



# **BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES: PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN IN THE SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF SHASHI DESHPANDE**

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**ABSTRACT:** In her short stories, Shashi Deshpande attacks age-old attitudes and constructs such as stereotypical women. This paper is an attempt to show how Deshpande through her short stories have presented the picture of women who breaks the stereotypical portrayal of woman in Indian context. The stories under study are *An Antidote to Boredom* and *The Window*.

Key Terms : Women, Stereotypical, Indian Society, attack.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages, but until recent times, most of the published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was without doubt biased. The roles of women in literature are often quite wide in spectrum. Women were often portrayed as secondary characters to the greater men who carried the story line along, while the females simply offered a supporting role in the midst of the action. However during the colonial rule and through contact with western philosophies and movements, slowly but steadily, the strength of the women characters was focused upon in the writings of some authors, and this was certainly in contrast to the traditional picture of literary damsels. According to author Anita Nair, “literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as

in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms, be it Elizabeth Bennet(Pride and Prejudice) or Jane Eyre( Jane Eyre). Author Jaishree Mishra feels if literature is doing its job as a mirror to society then, obviously, the depiction of women in books has changed along with society, from Jane Austen's seemingly demure heroines onto Helen Fielding's openly scatty, mouthy Bridget Jones, a modern-day reworking of 'Pride and Prejudice'(1)

## METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the portrayal of changing image and role of woman in general, it is useful to study her projection in short stories in particular. Two of Shashi Deshpande's short stories are selected for the present research study. The textual analysis is further strengthened by the supportive references of book review and interviews with Amrita Bhalla and The Hindu. The primary sources such as the original works of Shashi Deshpande as well as the secondary sources available in the form of research papers have been used.

Among the women writers of Indian English fiction, Shashi Deshpande stands out as a major name. Not many readers of Deshpande may be aware that her first experiments in writing fiction started with the short story. Shashi Deshpande has earned a distinct space for her particular attention towards breaking the stereotypical construct of "typical Indian woman" in her selected short stories. She herself feels that readers of Indian English literature sometimes find it uneasy to accept these pictures of women as depicted by Deshpande because these women characters don't stand in the primitive parameters constructed by the society through which a good ideal Indian woman should be judged. Amrita Bhalla writes about Deshpande "Women, she feels, have not participated in the process of word-making; the stories, myths and legends in our puranas, epics and kathas have been written by men. Moreover, women have been conditioned to a great extent by myth: "To be as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapoorna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga- these are ultimately the role models we cannot entirely dismiss'('The Indian Woman-Myths, Stereotypes and the Reality',1977,private papers). Deshpande feels that women never start with a picture of themselves on a clean slate, their self-image honed by the hegemonic influences of myths, movies and current day soap operas."(2) In the book review by First Cry on her Collected stories volume 2, it has rightly been stated- "Shashi picks up stereotypical characters

like the self-effacing mother, the adulterous wife, the loving daughter and brings in many variations to their personalities, so that the very cast of the stereotype is wrecked to pieces.”(3) In one of her interviews with The Hindu, Shashi Deshpande herself asserts that she had discarded stereotypes at the very beginning of her writing career.

The first story under study is *An Antidote to Boredom* that depicts story of a woman who is dissatisfied and bored with her routine life. She attempts to escape from the prison of her fixed role as a wife. Her marital relationship is dissatisfied and unsatisfactory. The husband is neither wicked nor cruel but unperceptive dull with an unforgivable incapacity to receive as against the boundless capacity for loving and giving in her. They have been married for twelve years. Of the two sons, who provided at once the bridge between the two, one is dead and other aged five is in school. The protagonist is dissatisfied with her dull existence and seeks an antidote to boredom. In the story this other ‘he’ is a man this lonely wife meets at his son’s school. In her own words-

“ He had said nothing, had followed us silently, then got me an ice cream with a smile. That had been the beginning”

That had indeed been the beginning of a lovely relationship which the wife enjoys, aware of her husband’s not knowing the fact. And this is perhaps a step towards finding one’s happiness, forgetting the consequences being in a conservative society where men and women are not considered equal in terms of finding love. Women are expected to be as Sita and Draupadi in terms of purity and loyalty and they shall silently accept what is written on their foreheads. Quite opposingly to this idea, the wife finds her daily life enjoyable and improving with this other man. She knows that the man felt the same for her.

“So that, without any words, we found ourselves going to the school twice a week, the same time, the same day, knowing fully well that our children didn’t really need us any more”.

Day by day they come very closer, having a sense of guilt and shame at the same time. Despite of her awareness, she continues to enjoy this relationship-“ with a kind of guilt and shame at making use of him, I would rush up to him, rumple his hair, stay with him for a while, and then, with a throbbing heart and pulsing excitement, go to the courtyard where I would find him waiting for me under the large clock”.

She dismissed her son also from her mind and continues to enjoy the explorations each day gives her with the man. Mothers are sensitive in terms of their children. They sometimes fail to give wings to their desires and follow their heart only because of their love for their kids. But the protagonist decides to choose her happiness first by any means without thinking of anyone else not even her own son. She was guilty when her son once caught her with that man but that feelings of guilty didn't last long. This discovery and sense of morality and guilt has not shattered their small world of happiness.

“ But it was rarely like that between us. Depression or tragic. No, it was more often joyous, exciting. And the thought of meeting him kept me keyed up to a more intense pitch of living”.

The woman enjoys the small lovely appreciations of her look by the man. She wants such remarks from her husband but her husband failed to give such. Sometimes they think of morality and of doing injustice towards their spouses but such thoughts were easily defeated by the thought of their having together- ‘But I was fooling myself. There was a sweetness in our relationship that made it impossible for me to wish it away. I knew it was the same with him”.

The man sometimes made her feel guilty of her doing but she does not mind this at all neither is she guilty of her extra-marital affair with him.

“ ‘Guilt,’ I had said bitterly. ‘No, there’s no guilt’. Why should there be? As long as his world isn’t disturbed, at least obviously, he doesn’t care. Sometimes I feel like shocking him, shaking him out of his lethargy by screaming in his ears....I have a lover, yes, a lover”.

And this scream is also directed towards those people, the society which thinks this as an act of crime or debauchery on the part of the women.

She imagines the physical relationship between them and he, unlike her husband would love her not as a habit or daily practice but as a way to show his feelings for her which both of them would enjoy. And in that beautiful relationship, her body would not feel lonely and deprived of happiness and enjoyment which she feels with her husband.

“I wouldn’t be just a habit.....Dull like treading a path one had walked many times before. So that at the end I would lie awake, wondering, thinking about those women who did it for money and did they have the same feeling of being cheated, of being defrauded of something that was the right of our womanhood?”.

She wants to experience the thoughts which continuously give her sensual feelings, a sense of joyful delight which she feels for him but she can't let her desires flow out from her heart. There is the sense of injustice towards her son Rahul, a feeling of shame that restricts her to cross the barriers of her limitations. Yet despite having such ambiguity, she does not think the same for her husband- " But I felt no guilt towards my husband, because I would be depriving him of nothing, nothing he wanted".

She admits that it could have been any man, if not this, then another because this is to her only an antidote to boredom. It gives her enjoyment and excitement to escape from the daily dull routine of her life. But with him, she never thinks of these thoughts because they have created a third world of their own where both of them shine and sparkle.

Finally she decides to fulfill her wish. She was excited and nervous too. For the first time she was happy for her husband's passivity, his blindness, his stolidity. She counts the days of her husband's departure but suddenly when her husband asked her to go with him, she was shocked. She realized then that her husband too felt for her, cared for her and all of a sudden her beautiful world which she has built with the man began to shatter. She let it go, the happy world of her own but to her, it was one of the most wonderful experiences of her life. Though she could not continue to live her life on her own terms, enjoying her short-lived happiness, this was surely an attack to the society which thinks that a married women should never think beyond her family, her husband, her children etc. The protagonist thus breaks the stereotypical image of an ideal Indian housewife who not only represents Shashi Deshpande's creative genius but at the same time the changing face of the portrayal of Indian women.

The second story " The Window" is the story of a girl who is a lesbian yet married. During the time when this story was written when even talking about sex in public was not correct, being a lesbian was also not an easy practice. It was thought as some mental illness and hence was totally rejected by the society. This story presents the idea of women sexuality and gender identity to the Indian readers through short story for the very first time. Even Deshpande was herself not sure whether her Indian writers would accept this writing or not and decided to write in English to be armoured herself against social criticism because a lot of courage was needed to write on this issue. As a result this story went unnoticed and unremarked. The female characters in " The Window" do not abide by the societal norms of being a woman in an Indian society where female sexuality is expected to be hidden and unexpressed.

“The Window” depicts the story of a lesbian who is shifted to a new house in Bombay with her husband. The woman astonishes when she sees roses in the house. “Roses” here stand as a metaphor for woman’s sexuality. And the moment the woman sees roses, she gets mesmerized and cannot control her excitement- “My God! Roses! I gasped loudly”. She finds herself quite uneasy with the landlady of the house. The house seems to have struck some strange chord of fear within her. She is confused and afraid of getting exposed by the landlady.

Despite of hating her, the woman eventually started looking for the landlady everywhere and felt her presence even if she was not there. She describes her bodily features-

“She was dressed in a stiffly starched sari that added inches to her bulk. A little pony tail, looking incongruous on her massive body, moved briskly up and down in tune with the vigour of her movements as she walked”.

Both the woman and her husband talk about the possible reasons of the landlady’s decision of staying single. The woman perhaps thought the landlady didn’t felt the need to marry at all. She thinks of those times when she herself didn’t want to marry.

“No man can imagine a woman not wanting to marry. But I could. I had, at times, sudden flares of repulsion against his maleness which died down just as swiftly, leaving me indifferently tolerant to his demands”.

The landlady catches her once when she was admiring her roses. The landlady ignores the woman’s words and suddenly expresses her own feelings as if her own sexuality towards her.

“I can’t bear to see them fade”.

She offers a rose to the woman and brushed her cheek with her fingers as if in a caressing manner. This reminded the woman of her hostel days when during hot afternoon, she used to enjoy smell of the talcum of her female partner. The landlady must have sensed her secret fear, the fear of being a lesbian. And she too was equally willing to respond if the woman ever desired-“Never mind, I’ll give you another. I rarely give away my roses, you know”.

Towards the end of the story, the landlady’s sexuality is fully exposed to the readers when she says-“Shall I brush your hair?..... “You are very pretty. Does he ever tell you that?”. She invites the woman to see her



house all alone, not with her husband. Though the woman was guilty and afraid of her sexuality to be revealed, she is even in doubts that one day she may go to the lady's room overcoming all her fears, prioritizing her desires.

## CONCLUSION

Deshpande portrays her women characters as being opposite to what is called an ideal woman in an Indian society. She puts forward the real picture of some of the women of our society whose portrayal many writers don't even think of as they didn't fit in the mould of what is called a "woman". Her women characters in the selected short stories are housewives who dare to take a big step in finding their own happiness, despite of being objected by inner fears or by the society. No doubt, Shashi Deshpande portrayed these women characters quite fiercely as this may have destroyed her literary career at the very beginning. But one cannot deny the fact that these women can be found anywhere, in any house of the society where they are considered to be a curse both to their parents or their husbands and in-laws. Deshpande seems to assert that a woman is also a being and she must have her own needs and desires which should not be neglected and suppressed. Even in literature, these aspects of being a woman should not be neglected.

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