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Major Changes in the Attitude of Women Characters in the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

It is a known fact that an individual living in society is directly or indirectly influenced by its norms and regulations. For women, these norms and regulations are generally a product of social conditioning. Women in society are considered as secondary citizen. They have inferior status in society.

Shashi Deshpande is a well known name in Indian English literature. She writes about the women's conditions in society. In her short- stories, she very beautifully describes women characters and their suppressed feelings. Her characters want to break down social norms which regulate them to a defined position. How she deals with the middle class women's frustrations, turmoil and their silences? What her protagonists do to get salvation? What kind of urge and demand they have to identify their own real beings. These are the questions which are tried to answer in this research paper entitled "Major Changes in the Attitude of Women Characters in the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande". And effort has therefore been made in this research paper to show some light on women's inner feelings and their changed attitude towards their problems in society.

Keywords: Social conditioning, Suppressed feelings, Changed attitude

Indian literature in English has been facilitated by many talented women writers. These writers have analyzed the changing socio economic conditions of society and their impact on women. They have written about the emerging new woman of times, contrasting her with her earlier avatar. New woman is one who has a desire to be her own person and struggles to reconcile the traditional with the modern.

Shashi Deshpande deals with the middle class women's frustrations, turmoil and their silences. Her protagonists do not struggle to get salvation. They urge and demand an identity of their real beings. During the bored routine life of the narrator heroines, there comes a day when they wake up to the fact that they are quite ignorant about their own selves. Then, a need arises to shunt away the stranger within their own souls.

In the story, "An Antidote to Boredom", the protagonist 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. She is caught in a suffocating and unsatisfactory marital relationship. The dull and passive behavior of the husband makes their relation bored. This is how the story begins:

"Do you want more sugar in your coffee?"

“Sugar? No...no. May be a little bit.”

“Half a spoon?”

I got the sugar, stirred the coffee. And suddenly, standing there, my sari tucked in at my waist, the picture of a solicitous wife serving her husband, I retreated into a wild flight of fancy. What if I came up to the table, I asked him silently, walking on my hands, your coffee balanced on my feet? I concealed a small smile at the vision I had conjured up, knowing fully well that he would do nothing, because he would notice nothing but that he had been served his coffee. No need to conceal my smile, either. For that again was something he would not notice. Where as he – no nuance of my expression ever escaped him. (Deshpande, 1993; 52)

In the story this other “he” is a man this lonely wife meets at his son’s school. 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 (Pathak,1998;187). 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. She often thinks that “dullness is to me, an unforgivable sin”. She is enraged at his indifferent attitude. In her own words:

Once I had thought I would fling myself at him and say, ‘I’ve missed you’. But I knew what his reaction to that would be. He would be painfully, horribly embarrassed. Now I no longer thought of saying that. It would no longer be true. (Deshpande, 1993; 54)

The monotonous routine life leads her to take interest in another man. The dirt of dullness washes away from her life when she meets a young widower at her son’s school and is excited about this new development in her life. Her strangulated self feels afresh at this temporary love–affair, acting as a strong antidote to her boredom. She is happy by the discovery that life can be lived on an intense and spontaneous level.

The beginning? Of what? Nothing, really. Just that we met and talked and laughed. Just that I felt I had to see him. I knew he felt the same. 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 ... (Deshpande, 1993; 55-56)

For her, he is the man who fills her heart and mind, who understands and cares for her. She reacts strongly to her neglecting, over busy husband. She thinks that her husband is not cruel. She is confused and still hesitates to associate herself with other man, because as she says, “I knew how it would be afterwards. I would never be the same again.... And there was the thought of Rahul too, some awareness in his eyes, a recent withdrawal from me, which made me wonder how much a child could see and understand. The very thought of it made me feel guilty towards Rahul” (58). But again she doesn’t want to forgive her husband for his dullness and boring attitude. She says,

But I felt no guilt towards my husband, because I would be depriving him of nothing, nothing he wanted. How often had I felt in myself a boundless capacity for loving, for giving? But I had felt in him incapacity to receive and for that I hated him at times, though I knew I wronged him by that. For her was not a wicked man not harsh nor cruel, only unperceptive. And dull. And dullness is to me an unforgivable crime. (Deshpande, 1993; 58)

The attraction developed between the two ends abruptly, when her husband who comes to know of her affair and subtly warns her of the consequences. The husband plans to go to Delhi and she fixes a programme with the other man. But at the eleventh hour, her husband invites her to join him, startled at the unusual invitation, which would result in the miscarriage of the anticipated pleasure with the other man (Pathak, 1998; 180). She replies, "I can't!" Then I looked up fearfully. Did he understand? But his face was as calm, as bland as ever. "Why not?" He said ... Next time, perhaps. I don't feel take it this time (Deshpande, 1993; 68).

But when her husband says, "If I were you I would make it this time" she feels a menacing sound in his voice. She understands that her seemingly unaware husband is intuitively aware of her flirtations and the thought fills her with a sense of guilt and shame. But her husband's move leads the woman towards self-interrogation; does it provide her the needed relief or freedom? Is it a solution to her monotony? Or was it only a need born out of boredom? The woman herself feels that the attraction had a genuine base.

So reluctantly and not daring to defy the social norms, she slips back into the role of a wife and mother. Deshpande does not allow her protagonist this much liberty. She restrains her in time so as to preserve the marital sanctity (Usha & Ram, 1993; 123).

In the story neither husband nor the wife displays any wish to walk out of the relationship. It is indeed, difficult and traumatic for the average middle class Indian woman to contemplate breaking her marriage. In India marriage represents not only a personal relationship, but a social-cultural status symbol for woman as well (Atrey & Kirpal, 1998; 98).

In Indian patriarchal society no woman can think of breaking her marriage merely because of an unsatisfactory marital relationship. If any woman tries to escape from her unhappy and unsatisfactory marital life, she brings social disgrace to her whole family. She cannot get support from her own parents and friends if she tries so. For the woman marriage also represents the ultimate goal of her existence. Without her marital status she would be a cipher since society sees her only as a daughter, wife or mother. (Atrey & Kirpal, 1998; 99).

Marriage, therefore, determines the fate of a woman to much greater extent than it does to the destiny of a man. Analyzing the relationship between a man and a woman in Deshpande's stories, Arthur Lindley comments:

Men in these stories, an occasional prospective lover aside, appear to the women protagonists almost as different species: potentially hostile, largely uncaring, certainly unseeing. The lives of communication are down: the marital sex is awful

(mostly he wants and she submits). The wives suffer in varying degrees and combinations from shame, resentment, ennui, guilt. (191)

The story "An Antidote to Boredom" is an overt portrayal of the changes taking place in respect of the temperament of Indian woman. The married protagonist is unable to rebel against her dull existence with her husband. The story sums up with a flood of emotions surrounded over her with a revelation that she was pursuing the mirage.

In India, marriage is not just a union of two individuals, but a union of two social groups. Marital bonds are not easy to break for both. Deshpande does not make any moral judgment while describing the extra-marital affairs. She uses extra-marital affairs as a metaphor for the women liberating herself from the chains of socially ordained moral codes. Deshpande wishes to liberate her protagonist in the radical sense but prefers to remain faithful to the demands of her socio-cultural context since it renders the portrayal more realistic (Atrey & Kirpal, 1998; 100-101).

The story, "The Duel" describes about a licentious writer eager to have physical relation with a married woman. The woman also likes him. The story has a male narrator. The protagonist woman and the narrator both are sitting on the porch of her house. The narrator asks the woman, "Why not? ... Surely you don't believe in all this morality business? A bourgeois concept like that? ... Or maybe you believe in a husband's monopoly (Deshpande, 2003; 104)?" She responds sharply to this. Her answer is based upon her own desire. "No it has nothing to do with morality. It's more simple. I don't feel like it." Her voice had a kind of soft huskiness that added an odd significance to her simplest words. The narrator feels that these words lingered between them. He narrates, "She suddenly laughed. Her face was in the shadows and I couldn't see it. But there was genuine amusement in that laugh..." (Deshpande 2003; 104). As the conversation goes on between the two, the narrator comes back to his point again asking, 'why not?' He thinks:

I don't know why I should have persisted. What was there in her? Nothing exceptional about her looks. A rather fleshy nose. A rounded chin. Eyebrows that had retained their natural shape. No nothing unusual. A woman like many others. One, who fed her household, looked after her children and carried an aura of domesticity around her. No. it was not her. It was me. I had this penchant for middle-class women. I enjoyed seeing them shed their inhibitions. I loved ripping of the thin facades of their morality. It gave me thrill, an ecstasy almost, like writing on a blank sheet of paper. Or was it more like fighting a duel? I don't really know. (Deshpande, 2003; 104-105)

The protagonist woman does not want to submit physically because this relationship cannot offer her anything 'new'. But when the conversation lasts, the writer starts to recognize her as a person, not as a female body.

Later in the story, she goes to him and surrenders herself to him. She allows him to make love to her without registering any response. The writer is quite surprised at this sudden change in her attitude. He says:

Her face puzzled me. It was so expressionless; it looked like the sketch of a face with the eyes left out. As if she was not there at all. Is life lived only on the physical

plane? Her own questions come back to me. And suddenly I was filled with a savage fury. Why had she come if she was so disinterested? (Deshpande, 2003; 106)

When he searches for the reason he discovers that she had come to him after she had lost her husband and her children in an accident. She had come to him in a confused state of mind. As Jain points out that "She had come, when the absence of her loved ones had brought home to her the significance of physical existence. The spirit may survive but human beings need the body for assurance, for touch, belonging and continuity. She had come to him for physical contact, to feel the pain of being" (Jain, 2003; 172).

Just as in the story "An Antidote to Boredom" the protagonist feels free to use her body and does not show any guilt feelings, the woman in "The Duel" treats physical relation as a matter of choice. As Jasbir Jain describes, both the situations depict that marriage is no longer confined to the belief in the husband's total possession over the woman's body (Jain, 2003; 171).

"A Day Like Any Other" is a very simple story. This story examines the situation of the wife whose husband has an extramarital affair, while the earlier story had an indifferent spouse, whose dull behavior had spurred the wife to seek someone else. The monotonous routine of a woman's life stands undisturbed even at the news of her husband's extramarital affair. In the story, the protagonist's friend who brings her news comments:

"What was I saying? Yes, about your husband. I mean, he may have been trapped by that girl, you know, I know how these girls are. Specially the working ones. Bold. Too bold"... "And it isn't just that..." "It's not just that they are bold. I can forgive them that. But, they're shameless as well. This girl now - the way she was dressed when I saw her..." "I remember when I saw them at the movies that day, for a minute I thought you were with him. I almost got up to speak to you. Then I saw him smiling, and I wondered. No man smiles at his wife like that!" ... "And she too, she was looking up at him and smiling. They looked very happy together; " ... "Oh I don't believe it's anything serious." After all, a man needs some fun, some entertainment. And he can't go alone.' ... "life is never fair ...nothing. Life is never fair to women... You sacrifice yourself, your whole life, you give it all to your husband and children... and in the end you're left with nothing." (Deshpande, 2004; 182-184)

When the protagonist wife knows of his husband's infidelity, she feels cheated and betrayed. But she does not indulge in self-pity. She feels that what she and her husband have made together is too strong – the home, their children "She refuses to give in to the crisis and accepts it with equanimity" (Atrey & Kirpal, 1998; 99). She is able to hold her own and the flirtation is an aberration she can afford to ignore as she reviews her own life. She says:

I always wanted to marry, to have children. I have what I want. A life without all this makes no sense. I enjoy this ... I still have my life. It is my own. No one has taken it away from me. (Deshpande, 2004; 184)

Replying to the question how does that girl look, her friend says, "She's quite tall... no makeup... And that day she was wearing a saree, starting from here... and a

sleeveless blouse, with the neck coming down to here" (Deshpande2004; 183). After listening about the girl, the protagonist looks at herself in the mirror and rejects the physical body as the only true representation of her being. She asks if she thinks, a body is agency of objectification. She says:

This face, this body... is that all I mean when I say "I"? Is that all he says when he says "my wife"? The thing we have built between us – and we have built it, no bitch can change that fact – does it all depend on this face, this body? Love, she thought, I wish I knew what it meant. (Deshpande2004; 185)

She decided that her life is her own and she will not change it to suit him. "He will have to take me as I am." She decides not to follow "formulas trotted out innumerable times by women's magazines" (Deshpande 2004; 186). She respects herself and will not become a sex object at any cost. She makes sure that she is not taken for granted and that she is cherished and held in esteem as a human being (Atrey & Kirpal, 1998; 99). She very coolly discloses the information to her husband as told by her friend. The husband becomes guilt conscious and promises to be faithful in the future. He says, "She means nothing to me, nothing at all. The children and you – this is my real life. You mean everything to me" (Deshpande 2004; 188). The tension between the two fuses at once and the protagonist feels triumphant.

In her stories, Shashi Deshpande has probed into the suffocated psyche of woman to highlight her suppressed desires, to show her ambition and frustrations, soothe her aches and pain and recognize her real self. Shashi Deshpande has largely discussed about woman's self awareness in her stories. In order to fight against established customs and assert independence, the woman's first casualty has been marriage. Her attitude to love, marriage and sex has undergone considerable change.

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