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**Editor:** Dr. Saikat Banerjee  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
St. Theresa International College, Thailand



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## Changing Perspectives of the Stereotyped Women in Shashi Deshpande's Short Stories

**Dr. Parveen Bala**  
Assistant Professor  
JECRC University, Jaipur  
&  
**Dr. Vijaylakshmi**  
HoD, English,  
JECRC University, Jaipur.

**Abstract:** Shashi Deshpande, an Indian Woman writer writing in English, discovers contemporary India and demonstrates the intricate amendments and social transforms of the 1980s. Her honest treatment of sexuality, gender, and generational conflicts is evident in her short stories. In Deshpande's vision, emancipation for the Indian woman is constrained by restrictions of class, social position, and marital status.

In Shashi Deshpande's short stories, women are found to assert their own voice and they also try to show their individual approach in their own style to showcase their way of life. The objective of writing this paper is to highlight Shashi Deshpande's preoccupation with the problems of woman whether she is a mother, daughter, sister or wife and how Indian women could not protest against the injustice caused to them by the existing beliefs, customs and rituals. Her short stories portray mostly those women who are aggravated either sexually or professionally and also the struggle of a woman in satisfying her emotional and intellectual needs within the framework of married life.

This paper is also an attempt to show the efforts of Shashi Deshpande to establish the women as human beings with their own independent identity through her short stories, especially from *The Legacy And Other Stories* (1978).

**Key Words:** Feminism, self-identity, social conflict, career.

### **Introduction:**

Shashi Deshpande is a distinguished person. She was much influenced by Jane Austen. As she studied in missionary school, she possesses a good command of English language apart from Marathi and Kannada. Her expression comes out with ease. Many quotations and references



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frequently appear in her writings reflecting her knowledge on various topics, for example, we find expressions from Simon de Beauvoir, Somerset Maugham, Sigmund Freud, Jane Austin, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson, etc. Also Indian Classics references are also seen in her fiction.

As one reads what Shashi has to say about all that she read in her childhood, her passion for words was so great that she has read all the dictionaries at home — Hindi-English, Sanskrit English, German-English, French-English. Her love for music is seen with the old Hindi film songs mentioned in the novels, very often characters sing by themselves. Also her novel *Small Remedies* is based on the theme of music.

Deshpande does admit the influence of the Western feminist writers, but only “to a small extent”. She has made ample use of Indian Myths. Shashi Deshpande, because of her talent and genius, seems to be comfortable and at ease while expressing in English and other languages as well. As one’s childhood experiences shape his /her personality and thoughts, so is with Shashi Deshpande. Being brought up in an atmosphere where books meant a lot more than life, Shashi Deshpande had a literary heritage of a famous playwright and a Kannada and Sanskrit scholar who happens to be an eminent person as well as her father. Deshpande herself wanted to learn Sanskrit. Instead she mastered in English Language, the only language accepted in the era of British Rule. She also learned Marathi and Kannada. Born to a Marathi mother and Kannada father in a traditional Indian household, Shashi carried two cultures together that can be seen in her writings, focused on Kannada and Maharashtrian rituals, customs and celebrations. The impact of middle class women to which Deshpande herself belongs to is prominently reflected in her fiction. She had no intention of settling down as a writer and when she went to England with her husband, she stated writing her experiences and embarked on her expedition as a writer. She was not a born writer but became one by her conscious efforts. Although Deshpande started her writing career very late at the age of thirty, she took her M.A. English, a post graduate degree at the age of forty five only to get a structured and systematic reading that gave her in depth vision in the real life characters in her surroundings.

Shashi Deshpande is a simple, home loving, caring woman, who prefers to be at home instead of



going out or attending a party. She avoids conferences and seminars unless it is a compulsion and also dislikes discussing her work before getting published. The only person with whom she talks about her novel is her husband who happens to be the first reader of her novels. All the characters of her novels are taken from her immediate surroundings.

She also mentions that there are three influential things shaping her life as a writer. The first one is her father himself, second was her English educational background and the last one was herself born as a female.

Shashi Deshpande's short stories are collected in five volumes: *The Legacy and Other Stories* (1978), *It Was Dark and Other Stories* (1986), *It Was the Nightingale and Other Stories* (1986), *The Miracle and Other Stories* (1986) and *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993). They had been regrouped into two collections: *Collected Short Stories I* (2003) and *Collected Short Stories II* (2004). Besides novels and short stories, she also published several children's books in English and wrote the screen play for the Hindi feature film "Drishti".

Her short stories contain most of the important themes of her fiction that reveal her preoccupation with the problems of women. In each case the crucial question is asked whether a woman can succeed in satisfying her emotional and intellectual needs within the framework of married life. Deshpande attempts to capture the moments of sensibility in order to reveal the inner lives of her characters. There are ten stories in the short story collection *The Legacy*; the title story is about a woman who surrenders herself with the permission of her husband to a stranger to beget a heir to inherit parental property and pride. She becomes complete only when her husband finds a surrogate for her. She conceives a child too through this relationship. The experience is described by the doctor himself:

We were the primeval Adam and Eve in Paradise. There was no talk of love. No futile promises. The few days we spent together were so complete in themselves they stand out like a splash of color on the gray palette of my life. I have never met anyone, who laughed, as easily as she did. Days of laughter!' (7).

Through her collection *The Legacy*, she exhibits her feminist emotions. Her novels portray mostly those women who are aggravated either sexually or professionally.



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In the preface to *The Legacy*, G.S. Amur observes:

Woman'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).

Next story in the same collection is '*A Liberated Woman*', the story is about the wife of college professor who herself is a brilliant and flourishing doctor. His wife's success hurts his male ego. The novel presents the agony of a woman who lives with her sadist husband. The wife is fully aware of her dilemma in this patriarchal society and confesses her protest to her friend instead of telling it to the husband. She breaks open with husband but does not publicise her anger openly as she is completely aware of the societal restrictions. The friend, who she shares her situation with, remarks:

But what really astonishes me is her feebleness, her attitude of despairing in difference. Surely she, an educated, earning competent woman, has no right to behave this way to plug all her escape routes herself and act like a rat in a trap. (20)

'*The First Lady*', the story of an old woman of seventy, whose personality differs from her public image attends a function always escorted by a servant there she becomes nostalgic with the memories of her husband, and her life then. *Intrusion* presents the life of a young bride on honeymoon at an isolated island. Her privacy is intruded as she still is a stranger to her husband. It's a psychological study of a woman in such situation who can neither protest nor accept anything.

'*Why A Robin*' deals the theme of mother daughter relationship. The protagonist is a lonely woman who is painfully aware of her isolation from her husband and daughter. Her thoughts constantly occupy her with the idea "bridges have to be built" and finally she succeeds in doing so.

There is a wide gap between the wife, the husband and the daughter. This drifting apart is explicit here:

I am an interloper. I do not belong. I move away from them resolutely. I dawdle over my work deliberately, so that I am late going to bed. Two single beds. Two islands that nothing



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can bridge. Not the child. Not even the bridge of passion. (56)

*'Rain'*, is a story of passion and guilt. It deals with the mind of a chronic bachelor and a middle aged widow and their one night physical relation in the hospital. The efforts of the woman to restore the previous relationship shows her will to exhibit herself as an individual, not merely a man's wife:

She gave a sigh and came into my arms, pliant, fragrant and warm. My lips moved over her eyes, her cheeks, her neck, her hair. There comes a moment when thought ceases, when reasoning vanishes and the mind is just a useless adjunct to a throbbing body. This moment was one of those. And now I was boy no longer, all those vague flights of fancy had hardened into something concrete. (80)

*'An Antidote to Boredom'*, is the story of a housewife whose husband's indifference irritates her. She turns towards a widower whom she meets at her son Rahul's school. The woman is not even able to make out that the relationship she has developed is just the malevolence for her husband or whether she has actually developed a priceless and genuine relationship:

And then I knew that he knew, that he cared and as if a dam had burst, a flood of shame, and guilt swept over me, drowned me. I let go of the mirage that I had tried to grasp so long, and now I realized, when it was too late, the most piercing thought of all - that it had been no mere antidote to boredom but the best part of my life. And I let it go. (100)

*'Dim Corridor'* depicts the story Miss Rao, a twenty-five year old teacher and her erotic relationship with her sixteen year old student Vinod, she escapes scandal by refusing him.

Although her emancipation has led the lady into a relationship with a young student but she cannot surpass the conventional norms. She lets him go and finally breaks the unseen bond so as to free him of the guilt for her:

I looked back into his eyes. Could he see the pleading in mine? Don't shame me anymore. Whatever I say, will shame me. What can I say to you, when you are only sixteen and I am twenty five? 'Yes', I said. And the fire in his eyes died instantly. He slouched away from me, hands in pockets, whistling tunelessly. I stayed there in that dim, silent corridor and thought of what I had destroyed. And of how fragile the tie is between humans.

And of how I could now say to him, 'SamWeller', and he would only reply with his earlier



languid insolence, Who's that, Miss. I don't know him.' (110)

Despite her inability to transcend the ethical code formed by the society, the protagonist in *The Dim Corridor* considers the experience of erotic love central to human life.

'*Death of a Child*', deals with the pain and suffering a woman undergoes at the time of abortion. This story deals with a mother who is now tired of being a mother for more than three times and when she comes to know of the next pregnancy, she thinks it wrong to have another one and she plans to abort. Once she is done with her abortion, feeling of guilt hovers over her. She feels that the aborted child asserts himself over her.

It is the past for me too, I tell myself. And so it is last night has nothing to do with this morning. Yet, I have an eerie feeling I cannot understand, cannot explain even to myself. I feel, as we walk away that I am not alone, I feel that the ghost of my dead child walks with me. (110)

She keeps moving between her will to go for abortion and her conscience of not killing the unborn child but ultimately emotions succeed.

Deshpande also favours the protagonist by saying that women are not sheer producers of children as the whole chronology encircles childbirth. She portrays in her stories how the traditional mindset still has supremacy over the modern mindset where the modern women are still not capable of escaping the guilt of getting away from tradition.

The protagonist of the story is a "personality conscious lady" (Samtani 187) who does not want to abstain from her personality for the sake of her children.

The writer is of the view that even a liberal woman's instincts cannot effectively shield her from the guilt, pain and humiliation, of a legally and medically uncomplicated abortion.

One of the best stories is '*The Eternal Love*'; it's the love story coming out naturally, an innocent man woman love, attraction, and compassion. It talks about a very tender aged girl who is very near to the spiritual experiences and an older poet she meets at a seminar. Both of them rise above the obstructions created by different languages and finally develop a bond of inexplicable relationship. But this too ends very early when she comes to know that the poet is a womanizer. Though this story has no clear feminist implications it talks only about the sudden breaking free from such false



relationships.

**'It Was Dark'** collection includes seven stories. **'The Inner Room'** is referred to the well known woman characters of Indian Mythology. It is a tragic story of Amba, the princess of Kashi, an ancient Hindu Kingdom, and Bhishma the celebrated bachelor, who abducts Amba and her sister for his half brother Vichitravirya as bride. She gets furious at being abducted from swayamvar where she was to choose her own fate.

**'It Was Dark'**, story of a girl who is still and shocked due to the miss-happenings in her life as she has been raped.

**'Can You Hear Silence'** is an analysis of a growing girl who is trying to understand the complexities of life, and man woman relations.

**'The Valley of Shadow'** portrays the suffering and pain felt by a handicapped woman who has to face avoidance from her husband and son, the darker side of life, when she shares her feelings with her neighbour. She visualizes the brighter side of life.

**'My Beloved Charioter'** is a modern woman`s quest for self. She an old woman away from her daughter, to develop a good relation with her she discloses her bitter experience with her husband and reconcile with her.

**'The Alien'** depicts the life of a housewife whose only companion seems to be television after performing her duties as her husband is busy with his academic activities.

**'A Wall Is Safer'**, breaks the belief that woman is safe behind the wall.

**'It Was The Nightangle'** another collection of short stories consist eight stories. The first title story, deals with the story of a woman who is career minded, for the sake of career she is ready to leave her husband and discards the dream of having children without any regrets. Right from their childhood, women are brought up with a sense of nurturing the importance of family in them. They are taught that family is of primary concern for them. But the present economic requirements and globalization demand that women should take up a job. They take up a job for the sake of the family and try to strike a balance between family and job. They get crushed in the process and feel hurt for everything they do. Through the story, the author wants to portray the mind-set of career-oriented women and their real inner conflict in bringing equilibrium between their family and job.





*'And Whats A Son'*, is a story of an old man having physical relation with a woman much younger to beget a son, a heir.

*'A Man And A Woman'*, is a life of a young widow who develops illegal relation with her brother –in – law, and later marries to a crippled man.

*'Anatomy of A Murder'*, is a crime story in which a young man gets involved with his lady customer in the grocer`s shop where he works. Later when the woman treats him merely as a goods deliverer he couldn`t tolerate and kills her.

In *'The Duel'*, the man gets involved with a young widow,

*'The Sweet Antidote'* is the story of a woman who accepts her husband`s illegal relation with a maid servant only to maintain the balance and harmony in the family.

*'A Day Like Any Other'* portrays the dilemma of a woman who discovers her husband`s flirting with other woman, the whole issue stops when her husband gives priority to his family and children but the issue still haunts in her thoughts.

*'The Window'* is a story of homosexuality.

The Short story collection *'The Miracle'* includes six stories; the title story is about a woman who falls in love with her employer, a veterinary doctor. His busy schedule troubles her but she is taken aback by her ordinary looks. Proposal coming from the doctor is Nature`s *Miracle*.

*'The Awakening'* depicts the story of a girl who wants to go abroad for further studies; instead she takes up a job of typist to support her family. After her father`s death she reads his letter and realizes how insensitive she was for her father`s love and frees herself from the painful past.

*'The Victory'* portrays a young man of disturbed psyche, the reason for his emotional imbalance is his father`s remarriage to his mistress soon after the death of his mother, in anger he seduces an innocent girl and takes the revenge of his father`s deeds. Madhu again focuses on the theme of sour mother daughter relationship.

*'The Pawn'* portrays a forgotten affair, a boy on his visit to Bombay falls in love with a girl, after returning to his hometown he carelessly rejects the thought of loving a girl of whom he knows nothing. *'The Shadow'* deals with the story of a man who accepts his wife despite her adultery, but does not accept the child born out of it. It is a trauma faced by the woman and the child.



*'I Want'* is a story of a girl who has to marry under circumstantial pressures to a man of her parent`s choice, she surrenders to disillusion and accepts reality.

*'Intrusion And Other Stories'* totally includes nineteen stories out of which sixteen republished from the previous collections. *The Intrusion* talks about a newly wedded couple who are on their honeymoon. The man is eager to make love to the wife whereas the wife is feeling nostalgic of her past when she was not married "not even acquainted with each other. Just a month back we had not even heard of each other" (66) but when the wife hesitates, the husband questions her:

Know each other? What has that to do with it? Aren't we married now? And how will we start getting to know each other if you put on such a touch –me- not air." (67)

She was surprised how one can expose herself to a stranger, though he is the husband too, "But, how can I, with a man I scarcely know? It's not fair, I thought angrily. It's indecent. He should have given me some time. What a way to spend our honeymoon" (68). She drifts off into a sleep, turning away from her husband. She dreams of the sea, the-beach and pounding her. But when she wakes up she realizes: "And it was not the sea that was pounding my body but he, my husband, who was forcing his body on mine". (70)

The other six stories are, *'Lucid Moments'* portrays the pain experienced by the protagonist and her dying mother`s disoriented mind brings back the memories of her childhood.

*'Ghosts'*, the young woman of 'Ghosts' who has accompanied her husband to UK, feels lonely and deserted.

In *'The East Enemy'*, the author probes into the heart of Durodhayana the hero of Mahabharata and his turmoil as a human, the pain and humiliation felt by him on his defeat is depicted.

*'The Cruelty Game'* gives the picture of a suffering widow in the middle class society who is forced to remarry to save her pride.

*'Hear Me Sanjay'* records the monologue of Kunti who falls prey to the male dominance; she suffers at the hands of father, husband and providence.

*'The Stone Women'* deals with the experience of a bride who compares herself to the stone woman carved on the walls of a temple. The men who sculpted a woman in stone carved them from their imaginations, a woman with no say, in the same way a man directs a women`s activity in real life.



*'And Then'* is a story of an old mother who feels that she is intruding in the life of her son with whom she has come to live after the death of her husband,

Deshpande agreed, Despite the problem of identity of her own, she was just a mother, a wife, but, she felt very incomplete, even dissatisfied. That's when she had read Betty Friedan's which helped her to realize:

*"I'm not only a female. I'm a human being with a mind. It gave me a lot of unhappiness that my intellect wasn't being connected to my female self. I was always Mrs. Deshpande, Raghunandan's mother, Vikram's mother... That anger ultimately translates into feminism."*

She also confesses that while writing she splits herself into two persons; one is the writer and the other is the reader. In such a role there happens to be a quarrel within oneself which becomes a dialogue within.

A thorough study of her stories reveals that her protagonists are modern, educated, Indian women torn between traditional ideas and their intellect. We can see in all her stories that Shashi Deshpande's protagonist finds herself enmeshed by desires and despairs, fears and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, and marital discord and male chauvinism.

The protagonists of Deshpande's stories never cross the boundaries of families and don't ever forget their pre-defined roles of a wife, a mother but they revolt in their own ways. In the stories of Deshpande, the women have tried to break their conventional image, may it be in the case of the wife who is not ready to submit in "**The Intrusion**", the mother who is not willing to warn her child in "**It Was Dark**", the mother not willing to have the third child in "**Death Of a Child**", the working woman going abroad in pursuit of her career in "**It Was The Nightingale**", Shaku in divorcing her husband and the old woman in favour of the divorcee in "**And Then?**", widow getting ready for remarriage in "**The Cruelty Game**" and so on. Sharma has rightly said, "Deshpande tries to demolish the tradition bound image of a woman as a passive, pliant and submissive creature ready to be moulded by man." (245) But they barely go out of the conventional pattern and the tradition of marriage. Thus we can see that in all her stories she talks about the problems of women.



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Through the story “*A Man and a Woman*”, Deshpande shows how women suffer due to the ruthless behaviour of men who marry them for the sake of their parents without considering the plight of women. “*A Day Like Any Other*” depicts the psychological confusion of a wife whose husband is not loyal to her. Through the story ‘*It Was The Nightangle*’ Deshpande tries to project the sacrifices women need to make for the sake of family.

Deshpande not only poses the problems in front of her readers but also gives the solutions. The protagonists themselves accept the situation as they come to know that it is not possible to change the circumstances but they have to change their own approach to make their lives resilient. This is the common thread found in all the short stories of Deshpande.

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