



Patriarchy and the Plight of the Indian Middle Class Woman: A Critical and Analytical Study of Select Writings of Shashi Deshpande

SAMIR DOLUI

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Panskura Banamali College (Autonomous), Panskura, India

Abstract: Woman in the male dominated society has always been suppressed and marginalised. Specially in a middle-class Indian society, the woman's individual preferences are unheard and unrecognized. They have to remain 'silent' as their sole duty is to oblige the norms and rules imposed on them by the patriarchy. They are the victims of the exploitation and the violence of the man. Shashi Deshpande in her writings very minutely depicts the miserable condition of the woman in this Indian society. She gave the voice to the voiceless and has presented the inner psyche that has always remains unexpressed.

Index Terms - Patriarchy, Marginalised, Middle Class, Exploitation, Violence, Voiceless

The women in a middle-class Indian society have to live their lives, confirmed by the man. From her birth she has been brought up by the patriarchal tradition and norms. She has no individual choice or opinion. From the father's house to the husband's house her every act will be decided by a male figure. Her individuality always remains unrecognized. Specially in in-laws' house she obliges to follow the command of the husband. Her judgement has always been overlooked. Her feelings and emotions and thoughts always remain unexpressed as there is no person to pay enough attention to hear that. Even the husband who should be well acquainted with his wife is rather indifferent to her feelings. Shashi Deshpande has skillfully presented that inner psyche of a woman in her writings.

Shashi Deshpande, born in Dharwad, Karnataka, has grown up in a literary environment as her father was a renowned writer and dramatist. She has found out the ingredients for her writings in the oppressed state and the suppressed voice of the woman, especially of the middle-class woman. In her novels those conditions have well been presented but in her short stories woman's wretched and miserable plight has not got less attention for the critical analysis. In "The Inner Rooms" Deshpande takes the subject matter from the Indian mythology and depicts the injured dignity and pride in the portrayal of the character of Amba. The patriarchal system has made the man and the woman follow the rules. Under such system a boy or a girl has grown up; "A boy who would become a man, playing the game according to some foolish rules made by men long dead, losing his self in the process. And if she had a daughter? She could only have become a pawn in the game, to be moved and discarded as their rules demanded." (Deshpande 95) The woman is to be disregarded and her dignity has been ignored and the man has to be in the position of command as the society has formed the rules in this way.

Shashi Deshpande, the prominent Indian short story writer, deals with the subject matter of the plight of the middle-class woman in "The Intrusion". She has expressed the inner psyche of the protagonist in this story. A newly married woman has experienced a kind of life that she has never expected. Even the in-laws expect the kind of behaviour from the woman, that has appeared only insulting to her. The circumstances have led her to accept an unknown man to be her husband and her opinion always remains silent. The father decides what a daughter should do. His decision should be hers. There is no scope for her to protest; "No one had asked me if I had agreed; it had been taken for granted". (Deshpande 37) She needs some more time for her new life-the married life. But her father cannot accept her plea; "What will you do?"... 'I have two more daughters to be married.' (Deshpande 37) So silently she has to accept that.

In "The Intrusion", the groom's family visits to see the woman to find the suitable wife for their son. The expectation of the groom's family has been presented humorously in an ironic tone. "We are looking for a girl, simple but sophisticated." (Deshpande 37) First of all her dignity has been ignored in the very word 'girl', her maturity has been denied. Secondly their expectation has been presented in an ironical tone that the woman should be simple as well she should be sophisticated in her taste. She should have the quality to communicate properly with the foreigner as her husband has such kind of status in the company. The narrator ironically says that it seems that she has to mix with the 'martians', not the foreigners as 'the word foreigners sound like 'martians''. (Deshpande 37) The writer has here criticized this degradation of a woman's pride and dignity.

The narrator in "The Intrusion" has got married to a 'strange' man and she tries to adjust with this person as her husband but he is insensitive. She wants to be acquainted with this new person in her life; "I want to know all about you, I want to say. What you think, what you feel and why you agreed to marry me?" (Deshpande 40) Without knowing each other properly, it will not be possible for her to live happily together. The intimacy can lead them only to a healthy life. Her timidity to the physical urge of the husband can bring the disgrace to her and her family but she hopes that he can understand her. She wants to reveal the mystery of her body only when they will be acquainted with each other but the husband cannot wait for that long. He is rather desperate. That desperation leads him to force the physical violence on her. In her mental conflict and psychological dilemma adds the physical violence. She cannot endure that pain of humiliation and that is the violation of one's privacy and individual right-"the violation of my right to myself" (Deshpande 41) She remains voiceless, sleepless while the violator snores loudly and sleeps peacefully. The wife is not only physically hurt but her trust and her belief have been violated. A healthy marriage life has been shattered before it has developed.

In "The First Lady" Shashi Deshpande has presented the inner thought process of a woman of nearly seventy in flashback technique. She falls in love with a person who has patriotic zeal. Abandoning her comfortable life under her father's care, she accepted the life the husband has offered her. She rather has adjusted with her married life. She found the 'romantic halo' in 'his burning patriotism'(Deshpande 6), but when there is nothing much to think about anything else as a mother of three children, she has realized that "the passionate and dedicated face she had fallen in love with was incapable of loving another human being." (Deshpande 6) The husband is indifferent to the wife's choice in his acceptance of the life of 'celibacy'. She agrees to that reluctantly. She desires most the husband's intimacy; "She had wanted him to touch her, to hold her, to have her."(Deshpande 7) As the mother of three children She is ashamed at the same time in the thought of the response of this society, especially her husband. That is why it remains unexpressed. That young stage she has left. She is too old now to brood over that past desire, it is time 'to sleep and not to dream.' (Deshpande 8) Shashi Deshpande rather artistically presented that inner thought and the psychological suppression.

In "Death of a Child" the writer has provided a vivid description of the husband's indifference to the wife's physical and mental health. She becomes pregnant for the third time in less than four years. That can affect severely the mother's health. So, she wants the abortion but the husband is indifferent to that decision. Even he wants the third child. When She says abruptly "I don't want it, I can't," (Deshpande 44), he denies to take the responsibility in this act of abortion. The wife has to bear the whole burden herself though he is also responsible for the situation. She acts courageously in spite of her husband's disagreement and denial of providing the support. She gets rid of the pain of giving birth of the child but she has to endure the pain for abortion and the

travesty of the usual scene in losing the child; " I am conscious of a piercing pain in the place he had filled. "(Deshpande 50) She has to bear the trauma in discarding the unborn child; " I feel that the ghost of my dead child walks with me." (Deshpande 51)

The daily routine of a housewife has appeared to be full of monotony and boredom in "An Antidote to Boredom" because of the husband's lack of attention to the wife. Their relationship has become static. There are only some daily duties they have to perform. The daily same speech and acts make the life of the wife stagnant. The lack of the demonstration of the affection of the husband to the wife has led to the conclusion that perhaps the only things that hold them together are the duties and the child they have. They have the physical act in once or twice in a week. That lovemaking cannot make her loneliness and alienation disappeared. She thinks about his indifference to her emotions and feelings; "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?" (Deshpande 65) She criticised in these lines the husband's advances only to the physical relationship without any kind of mental bond. The man and the woman should have the friendly harmonious relationship that can help them find the happiness in their daily duties.

In "An Antidote to Boredom" the wife expresses her plight in her very speech; "Knowing fully well that two persons, a man and a woman, could not look at each other the way we did, could not refrain from touching each other the way we did, without something having to happen some time." (Deshpande 65) She seeks the emotional and mental support from another man and she feels no guilty for that as she explains that "I would be depriving him of nothing, nothing he wanted." (Deshpande 65). The husband is not wicked or harsh but dull and unperceptive. She wants his care and attention. When she finds that spark in his act, she allows the 'mirage' of grasping another man's affection to be discarded and accepts the familial life and it has appeared not only an 'antidote to boredom' but also the best part of her life.

Shashi Deshpande has narrated the story in the first person and third person narratives coupled with the flashback technique. She has presented the glimpses of her woman protagonist's inner world -her innermost thoughts and feelings. In this middle-class societal life, the woman's thoughts have always remained voiceless and silent. One can trace a new dimension in the writer's presentation of the woman's psyche. The woman's injured dignity and pride find its expression in Deshpande's short stories. They seek to establish their identity in this male dominated society.

Shashi Deshpande very artistically depicts the inner psyche of a middle-class woman, the unfulfilled expectation after marriage, and their wretched and miserable condition has been very skillfully delineated. To a man marriage is a license to gratify the carnal desire. There is always male supremacy and dominance over the female body and this is the basic reality that the women have to tolerate in her life. The male dominance over the woman and the insensitivity to their feelings are always predominant in this familial life of the married woman. The violence which is physical as well as psychological has imposed on them. This is inhuman and the proof of insensitive attitude on the part of the man. In this patriarchal system they have been humiliated as they have to maintain the blind obedience to the man. Shashi Deshpande in her writings shows the woman's protest against the man's insensitivity and the cruelty. In her writings, from silence the women move to speech, from margin to the centre.

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