

Identity, Space and Gender: Reading Select Narratives from Shashi Deshpande's *The Intrusion and Other Stories*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, a renowned Indian English novelist and short story writer is known for focusing on the “inner world” of her characters, especially women characters. She chooses middle-class women as characters and presents their psychological analyses with a focus on the clash in their minds between tradition and modernity. She has been awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Shri for her contributions to literature. Her works take up the questions of female identity and complexities of marital life and provide insights into the core issues that affect human relationships, especially in contemporary Indian society. Since the beginning of her career as a short story writer in the late 1970s, she has published many novels and short stories exploring the deeper recesses of the human mind and inner struggles of women for identity, autonomy, space and rights. Her stories attack and deconstruct the idealized institution of marriage which often demands the self-sacrifice of women presenting them in their *ardhangini* role that dilutes their individuality at once and silences their voices. The present story collection *The Intrusion and Other Stories*, published in 1993 deals with key contemporary issues of gender discrimination while exploring the themes of marital rape, bodily autonomy, lack of emotional connection and patriarchal conditioning etc. The present paper aims to explore these issues that are largely responsible for the physical and psychological suppression of Indian women.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Subversion, Space, Individuality, Autonomy.

Indian society is largely under the influence of the patriarchal or male-chauvinist worldview. Although in modern times, the status of women has changed and improved considerably in terms of education, employment and empowerment, the women, particularly belonging to the middle class families, are thought to be responsible only for child care and

household chores. Although the system is going through a transitional phase moving towards the gender equality breaking the patriarchal norms and stereotypes, it will still take time to achieve its goal. Women in India have to go through psychological and physical struggles at numerous levels when they aim to create space and identity of their own. Since ancient times, women have been considered the life partners of men. In *Shiva Purana*, Lord Shiva's *ardhnarishwar* form represents gender equality making *Shiva* and *Shakti* complementary to each other. It promotes completeness and harmony in the union of male and female. But the so called patriarchal societies see only one side of this form and interpret woman as *ardhangini* stripping her of self-identity. No one says that the male is the half part of a woman and incomplete without her. Rather, she is taught from her childhood that she has to devote her life to her husband regardless of his loyalty to her; popular song from the famous 1986 Bollywood movie *Naseeb Apna Apna* making the husband a divine-figure (“*Bhala hai, bura hai, jaisa bhi hai, mera pati mera devta hai...*”) reflects on the patriarchal conditioning of women. Therefore, it becomes challenging when a woman tries to get rid of these norms and asserts her individuality. The stories in the present collection deal with the struggles and challenges that women face while fighting for self-realization, autonomy and identity.

Before coming directly to the stories, it is imperative to explore the perspectives of presentation and techniques employed by Shashi Deshpande in her narratives. She is one of the key speakers of the silent voices of women and her works speak of the sorrows and grievances of the middle class women who suffer from loneliness and isolation born out of the estrangement in their marital as well as other family relationships. While talking about the inner silences that give birth to the feelings of alienation, Edmund Fuller counts this situation as one of the biggest problems in modern societies when he comments in his work *Man in Modern Fiction*, “Man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin but also from inner problems, a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in his way of existence.”(Fuller) Deshpande's fiction portrays this condition in a detailed manner. By going through her stories, it is easily witnessed that she largely banks upon the stream of consciousness technique to narrate the lives and stories of her female characters. This technique provides her a lot of space and wonderful opportunities to get into the recesses of the female mind. Though first used by the Scottish philosopher and educationist Alexander Bain in his book *The Senses and the Intellect* in 1855, the term “Stream of Consciousness” gained popularity when the American psychologist William James defined it in his work *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890. While discussing the significance of this phrase James refers to the uninterrupted expression of the endless memories, conflicts and emotions which do not follow any format or pattern. Many established twentieth century authors have already utilized this technique profusely in their fiction and it is also commonly observed that while presenting female characters and depicting their psychological states, this technique offers better results as all the hitherto repressed feelings get a free flow. Shashi Deshpande is also famous for her first person narrations that provide the narratives authenticity and emotional directness. Her non-linear style of story-telling, full of flashbacks and memories provides a platform to float freely with the memories and current realities in the mind of her protagonists. Sarabjit Sandhu in her book *The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* also highlights this pattern in her fiction and shows how Deshpande skillfully penetrates through the inner lives of women in India. The book entitled *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande* edited by R.S. Pathak also contains essays that explore psychological depth studded with characteristic individuality in characters created by Deshpande.

In the story, 'An Antidote to Boredom', she presents a bored housewife married for twelve years who uses adultery as an "antidote" to her dull and loveless marital life. The story explores the side-effects or the lack of emotional bonding in a marital life. The protagonist is yearning for the love and care of her husband who is devoid of emotional feelings towards his wife. Like every woman, the wife needs appreciation, romance and a sort of camaraderie affection from the side of her husband, but she is forced to live a loveless marital life. Like a solicitous wife, she takes care of her husband and in return, she wants the same care, attention, concern and protectiveness from him too. But, her wild flight of fancy to be noticed by her husband and to share laughter of the couple which could create a link between them crashes down on the ground of reality when she sees her husband silently eating and moving his jaws rhythmically without ever noticing her. She is bored of the daily routine of her husband in which there is no space for her. She says, "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, 62)

Therefore, her boredom gets an "antidote" of romanticism in an extramarital affair with a younger widower whom she meets at her son, Rahul's school. Her profound loneliness, drab routine and loveless days work as catalysts in her affair with that man. Although this affair remains unfulfilled and incomplete, it fills her life with excitement, romance and enthusiasm born out of the feelings of companionship and emotional attachment that she was longing for a long time that her husband could not provide. This affair provides her a purpose and a sort of a temporary solution to her chilling loneliness as she says, "I was never lonely now. As I moved about the house doing my chores, I stored up jokes, little bits of my day to tell him, the other. We would talk of anything; nothing was too trivial or too intense for us". (Deshpande, 62)

Thus, this relationship brings in a little spark of hope that she has always been yearning for. But the feeling of guilt in becoming unfaithful towards her husband makes her hesitant. The young man immediately understands the situation and responds saying, "It's bad for you, I know. But don't think it's easier for me. The dead clamour for loyalty as much as the living". (Deshpande, 63) In her relationship with her husband she never found anything that could ever involve her or let her feel connected; it was a relationship that could not create anything positive, meaningful or memorable except the child that they called theirs. She longs for something special and unique from her husband so that she may also consider herself to be an indispensable being in his life as she thinks:

My husband denied me nothing; but there was not one sari with associations. Not one sari that was special to me because of something we had done together, something he had said to me.... But what if there is no affection at all, the only things holding us together being habit and a child? (Deshpande, 64)

Towards the climax of the story, her husband discovers her infidelity and makes her realize that she is doing wrong. He brings her back into reality and tries to convince her to spend time with him by coming over to Delhi. His piercing eyes make her aware of the fact that "...he knew, that he cared, and as if a dam had burst, a flood shame of guilt swept over me, drowned me" (Deshpande, 68). Ultimately for the sake of domestic harmony she decides to let go the

mirage she had tried to grasp for so long. Here, with this ending, Deshpande critiques the patriarchal expectations that only demand wifely and motherly duties from women starkly ignoring their individualities that ultimately cost heavy prices in the form of adultery and infidelity. Through this short narrative, the writer tries to establish that though this act of emotional rebellion is temporary and ends in guilt and deep ethical dilemma, it is meaningful, serious and of great significance. It only leaves people in conflict between the social or familial loyalties and personal desires. What instead, is needed is that both the partners should be sensitive enough to respect each other's feelings and individual spaces.

The other story, 'Lucid Moments' deals with the theme of the quest for identity beyond the domestic roles assigned to women in middle class families in India. In Indian traditional families women are usually not called by their own names but by the name of their husbands. In Shashi Deshpande's stories, teknonymy or any such similar male-chauvinist terms stripping women of their very existence in the name of respect which identify them only by their relationship with men as wife, mother or daughter-in-law, undergo a journey of self-discovery. This precisely the reason why Indira Nityanandam compares her with Tolstoy and says, "Being trapped in the women's world of experience, Deshpande hopes to emerge as a kind of female Tolstoy who can create real, rounded characters and not merely women characters created for men." (Nityanandam) Mainly focussing on the mother-daughter relationship, the present story explores a woman's journey to discover her own identity while trying to fulfill her dying mother's desire to know her own dead mother's name. Sujata, a working woman feels distraught due to the childless life that she is living. This emptiness haunts her every time. Pangs of childless life generally affect women more than their male counterparts in a traditional patriarchal society like India because they have to continually bear the brunt of the society as if only they are responsible for it. Sujata, the narrator, feels it more severely when she meets her sister's children, "It is an emptiness, a feeling as if the chore of me has been scooped out, leaving a black hole behind. Often, watching Shilpa with her children, I feel unreal, my life seems to be without any substance" (Deshpande, 72).

Whenever she meets her younger sister's children, the feeling deepens but she cannot express it before anyone. This has turned her into an indifferent person who would even prefer to die giving birth to the child and wants to become "that nameless woman who died giving birth to her first child. But she had a child..." (Deshpande, 74). Social pressure and stigma of being a childless woman are so heavy on her consciousness that she finds her life thoroughly inane, drab, meaningless and aimless. Her outlook changes when she comes to look after her mother who is in her mid-fifties and is dying of stage four cancer called metastasis. She finds her mother too frail to be easily relatable to her earlier self but even in such conditions she sees her mother putting *bindi* on her forehead. This brings out a change in her outlook as she takes her mother's act as the invincible urge to retain what one could even in the most damaging conditions, "It is not, I somehow guess, a conventional clinging to her jewellery, even her mangalsutra. 'It's too heavy', she had said. I suppose wearing the bindi gives her link with her old self; it is somehow reassuring" (Deshpande, 72).

Her mother never liked wearing heavy ornaments even when she was healthy and had suggested her daughters too not to carry them all the time but this time, she smiles when Sujata applies the '*sticker bindi*' in the center of her forehead because this *bindi* reunites her to her old

self. It changes her attitude towards life as she now realizes the folly of her thought process and starts taking interest in everything around and judges human life from a fresh perspective. Now Sujata gets her mother ready as a mother does to her child. The story also reflects on the kind of relationship that her dying mother (Akka) shared with her father (Baba); it is a bond of trust and companionship as when the latter sees his partner dying, he invites Sujata for help as he cannot bear these distressing moments alone, “Poor Baba, I know how it is for him—he can’t bear being alone with his dying wife.... He was the rock on which my life had stood firm. Until Akka’s illness when the rock turned to shifting sand” (Deshpande, 72-73). But the main issue that the story raises is the quest for identity. Her mother has completely forgotten her own dead mother’s name in the course of illness. She asks Sujata many times to answer her question- “What is ... my mother’s name?” But neither the narrator nor her father himself remembers the name of the mother’s dead mother who had died while giving birth to her. She always heard her mother being called only by the title ‘mother’ and is therefore, now curious to remember her by her name. This episode raises a serious gender issue as it is very commonly seen in India that women in the name of showing respect towards them or due to the generally acceptable trend, have often been secretly stripped of their own real identities. Till they are at their parents’ place in the pre-marriage days, they are normally called by their own names but just after marriage, either the name is altered or it gets lost forever and is replaced by the names newly coined by adding either the husband’s name or the child’s name; they are called as ...’s mother or’s wife etc. After sometime, they themselves become unaware of their own identities. This female identity is constructed on the basis of the prescribed roles, trends and traditions and gets fixated in due course of time as Judith Butler also argues in *Bodies That Matter*:

Whenever construction is considered not as an activity, but as an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed; the constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the evacuation or displacement of human agency.

(Butler, 9)

Her dying mother tries to search the identity of her dead mother, but is helpless now because it is too late and now nobody remembered her by her own name. After the death of her mother, Sujata pays tribute to her mother by calling her by her name Sumati before Karuna, her mother’s granddaughter and her younger sister Shilpa’s daughter so that she may remember her grandmother by her name. By doing so, she tries to save her from being lost in the darkness of oblivion,

May be can begin by tracing the name of that woman who died leaving no name behind. And then...?

Can I prove to my mother—my mother? no, myself—that even if they never chant a lityan of their names at a wedding, these women are real? (Deshpande, 79)

In another story entitled ‘Ghosts’, Deshpande deals with the problem of a migrant Indian woman who feels alienated, emotionally detached and completely cut off from her roots in a foreign country like the United Kingdom. The protagonist struggles with her homesickness and isolation while she is physically living with her husband who has brought her to this foreign land, but does not have enough time to share her feelings of leading a desolate life in an alien

land. She is left alone in the room with her child to manage all the household chores. While going for grocery shopping, the chilled atmosphere of this country does not suit her and makes her realize that “sniffing and snuffling, walking like a brown ghost, among people who don’t know I exist” (Deshpande, 81). She repents over her decision to come here with her husband to stay among people who look at her scornfully, because she is a coloured woman for them. It makes her nauseatingly miserable and homesick, “Now, walking home, it seemed so far away, it could have happened to someone else. Not to her” (Deshpande, 82). She is also sad for her son who has none around him to play with, while in India, there were many people who always surrounded him. But, here only her face is the thing which can make him happy. Even his father has no time to spend time with him, “Poor little fool, she thought with scornful tenderness. To have a world consisting of one face only and to be happy in that world! What it do to him?” (Deshpande, 80)

The story reflects on the struggles of a woman who is not habituated to live in a single room and share bathroom and toilet which increases her homesickness; she anyhow manages this problem, “by filling a bucket under the kitchen tap and having a bath standing in the tub” (Deshpande, 84). Whenever she complains to her husband, he passively remarks, “For God’s sake don’t act the pure Brahmin. Not here. Not now. It’s going to complicate matters immensely” (Deshpande, 84). These ‘frantic overtures’ as her husband calls them, were completely ignored by him which highlights the marital disconnects and the complexities of male-female relationship. The lack of emotional support increases the feeling of helplessness, isolation and to be left alone in an unrecognizable world, “Most of the time, however,...it shocked him. Or embarrassed him. Or, may be the simple truth was that he was too tired. He would turn his back on her, and there was only her own self left”. (Deshpande, 85)

This incessant search for belongingness and emotional support attract her towards television that at least could fill the room with noises breaking its unbearable silence. The faces on the screen look real to her than the people in the real world because they don’t look at her scornfully, rather they smile and make her happy, “She was part of them a real person, not a ghost whom people looked through. A ghost who moved invisibly in a grey world peopled by blank-faced strangers.” (Deshpande, 86)

Through the present story, Shashi Deshpande does not only explore the loneliness and feeling of being homesick by any individual in general but also tries to highlight the ludicrous plight of a woman who is forced to live unwillingly in such trying situations where she has to search for the meaning of her existence in a foreign land. She is neither employed anywhere nor does she have any friend circle around to pass her time or remain busy for the whole day long when her husband is away for his work. Even when he comes back, he hardly has any time left to spend with the wife and son. Moreover, he must also be facing problems and experiencing the pangs of living in a foreign country but he has a purpose to live and targets to achieve but the wife does not have any such cushion to bank upon. Her life gets miserable everyday so much so that she starts searching for a meaning in the noises created by television that provide her a little relaxation, comfort and a derived sense of self and belongingness. Ritu Tomar Rathi throws light on this sort of loneliness in the following words:

The correspondence columns of women's magazines provide good examples of what they talk about; one can hardly imagine a 'lonely hearts' column for men only; men meet in the world, which is their world, while women have to define, measure, and explore their social domain; their correspondence deals especially with beauty counsel, recipes for cooking, directions for knitting; and they ask for advice; through propensity for chatter and self-display genuine anxiety sometimes emerges. (Rathi, 31)

Another story in the collection 'It was the Nightingale' reflects on the struggles of working women juggling family and career. In modern age, when women are trying to be career-oriented and wish to make a mark on their own, they cannot be taken only as 'appendage'. The present story explores the same thoughts as delivered by the honourable Supreme Court of India recently in May, 2026 in the matter of Ann Saurabh Dutt v. Lieutenant Colonel Saurabh Iqbal Bahadur Dutt, 'It is not cruelty for a wife to prioritize her own career.' It sounds highly ridiculous and condemnable in an age when society talks about woman empowerment. Deshpande in 1990s expressed the same thoughts through this story while we are still trying to find out the solution to this patriarchal problem. The story presents those complex roles women enact in modern age when they try to create their own space and identity in the society. The court on that matter has clearly stated that a wife is not an assistant in her husband's house to be treated as unpaid domestic helper and that marriage is not meant to erase her individual self. So, for a happy married life, both the partners will have to respect each other's aspirations.

In the present story, Jayu, a first person narrator, expresses her feelings of double burden, fear of career stagnation and her efforts to manage the traditional expectations of her husband and his family. The story starts in the last night when she has to go away from her husband for two years due to her assignment in a foreign country. She is an ambitious career-oriented woman who is determined to climb the ladder of success. Her husband also knows it well that if she has decided to go, no one can change her mind. He, therefore, does not stop her but somewhere inside his heart, he does not feel happy and contented with this decision. His acceptance is simply obligatory shrouding many layers of doubts, fears, dilemmas born out of patriarchal stereotypical norms. She also realizes the meaning of this long separation, "I'm putting two years between us. A fearsome period. Two years of experiences we will not share. And each one a brick that can ultimately become a wall between us. It isn't quarrels that shatter a marriage, it's doing things apart." (Deshpande, 89-90) Both of them love each other to the extent that each one can easily make out what has not even been said by the other but they also have a clear understanding of how each other's emotions and perspectives sometimes become a barrier in their love. Jayu knows that her husband is not happy about her going abroad for career but avoids registering it because she knows that she will not stop. Demonstrating a lot of courage, she finally says:

'I wish, you have refused to let me go.'

'How could I?' His voice is drowsy. But it is lassitude, not contentment that makes it so. (Deshpande, 90)

But he soon expresses his feeling in a manner that poses a direct question to the whole issue of going away for the sake of something that cannot even be visualized at this stage. Moreover he also dramatically blames her of being too much with herself, "...why are you really

going? Is it really going to make all that much difference to your work? You know you've just begun feeling your own way." (Deshpande, 91) The writer here suggests that when a woman thinks about her own career and plans big, it does not at all mean that she has all of a sudden started taking her family life very casually. Biases that generally define gender roles work in the same manner as if the husband would have been offered the same opportunity, this whole episode of leaving the country and earning more money, prestige and status in the society would have been a matter of celebration to everyone in the family. The women are usually called insolent when they revolt against such patriarchal norms which demand preference for family over career from women. Though the husband declares his preference for family over career, it is hardly palatable to the common reader as the general perception stands against it,

'I couldn't miss the chance,' I say, sensing that my tone is petulant. 'If you had been me...'

'...I would have put ourselves first'. (Deshpande, 91)

Her mother-in-law is not at all happy with her decision to leave her son for two years just for an assignment and narrates her own story of how she stopped even to her parents' place after the death of her mother-in-law. Even her husband also accepts that the women of his mother's age never thought beyond their family responsibilities and hardly ever knew what identity meant, "For women of her generation, life held nothing, literally nothing, apart from husband and children. She can't understand how a woman can see beyond that." (Deshpande, 92) The narrator, Jayu herself is well aware of it as her own mother was a very conservative woman who could not look beyond her husband and children. So, Jayu had already faced a lot even before her marriage because of her mother's traditional outlook:

A woman who had nothing of her own. Who tried to live her life through her husband and daughters. Who was shattered by any tug at the bonds. Who tortured herself and tormented us. Who made her own hell and gloried in it. And so, for me, each step out of home had been a battle, each success a treachery towards her. (Deshpande, 92)

She, therefore, knows it well that she would never be able to explain things to her mother-in-law but what is more disheartening to her is the husband's reluctant acceptance. The question still stands that when her husband cannot understand her situation, how can she even think of justifying herself before a lady of the older generation. But she tries her best to convince him by saying, "To me our lives are intertwined, yet they are two distinct strands. They are like two lights that shine more brightly together, but to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone." (Deshpande, 92)

At the end of the story, Jayu chooses her career but with heavy heart full of the memories of wounds and also of the hopes of new beginnings. We thus, see that her short-stories explore the female psyche examining primarily the inner struggles of middle class women. Moreover the way Shashi Deshpande's epoch-making novel *That Long Silence* (1988) presents the forces conditioned to uphold patriarchal norms which push women into submissive roles and self-imposed silences, similarly her stories discussed here also showcase snippets from the world around us that clearly suggest what the concluding lines of the novel establish, "We can always

hope without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this; life has always to be made possible.” (Deshpande, 193)

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