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CANVASSING THE CULTURE BOUND WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECT SHORT-STORIES BY SHASHI DESHPANDE.

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ABSTRACT

It is really fascinating to blend up the portrait of women in Indian literature because when put together, the picture collectively makes up for a captivating and thought provocative reading. Women in India are still caught between the cultural milieu with traditions deeply seated into her veins and the approaching modern life. Combating with the burden of domestic and social life, mothering, child bearing, struggling with the conventions, women have first to survive this harsh world. The question of equality and equal opportunity arises afterwards. In such compromising times, it is essential to identify the new areas of trouble and to check the disproportion which arises just after her marriage. The transition from girlhood to womanhood marks a great change in her life and hence the beginning of a completely new phase. Among the present-day Indian women writers in English, Shashi Deshpande stands out as a dominant name. In this thesis I've taken up 8 stories depicting the paltry condition of a woman, most of the times as a wife and also at times as a mother or even a daughter. The seven stories included are beautifully carved out in an exquisite style. Deshpande's writing style is simple and reasonable, devoid of any fabrication and deception. The paper is a prudent attempt to analyze the image of woman in a self-denial mode. The use of the first-person narrator gives an outline of credibility to the actions and situations and brings the protagonist closer to the reader. The stories essentially are woman-centered, women in their different roles of daughter, mother and wife, who find themselves trapped and enclosed in the institution of marriage in this patriarchal society and who unfailingly suffer from alienation and a sense of guilt and loss. Though Shashi Deshpande does not define herself as a feminist writer, and she has no intention of becoming the spokeswoman of the predicament of the middle-class Indian woman still her novels and short-stories portray social reality the way it is. Of the selected 7 stories, 1 has a mythical background, with characters taken from the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. The other seven portray common daily life situations an Indian woman has to deal with in the world that strictly predefines her roles. All the female characters share a deep feeling of confinement and frustration. However, none of them will put into danger their family's peace and stability. The female characters are alienated in their own private worlds and inner rooms, away from their husbands who find them insignificant and take them for granted.

KEY WORDS: Women, relationships, Culture, tradition, institution of marriage, mothering, child-bearing, social-conventions, short-stories, middle-class women, shashi deshpande, fiction, reality, mass-group, marital-rape, extra-marital relationships

INTRODUCTION

The term “Feminism” is derived from French and its origin is from the Latin word “femina” which means “woman”, and hence, it refers to the aiding of woman’s rights seeking to rule out restrictions that discriminate against women. It relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. According to Janet Richards, “The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex, the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism.” The devaluation of woman is a pivotal fact of history and it is the basic reason behind all kinds of psychological disorders present in our society. Feminism aims at uncovering the power structures in the society, social practices, male domination and the social institutions such as marriage, which are instrumental in assigning a subjugated position to our women. Indian feminists have fought back hard against the prevalent traditional and cultural issues within the patriarchal society, such as the laws of property inheritance and practice of sati. Unlike the western feminist movements, India’s movement was initiated by men followed by the women. The feminist literary criticism spent most of its ideologies in describing how women were represented in literary pieces created by both men and women writers. Many of the women writers who believe that art is a weapon for social change have moved towards the noble profession of activism through art. Mary Wollstonecraft published one of the first feminist writings ever, “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” (1792), in which she demanded for the social and moral equality of the sexes. Regarded as the grandmother of British Feminism, it is she whose ideas shaped the understanding of the suffragists, who fought for the women’s right to vote.

It is through literature being practiced on a large scale that feminism has today become a critical theory. During the post-Independence era, feminism in Indian English literature was basically a part of the western feminist movement. It got subsistence from the freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, non gendered spreading of education, livelihood opportunities and laws for women’s rights. As Uma Narayan Rightly says:

Third world feminism is not a mindless mimicking of Western Agenda in one clear and simple sense. (Narayan)

Indian Feminism is precisely a response to the issues related to the middle-class Indian women. Indian society has always been extremely hierarchical. The hierarchy within the family concreting upon sex, age, gender has been maintained very strictly. To understand and comprehend with the sensibility of feminism, it is first and foremost important to agree that Indian feminism presents a completely different picture of the female gender. As Patricia Meyer Specks remarks that:

There seems to be something that we call a women’s point of view on outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable through the countries. (Meyer)

G.B. Shaw, the great Irish playwright and a co-founder of the London School of Economics, described marriage as:

An institution that brings two people together. He said that marriage should be based on intense, profound love and a couple should maintain their ardor until death does them part (G.B Shaw)

While a lot has been said and done, the scene of marriage is quite different in the in the Indian context. It is considered very important to get a girl married as soon as she reaches the marriageable age so that she can settle down and take care of her family. At times even if she wants to pursue her career and ambitions, her dreams are shattered down and rendered meaningless. Now as soon as a girl is married, this shifts our focus to the man in charge. She is considered lucky enough if gets an understanding and loving partner while if the fate plays bad for her, there’s no one who would lend an ear to her woes. While a woman is considered to be the epitome of love, sacrifice and perseverance, the man on the other hand according to the customs prevalent in the society can insult her whenever he likes. Any resistance to violence will

definitely lead to the separation of the two and the woman ultimately will be blamed for her inability to adjust and in worst cases the girl's family will be held responsible for the spoilt upbringing of their daughters.

In a marriage, sexual relations without the woman's consent is not considered rape in our country. The concept of marital rape does not exist in our society. Does that clearly mean that a married woman is a slave to her husband? Can she not say "no" just because she is a woman? It is said that we and patriarchy, which is dynamic co exist. Also patriarchy is always in flux, sometimes in the form of a dominating husband, father, brother, etc. Some consider that the patriarchy has always existed and is a way to keep order in the society. While on the other hand we also have another school of thought that patriarchy is manmade and can be changed if not eradicated. It is the historical and traditional processes that created hierarchy, it had not always existed. Why do women fight for their rights? For their subordinate positions in the society? The answer lies in one single word "Patriarchy" and where does this patriarchy come from? - "The Institution of Marriage".

It was in the 1960s that Shashi Deshpande began writing short stories about the society's cultural and traditional systems that constrained a woman's freedom in India. Her writings analyze the conflict between domination and liberation, as well as negotiating gender conventions. Self-revelation, social reality and dogma, spiritual and traditional values, family life, romance and the subordinate role of women are the prominent topics dealt by her in her novels as well as short stories. She depicts the emotional resentment of the modern well coached Indian woman, caught between patriarchy and culture on the one hand, and self-expression and self determination on the other. Her protagonists seek freedom, independent of traditionally attributed roles within the family that of a daughter, wife and mother. As she sketches the women characters of her stories, she gives voice to every other Indian woman who was crushed under the weight of this male dominated and tradition bound society. The research focuses on the deepening urge of her women protagonists to break free from their gender binding roles completely. Her women characters towards the end are able to object if not completely revolt against the injustices.

To begin with, her short story "*The Intrusion*" features a newly married couple on a honeymoon just after their marriage, the vacation which was meant for the couple to know and understand each other better and build a a bond which would last lifetime. The marital relationship is evaluated from the wife's (female) point of view in this story, too. The newly-wed woman who is though officially the wife of the man is unable to accept sex shortly after marriage with a man she feels is still a stranger to her even though he is lawfully now her husband. She wants to know him better (which was the sole purpose of the vacation) but he cannot understand why is it even important." Know each other? What has that to do with it? Aren't we married now?" To her it seems as if sex even with her husband when it is against her will was" an intrusion of my (her) privacy, the violation of my (her) right to myself (herself)". In spite of her anger, she surrenders to 'his humiliation of her'.

Man's desire and demand for sexuality has been cherished and forced upon woman since time immemorial. To fulfill their demands and desires whether licit or illicit was considered to be the prime duty a wife holds. Deshpande, once in an interview in 2004 with "The Hindu" said 'The family is where everything begins, and everything that happens outside the family mirrors what happens within it.' In her other short story '*The First Lady*', a woman marries a man she adored for his high political goals. The man excels in influence and leadership in the government and the title of the 'First Lady' is bestowed upon the wife. Soon she realizes her husband's political claims 'were a sham, a mask', spoken only to gain power and status. She is embittered by the melancholic life led by her because of her husband's fake acts, but she is still not able to break out of her long established familial and social bonds. The title bestowed upon her merely serves as a constant reminder that she exists at the edge of society and in the shadow of her husband. "We have lived too long," she says to herself. For Deshpande, self-revelation is a cruel process and self submission even after the realization is crueler.

Being an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a caring and loving mother are the three ideals of womanhood in Hindu society. This is what that has been depicted in the other short story by her, named "*The Stone Woman*". The story opens with a newly married couple visiting a temple of women figurines carved out on rocks symbolizing fictional women, 'Ladies' as mentioned in the text were women with perfect figures and their bodies carved out as desired by men, perhaps who never saw such women in the world, women who emerged out of their

fantasies. Though the woman in the story was towards the end able to express her views as “It’s comfortable, I like it”, in a convincing tone yet what’s more powerful is husband’s words “I don’t like it”.

Shashi Deshpande's female characters are conscious of the gendered treatment that they have to endure. Though they are the women with a rich interior yet it seems to be of little if no interest for their husbands. She does not intend to suggest or derive any solution to the undeserved condition but rather prefers to act like a camera, recording the bare truths of the society with realism and sensitivity. An analysis of these short stories shows the fact that culture and tradition is deeply ingrained in the women of the Indian society and for those women who understand this discrimination, the only way to come to terms with the unquestionable reality is the acceptance of loneliness or a rather submissive position as the ultimate truth of their existence.

In the preface to “**The Legacy**”, G.S. Amur says, “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”. In the other story relevantly titled “**A Liberated Woman**” Deshpande creates an alliance between a highly educated doctor, self dependent and modern and a less educated husband earning comparatively less than his wife. The deep-seated prejudices and inferiority complexes of the husband are set in contrast to the liberal and progressive outlook of the wife. The husband suffers from an inferiority complex and takes it out on his wife by tormenting her to ruthless tortures. Since the wife is well aware of her position in a patriarchal society. She confides her protest not to her husband but to an old friend of hers. She veils her will of resentment and breaks her marital ties with her husband, because of the ethical bashfulness of the society.

In her yet another short story “**Why a Robin**” the narrator is again a woman estranged by her own husband and daughter comes face to face with the problem of, her very own sense of belonging, her identity. It is the story of a mother distanced from her husband and her daughter, because of her simplicity and ignorance, she is coined “stupid”, “foolish”, “inarticulate”, and “dull and brown” in their presence. She longs for a better and close companionship with her daughter. When her daughter wants to write an essay on a Robin, she is not able to help her and instead asks her to write one on a peacock, which the daughter does not want. She considers herself a failure and is filled by the feelings of guilt and remorse because of loss of identity she has suffered as her husband and the daughter, is indifferent towards her. The daughter and her husband rejoiced in each other's company and there is an unbridgeable gap between the wife and her husband. She begins to feel as if she is an outsider in her own home. This estrangement between the “woman, her husband and daughter is made vivid metaphorically with the title “**Why a Robin**”.

“**An Antidote to Boredom**” is one of the strikingly beautiful, at the same time unexpected story by the author. The narrator of the story, a cheerful woman is tired of her lifeless existence as a mere house-wife. But in spite of her inability to comply with the whole setup, she is actually unable to do anything about it. She feels she has found a way to escape the boring reality of her life when she meets a man already widowed, at her son's school and knowingly moves into an open relationship with him. Her attempts to break free from the stereotypical role of wife and mother and the insulting indifference of her husband, are heightened to a great extent when she moves a little too close to “him” and later eventually develops a feeling of guilt and uncertainty. The socially unacceptable status of the passion as a natural force in the human being automatically places her in a puzzling dilemma. Where on one hand she experiences Eros as an aspect of natural human instinct, on the other hand such an experience for a woman is considered unnatural and unacceptable.

Where on one hand the central theme of all the selected stories is the unfulfilled marital life due the constraints of the society and the husband, the upcoming story deals of course with the same theme but also a thin beam of light has also been focused upon the mother daughter relationship who are a “pair of widows”. “**My Beloved Charioteer**” is an offbeat story of an old widowed woman whose only ray of hope is her grand-daughter, the sudden death of the child’s father left the woman’s daughter sad, devastated and inconsistent at times. The story at the initial stage focuses upon the beautifully sketched bond between the lady and her granddaughter, it is at the later part of the story that we come to know about the conventional and unacceptable relationship between the old woman and her husband. The daughter who was so fond of her father was still unaware of the actual nature and character her deceased father had. The old lady tries to establish a relationship

with her grown up yet immature daughter by disclosing the truth of oppression she had gone through in her entire life, this incident opens her daughter's eyes and brings her to the senses, to the true character of her father which results in the ultimate reconciliation of the daughter with her mother. The only realization that it is the pre determined "feminine destiny" to suffer by also secretly.

Last is the title story of the volume **"The Legacy"** there is only a slight feminist component in the form of consummation of a woman. The story sketches women's quest for self-completion. It also characterizes women victimized to a certain degree in the patriarchal Indian society. The woman's natural longing for a son remains unfulfilled, because of the sexual incapability of the husband. But the child is granted to her when her husband decides to arrange a young doctor as surrogate husband. Though it was sex without love with the doctor she still conceives a child. The doctor in his letter described the experience as

“ 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, so easily as she did in days of laughter (7).”

Although the author, does not advocate explicitly such extra-marital sexual relations her attitude is undoubtedly a moral one. The psychological conclusion is that, a woman's desire for a child is way stronger than the socially imposed confinement on extramarital sex. **"The Legacy"** supports the Niyoga theory of Mahabharata, where sex is conducted to maintain the dynasty of the king of Hastinapur.

Myths occupy a large part of the Indian culture and tradition and the next story is a continuation of the same string of Mahabharata-the epic. Those traditions where a woman has been assigned the roles of a dutiful wife, daughter and a mother remains deeply ingrained into the minds of the society that they have continued to seek the resemblance of such super natural God like women even in their own households. The quest for the search of self, the reason and behind the existence of 'my' life which is often controlled by the other are a few questions which arose in the mind of the legendary 'princess of Kashi'. The story **"The Inner Walls"** is about sheer anger and utter disgust that we see into the eyes of the bride Amba- The unforgettable character from the epic Mahabharata. The ultimate despair and the resentment of her mind was practically heard by no one. Being made the mere pawn into the games played by men and the rules decided by those who are already dead, she thinks "honor, dishonor, right, wrong- what are these but words used by men to cover their real emotions". The sympathetic monologue of Amba gives birth to a number of questions to the people living in this land, the land where the Vedas hail. What is the significance of a woman's life when every other decision taken for you is not by you. She ultimately chooses to embrace death, at least that would be something decided by her, time chosen by her.

CONCLUSION

Marriage is supposed to represent the beginning of a beautiful journey, but our society has successfully turned it into a race, in which no girl wants to be left behind. The pressure to fulfill societal expectations often causes one to obsess over marriage, rather than allowing it to happen in its natural course of time. While there is nothing wrong with a girl wanting to prioritize her marital pursuits over her professional goals and ambitions, we need to stop stigmatizing those who do not. More importantly, our society needs to stop categorizing girls as being marriage or career focused, and recognize that they too can be both. Though patriarchy is most dominant feature in Indian homes, still India is not known for its society holding high rates of divorce or separation. This reflects the nitty-gritty acceptance of marriages in India, which is still highly constrained by patriarchal and socio-cultural norms and tends to be controlled by families from the prospective bride's and the groom's side rather than the individuals who enter into the marriage.

Marriage is near-universal alliance, exempting only selected few who choose to remain unmarried. Caste and creed still dominates in choice of partner for the respective boy or girl by the family. The community of women very rarely has any autonomy or say in selection of their better halves. Women belonging to urban, "westernised" or ultra "modern" social settings, are expected to have control upon these social

alliances ,but even among such women, real and effective agency in choice of marriage partner is not that common. So in general, marriage is more often seen as socially and culturally determined and not something the partners themselves — particularly the women — can control as they please. This obviously affects the likelihood of divorce as well. There is still very little social and cultural acceptance of divorce, particularly when initiated by women. Indian middle-class women are constantly subject to two opposing and conflicting forces, the cultural construct of the ideal of femininity and the feminist ideal of women's equality and autonomy. An Indian woman is conditioned to a blind emotional dependence on men and in a sense the whole purpose and meaning of a woman's life is to win and retain a man's love in her life. Whenever there is a slight deviation or variation in the approval and affection of her man, she gets terribly upset. On the contrary, if she asserts her rights and demands, it is received as a cultural shock which upsets the equilibrium of the society. Shashi Deshpande presents a large number of such middle-class women who are only concerned with their husbands, children and home and are adjusting themselves to their feminine roles with ceaseless efforts.

To conclude,I would like to refocus the gaze upon the introduction to her writing, Simone De Beauvoir probes into a question, 'What is woman?' She further states, 'It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life.'

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