uncles. (RS). Deshpande also makes the readers aware of society's reaction to the superior status of the wife in marriage, which leads the husband to develop an inferiority complex. For example, in *DHNT* Sarita becomes the victim of her husband's sadistic torture through physical and sexual violence. While *TLS* presents a typical Indian husband who takes his wife's unflinching support for granted. In *BV*, Deshpande makes a bold attempt to tackle the subject of rape in marriage - man imposing himself on a wife.

### **WOMEN IN THE BINDING VINE**

Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) is very much similar to her earlier novels, as it sketches her middle-class female protagonist predicament in a male-dominated world, where she has very little scope to give voice to her concerns. Although the story in this particular novel at the superficial level appears to be very identical to her other novels, but if one explores it deeply he can easily sense the peculiarity in it. In all other novels we find that the protagonist is of paramount importance and all the other characters are used to feature her concerns and feelings. But in this novel the minor characters play a very significant role; the protagonist Urmi plays the role of anchor, it is she who is used by the novelist very cleverly to expose the sufferings of women from different sections of our society. *The Binding Vine* deals with the multi-facetedness of its central character Urmi. Urmi is an intelligent, educated middle-class wife, who is employed as a lecturer in a college. Urmi's vision towards life is quite different from other women of our society. She is one who affirms her independence and freedom in each and every judgment of her life. Urmi united in marriage with the man whom she preferred, but is desperate in her married life because of her ego and to some extent Kishore her husband is accountable for it. The problem with Urmi is that she is brimming with confidence, as is financially independent and well settled in her life. Due to this economic stability she has developed a kind of super ego in herself which makes her reluctant to submit before her husband. Moreover, she cannot tolerate the submission of Vanaa (her sister-in-law) and her mother before their spouses.



From the initial days of her marriage Urmi starts feeling that the bond between her and her husband is not that of love and there is lack of emotional support and understanding. Although Urmi knows that for a woman to adjust in a totally new world, love and compatibility on part of a husband is very essential, but on the other hand Urmi's husband Kishore is the true reflection of the conventional Indian husband, regardless of being an educated Merchant Navy officer. Every time when Urmi tries to reveal her emotional insecurity, whenever Kishore goes away from her, he asserts himself sexually rather than understanding that her desire is not physical what she needs is something else. Urmi is leading an economically and socially secure life like a normal human being even without the support her husband. But sometimes she feels erotic feelings growing within her because she is deprived of true love and she finds it hard to control her wishes.

The novelist has very sensibly laid bare the fear, anger, helplessness and anguish of Shakuntala. When Urmi escorts Shakuntala to her home that night she comes to know about Kalpana from her. What we as reader find that she has kind of mixed feelings for her daughter, that is sometimes she is full of praise and love for her daughter but the very next moment she condemns her for her present condition. The point which Deshpande is trying to make is that it is not the victim who is responsible, but it is society at large which is to be made accountable for such savage acts against woman.

## **PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN: IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS**

Shashi Deshpande has carved a niche for herself in dealing with woman in different roles – daughter, wife, mother and an individual in a society conditioned by the rigid codes laid down by men. Deshpande is the articulator of women who are caught at the cross – roads of change in a society which is undergoing the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. It is a difficult job, indeed, to give voice to women who themselves are not sure of their own suffering and who stand in an unenviable position today. They are acutely aware of the marginalization of their individuality but are condemned to live the life of silent suffering which was the lot of their predecessors. Sunita Reddy too expresses similar view that "In many ways, their condition is even more pitiable than that of women of earlier generations who unquestioningly accepted their secondary position in society." (Reddy: 29) The stories that are discussed under the following sub-topic portray the patriarchal culture within which the life of a daughter becomes marginal.

Moreover Deshpande is seriously concerned with realistic perceptions of family role-relationship. She has dealt with various facets of human relationships most intensely because the traditional heritage of India gives great importance to the family unit. Thus while exploring the role-relationships of a woman in Indian society, Deshpande in her short stories offers readers

an intimate and domestic chronicle of the inner world of women and the pain of coming to self-knowledge. Her stories are about the personal journey of woman; the heroine learns as she undergoes the crisis. Her stories depict effectively a disturbed but a brave feminine psyche in the new ethos.

Shashi Deshpande deals with the problem concerning the marriage of

girls in Indian society. They are portrayed as crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Deshpande has attempted to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations in some of the short stories. The marriageable girls in these stories are shown operating within the framework of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Through these examples Deshpande raises the issue of arranged marriage or lack of feeling in a union which sanctified the lifelong partnership of man and woman. It is to be observed, however, that Deshpande desists from making hysterical anti-dowry statements and instead tries to look at the problem without any preconceived ideas. She lays bare the hypocrisy and double standards practiced by society. The protagonists of the following stories are unable to defy social convention and seek a compromise as a way out of their dilemma.

Shashi Deshpande ironically indicates that a girl is treated like a commodity in the marriage-market. She gets quickly selected if she is found suitable to the groom's requirement. Her will and requirement has no place and not at all considered important. In this story, the groom's party had agreed to the proposal because she fulfilled their requirement of "a simple but sophisticated girl who can entertain and mix with foreigners for their son is working in a foreign company."

The story "Alka" shows the girl, Alka bending to the will of elders. Deshpande ironically presents the true facts of marriage in a middle-class family in orthodox India. Marriage, a promised end in a traditional society puts an end to aspiring girl's career. This is aptly illustrated in the story.

The story revolves round the protagonist, Alka who has crossed the generally accepted marriageable age. So she is expected to marry the first man who agrees to marry her. Her opinions are never taken into account – first by her father with regard to her marriage, and later by her fiancé with regard to her career. We discover a fairly good deal of self-searching in "I want..." where a twenty-seven year old woman Alka is subjected to "the insolent stares, [and] the impertinent question" (36) by the groom's party. Alka hates to be exhibited and inspected again and again. But she cannot protest lest she should bring a bad name to her father. The earlier refusals from the groom's party have brought disappointments and hopelessness in the family.

The fear of remaining a spinster in Indian society is a constant humiliation. Alka too faces this burden of inferiority. She feels to be so ashamed when she faces remarks like, "A daughter of 27 and not married." Deshpande may be shy by nature but that 'she lacks popularity' because of "the conventional attitude to her themes" is untenable. Her attitude in her woman oriented stories is anything but conventional. Though she has declared clearly that she is not feminist yet her sympathies are quite conclusively with the women who are treated unsympathetically in a marginal culture. Otherwise there is no point in articulating the psychological ordeals undergone by her female characters.

The next story "The Pawn" presents a meek, docile picture of a girl who represents all those Indian women who are covered with thick, slack layers of convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in real life and who have no autonomous existence.

The young girl in the story "The Pawn" is compared with the pawn in the story, 'The Pawn'. She comes to Bangalore with her parents to see the city during their journey to Madras. Ramaswami, a distant friend of their relative is supposed to take them around. He is the narrator of the story who finds the young girl as a pawn with her parents because she walks discreetly with her parents, saying nothing, just walking quietly with her heavy lids screening her eyes, looking aloof and unconcerned and unsmiling.

Deshpande evocatively brings out the despair of the mother who feels guilty for having never built a wall round her daughter. In Indian society, the girls have to live under so many margins. The mother remembers her own youth when she was marginalized with, 'don't and do's '. But she decides that she won't let her daughter live behind walls. However, the daughter was told about few things when she grew up. But despite, her knowledge of biology, the daughter is sexually abused.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande has given convincing portrayals of daughters from middle class families. She has tried to show the Indian woman in her home who has no voice even in the decision about her marriage. Marginalization of woman as daughter is clearly indicated in these stories. She is sexually stereotyped by the conservative attitude. She is psychologically accustomed by the norms laid down by the traditional culture. These characters, though urban and educated, are firmly rooted in India with the weight of centuries of tradition and culture behind them. It would be wrong to think Shashi Deshpande as vocal feminist. She writes about the dilemmas faced by womenfolk but without a plea for radical change. Reconciliation, stoicism and self-denial remain the major governing principles of her women characters. (Singh: 155) That is why they cover their real feelings or attitudes.

They are too weak, too docile to shake off the shackles and this is what heightens the problems for most of the women characters in Shashi Deshpande's stories. We can say from the above discussion that the issues which Deshpande feels strongly about are the degradation that women experience and continue to experience and the subordination and inequality.

As a writer, she highlights the secondary position occupied by women and their degradation which is inevitable in an oppressively male-dominated society. She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present-day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism.

## CONCLUSION

A woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. Though independent to some extent, Shashi Deshpande's women characters are firmly bound by the shackles of tradition and seek fulfillment only within the orbit of family and tradition.

Fiction written during the last three decades provides a glimpse into female psyche and deals with the full range of female experience. Short stories written by Indian women present the Indian woman, her conflicts and predicament against the background of contemporary India. They analyse, in their writings, the socio-cultural modes and values that have given women their image and role towards themselves and the society. In the changing contexts of our country and times, the women now find themselves at cross purposes with themselves as well as the society. Accordingly, Shashi Deshpande explore the psychic and moral dilemmas and repercussions of the situation in their women characters trying to achieve a new harmony of relationships with themselves and their surroundings.

Shashi Deshpande has been accepted as a significant literary figure on the contemporary literary scene. Many comparisons have been made between her fiction and the fiction of other writers. A comparative approach ought to lead us to a more comprehensive and adequate understanding of the works and their authors. With this end in view, the researcher has tried to compare the short stories of Shashi Deshpande.

## REFERENCES

Adele King (2000). "Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman". The New Indian Novel in

English, Vinay Kirpal (ed.), New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

Bala, Suman (2001). (ed.) "Introduction" Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House.

Deshpande, Shashi (1993). The Binding Vine. New Delhi: Penguin, Print.

Deshpande, Shashi (2003). Writing from the Margin and other Essays. New Delhi: Penguin.

Dr. Yashoda Bhat. (1993). (ed.) "The Image of Woman in Indo-Anglian Literature". The Images of Woman in Indian Literature,. New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation.

Joshi, P.G. (2003). Shashi Deshpande's Fiction. New Delhi: Prestige.

P.G. Joshi (2003). Shashi Deshpande's Fiction: A Study in Women Empowerment and Postcolonial Discourse. New Delhi: Prestige.

Prasad, Amar Nath (2005). New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English: Part 3. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, Print.

Sandhu, Sarbjit K. (1991). The Image of woman in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, New Delhi: Prestige Books, Print.

Sandhu, Sarbjit K. (1991). The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi: Prestige.

Sree, P. Sudha (2005). Difficult Daughters: Treavails in self-identity. Prasad, Amar Nath, Indian Women Writing in English: New Perspective. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons. Print.

Suman Bala.(ed.) (2001). Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House.

Sunita Reddy (2001). A Feminist Perspective on the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi: Prestige.