

Being a 'Woman': Critical Study of Shashi Deshpande's 'The Intrusion' and 'Death of a Child'

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Abstract: *Shashi Deshpande elementally portrays Indian women through her short stories and novels. She talks about several social hurdles that hinder their way, confine them and thereby exploit both their body and mind. Being a woman is not an easy task. Womanhood puts those women in the face of challenge. This article focuses two of Deshpande's short stories namely 'The Intrusion' and 'Death of a Child' where she enlightens some grave issues like marital rape, motherhood, childbirth, abortion etc. Her stories are expressions of modern feminist ideology.*

Keywords: *Motherhood, childbirth, patriarchy, arrange marriage, abortion, intrusion, marital rape.*

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent woman writers from India whose writings bear the absolute essence of "Indianness". She is born in 1938 in Karnataka. Her first collection of short stories is brought out in 1978. She wins the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel *That Long Silence* in 1990 and the Padma Shri award in 2009. Her stories illuminate multitudes of issue, both domestic and social and she skillfully makes her readers au fait with human emotions and feelings. She portrays several characters that reflect upon the web of the urban society, human relationships, male-female binary etc. But significantly enough her writings introduce us with a variety of 'women'- isolated, neglected, exploited and in an utterly vulnerable state. We find some well-educated women fighting for their own identity.

India is a country where we worship Maa Durga, Maa kali and thousands of other goddesses every day. But reality has a different story to share. It is the country where patriarchy has its deepest root. Here women are subordinated, exploited, tortured, humiliated, raped and murdered on a regular basis. Ideas of marriage, sexuality, childbirth, motherhood have been politicized in order to supply victuals to patriarchy. In the famous book, *The Second Sex*, the revolutionary French feminist activist, Simone de Beauvoir comments:

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One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 281)

Men and women are biologically different from their birth; but their gender role is conferred upon them by the society (as they grow up.) It proves to be a systematic differentiation by which man-woman hierarchy has been created. In a phallocentric society, being a woman is not an easy task. This article discusses in detail two of Deshpande's short stories namely 'The Intrusion' and 'Death of a Child' where she enlightens some grave issues like marital rape, motherhood, childbirth, abortion etc. Her stories are expression of modern feminist ideology.

'The Intrusion' is a story about a newly-married couple who are on their honeymoon trip to a desolate place and the husband explains that he has chosen such place intentionally to have 'Complete Privacy'. His wife feels twitchy about her own husband as he seems to be a stranger to her. There is an absolute emotional void between the two and to the readers their detachment appears to be unbridgeable. Their marriage was 'arranged' and the lady was compelled to agree with her father's (the patriarch of the family) decision as he had "two more daughters to be married." It is a common phenomenon of the Indian society that is undeniably patriarchal and therefore misogynistic, where the bride has to act in accordance with her parents or family. It is basically the male members of her family who decide every particular regarding her marriage, get her married with a prospective bridegroom and thus disburden themselves. The concept of women being the burden to her family is no uncommon. It is not even restricted to Indian society only. Mary Wollstonecraft points out in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), that in her society, marriage brings women prestige and power, they can rise in the world by marriage while men have more options open to them since marriage is not the grand feature in their lives. Human civilization nurtures this inequality with marked proficiency from the very beginning of its emergence. It reminds us of John Stuart Mill's words in his famous essay, "The Subjection of Women", "...from the dawn of human society every woman was in a state of bondage to some man..." Gerda Lerner, the eminent Austrian- American historian, in her famous essay "The Creation of Patriarchy" talks about this systematic marginalization of women and puts emphasis on how their contribution to the civilization has been left "unrecorded, neglected, and ignored". Women are forced to perform their predefined roles. They are considered to be the 'weaker sex'.

The unnamed lady-narrator in Deshpande's 'The Intrusion', memorizes how it has

happened to her all of a sudden. She remembers her mother-in-law saying, "We are looking for a girl, simple but sophisticated...My son is working in a foreign company. His wife must be able to entertain and mix with foreigners" (Deshpande 37). In such cases of match-making, women are treated as profitable commodity and after their marriage they become the perennial source of carnal pleasure. The husband in the story tries to establish his ownership over the 'female' body of his wife. The more he seeks intimacy, the more his wife repels:

He came closer, looking concerned, and put his arm around me, but awkwardly, stiffly, so what we looked like two marionettes sitting side by side. I tried to move but his hold was firm. He smelt of sweat. Through his glasses, his eyes had a sardonic gleam that frightened me. (Deshpande 37)

She starts to feel homesick. She thinks about her 'mother's face', her 'father's laughter' and her 'sister's chatter'. The 'nameless stranger', her husband provides her with nothing but discomfort. Like an escapist, she suggests him that they must go to the sea. Her husband discards her wish immediately by saying, "let's go in the morning. It's going to be dark soon. Look at the way." He begins to change his dress with much exhilaration and his wife stands in the verandah, leaning against the wooden railings, thinking about her ensnarement in a strange place with a strange 'man'. She drowns in claustrophobia.

Though from the very beginning of the story readers can peep into her mind, the note of hysteria in her behavior gradually becomes palpable to her husband also. He, being too annoyed, asks, "what's this? Why are you behaving like this? Avoiding me. Don't think I haven't noticed it. Ever since we came here you've been...been...avoiding me". She stammers, "we...we scarcely know each other" and this exasperates her husband even more. He again fails to read the language of her eyes. Before being intimate, she wants to know the man thoroughly –his liking, disliking and all. She believes in the union of souls and her cravings for establishing an emotional bond with her husband proves to be futile.

She goes to sleep just to flee away from the situation. After a while she wakes up with a sudden jolt and finds her husband forcefully intruding upon her intimate parts. She can feel the presence of his mighty phallus. She tries to uncage herself. She narrates :

But he my husband, who was forcing his body on mine. I was too frightened to speak, my voice was strangled in my throat. I put my hands on his chest to push him away, but it was like trying to move a rock; I could do nothing. He put his hands, his lips on mine and this time I could not move away. There was no talk, no word between us- just this relentless pounding. His movements had the same rhythm, the same violence as the movements of

the sea... (Deshpande 41)

This is what we call 'marital rape'. The woman loses her bodily privacy as her husband reigns over her body securing complete subordination. Sexuality appears to be a conflict-laden exchange between an active male and passive female where the 'intrusion' is quite obvious.

Men and women are never equal in our society; the former is privileged peremptorily over the later. We can trace back its origin in *The Bible*. In the second chapter of Genesis, after Eve's creation from Adam's ribs, Adam says, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man"*(KJV, Genesis 2:23). It is the 'man' who has absolute freedom to act in accordance with his own will and a 'woman', eternally placed at the lower level of man-woman hierarchy, has to cope up with such heinous incidents like 'marital rape' out of shame and fear of being returned to her paternal house. And if a woman is returned from her in-law's house, she becomes a subject to be frowned at. She is humiliated and systematically isolated from the society's pomp and gaiety. Here the readers may refer to J.S. Mill's essay once again:

"That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." (J.S. Mill)

Another major issue that is going to be enlightened in this article is 'Motherhood' that is often romanticized with certain chauvinistic notions and there it has been made part and parcel of a woman's existence. Women are considered to be a vital tool for sustaining the existence of human race on this planet by creating human progeny relentlessly. Women unable to reproduce often face forceful alienation. In Indian society reproductive inability ousts women from their in-law's house. Their self-respect is negotiated and their 'female' body is used solely for procreation. Shashi Deshpande's short story 'Death of a Child' deals with such a grave matter. It points out the fact that motherhood does not necessarily always bring sunshine to a mother.

The story is narrated again by an unnamed woman who conceives for the third time. This surprise pregnancy makes the woman agitated. Her husband conveys passive acceptance and does not even get distracted from the newspaper after hearing the consequence of

* Taken from *The Bible* (ed. David Norton), page 5.

their unprotected intercourse. It causes sheer repugnance inside the woman:

This time the smile is obvious. But his eyes are still on his paper. He hasn't looked at me yet. Now rage floods me, makes me move. In two strides I am beside him. I wrench the paper out of his hands... (Deshpande 43)

When a woman expects a baby, her self-sense is supposed to be centered round the presence of the fetus inside her body. Our society believes that 'motherhood' is arbitrarily connected to selflessness, sacrifice and devotion. The woman who sacrifices everything for her child is termed as an 'ideal' mother and she secures some sort of pseudo glorification by which patriarchy sustains itself and overburdens the woman with the duty of child rearing. The narrator of the story does not want to exhaust herself with such duties anymore as she still remembers the difficulties associated with her earlier pregnancies. She cannot believe that "the main purpose of my life is to breed". She sounds phobic and highly hysterical:

I grope for words. To me it is simple. I feel trapped. I feel like an animal. The third time in less than four years. It isn't fair. (Deshpande 44)

Her husband's consoling words that they can manage three kids, infuriates the woman even more. She neither can facilitate a satisfactory communication with him nor does he understand her womanly frailty. In a baffled state, he asks, "How can a mother be so selfish?"

Mothers cannot be selfish! They cannot prioritize themselves! They must be unfailingly nurturing and endlessly giving! This is society's inherent expectations from 'mothers'. The lady in the story subverts all these notions and calls for a different choice. For her the first feeling associated with motherhood is of awe, then comes her inadequacy and fear, love appears later. She sternly believes that "marriage, childbirth destroy something in a woman. A reserve. A secretiveness. An innocence." So she decides to go for an abortion.

Even in this age of progressiveness, abortion is still a taboo in our society and culture. Women are also prejudiced without knowing its pros and cons. In Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua it is completely banned. With the introduction of Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971, abortion in India has become legal under various circumstances. In 2003, the Act was further amended to enable women's accessibility to safe and legal abortion services*. But society does not come by it conveniently. In 'Death of a Child', when the woman expresses her wish for an abortion,

* Source- Wikipedia.

it was something beyond the husband's imagination. But it is he who finally takes the lady to the doctor to get rid of the tangle. Deshpande portrays the husband with much ambivalence.

After the abortion is done, there is a strange psychic change- a turmoil inside the woman. There is a dreadful feeling of hollowness. She can feel the heaviness of her own breasts. Feelings of 'motherhood' stream through her veins. She despairs:

I am conscious of a piercing pain in the place he had filled. Grief becomes real. I swing, like a monstrous pendulum, between grief, guilt and shame. Guilt conquers. I welcome it and shoulder the burden with a masochistic fervor. (Deshpande 50)

It feels like a nightmare for her; she cannot even sleep. During the deadly hours of midnight she hears a baby bitterly crying somewhere. She finds herself perplexed with the thought of her dead foetus –her dead child. She feels no longer alone as the ghost of her dead child walks with her. In such a context, one may think of Beauvoir who opines that no such thing called 'maternal instinct' ever existed-it is a patriarchal contrivance to trap a woman by infusing 'maternal guilt'. Though in 'Death of a Child', the poignancy of such narration stirs the readers.

In Part V of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that marriage has traditionally served male interests. Concepts like contraception and abortion have remained a taboo and are not freely available to women. Beauvoir was writing this in the 19th century about the experience of French women. But her ideas are relevant even today whenever we scrutinize a society and its women. The discussion over the representation of women in Deshpande's short stories here is not only widened but also solidified with Beauvoir's ideas. 'The Intrusion' and 'Death of a Child' sketch brilliant pictures of the Indian society and its women. They also challenge our prejudiced notions about marriage, motherhood, abortion etc. The stories are about discrimination, social bias, existential crisis of the 'weaker sex'. Perhaps Deshpande has not given names to her woman-narrators just to elicit a universal and pragmatic appeal.

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