



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## **To Cry or Not to Cry: Delineation of Women in the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande**

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### **Abstract**

The Post- Independence women short story writers in Indian- English literature were living in a society where the independence had also inspired women to throw away their veil, which had covered all their mental abilities and accomplishments. They had decided to move out of the four walls and go into the world with a new confidence and determination. However they had to face a lot of hurdles, created not only by men but also by other women. There were a lot of actions and reactions. The women writers of this period have captured this situation in their works. The objective of this article is to document the sufferings of women as delineated in the short stories of Shashi Deshpande.

**Keywords**

Sufferings of Women; Hold of Men over Women; Emancipation.

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The emergence of feminist movement in 1960s aimed at securing equal rights and opportunities for woman in the patriarchal society. Commenting on this movement Lakshmi Kannan says:

For a woman, her works are no less a process of self-actualization as her life is. In both, she wrestles with a host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes, precipitated by her...the myths, legends or the collective memory of the inherent conservative elements within a community, but equally with the ones thrown up by the movement of feminism itself ("To Grow or Not to Grow" 31)

Women's contribution to the short story is invaluable. Both women writing and short story form have developed simultaneously in the twentieth century, especially in its later half. Indian English literature has established its credentials all over the world. Indian writers in English have been using almost all major forms of literature.

They have drawn much attention as well as appreciation in the post-independence era. They have also excelled themselves in fiction writing. This is because of their clarity of perception and vision, immaculate articulation, depth and variety of subjects, and universality of appeal. They have made innovative experiments in the form and the narrative techniques. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that:

Indian writing in English is a distinctive literature – a tree that has sprang up on hospitable soil from a seed that a random breeze had brought from afar...What is written has to be recognizably Indian to the Indian reader and recognizably English to the English reader...Its familiarity is its recommendation in India, its apparent

novelty is its recommendation abroad. (*Indian Writing in English* 342)

Women started to feel that the society is a fetter to their sense of freedom. The customs and conventions in male-dominated society are the shackles. They gradually chose their own course and followed their own ideas. This theme of feminism finds expression in so many short stories of post-independence women writers. Shashi Deshpande, Anjana Appachana and Prema Ramakrishnan are prominent writers who have given voice in their short stories. (qtd. in Krishna Daiya 13). These writers artistically articulated the feelings of women and their struggle for existence in the society. The objective of this paper is to focus on the freedom of women which is a key issue in the short stories of Shashi Deshpande. The short stories taken up for study are “A Liberated Woman,” “The First Lady,” “An Antidote to Boredom,” “It was Dark,” “The Alien,” “A Man and a Woman,” “The Widow” and “Anatomy of Murder.”

Shashi Deshpande in her shorter as well as larger fiction dwells on frustration and desperation, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness and alienation of a sensitive woman pitted against an ill mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her. G. S. Amur rightly remarked that,

Woman’s struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande’s major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories. (“Preface”, *The Legacy and Other Stories* 10)

Shashi Deshpande is a powerful spokesperson for women. She becomes the strident voice of the voiceless women. The plight of women in male dominating society becomes her most persistent and agonizing concern. She has thrashed women’s problems and situations in a fast-changing social scenario.

“A Liberated Woman” narrates the story of a married couple, a successful lady doctor and a frustrated lecturer, who becomes a sadist and tortures his wife physically and mentally. Shashi Deshpande brings out the temperamental and situational contrasts between the couple. The woman-persona in this story undergoes mental agony at home but outside she is called as a liberated woman. At home, she is a silent sufferer and is totally helpless in the given situation. Shashi Deshpande satirizes at her feebleness, her attitude of despairing indifference.

The woman-persona is an educated, learning, competent woman but acts like a rat in a trap. In this regard, Krishna Daiya puts the question that “Are the modern working-women really free or are they still bound by the fetters of tradition, society and male chauvinism?” Deshpande attempts to intimately analyze man-woman relationship within the ambit of family and society where women are mere puppets in the hands of their husbands.

“The First Lady” is a story of a fatty old woman who is the wife of a Gandhian with three children. Though she lives a luxurious life, she finds her life quite boring and meaningless. She becomes increasingly disillusioned with life in which freedom has no place. She blurts out: “Yes, I love my comforts. But for these comforts we have battered away our immortal souls. And the whole prize has not yet been paid (“The First Lady” 35).

The same sense of boredom and frustration towards life is echoed in the story “An Antidote to Boredom.” In this story, the writer introduces a woman who falls in love with a young widower. Her goal is to fulfill her desires by keeping the company of her lover. The woman-persona in this story meets a young widower at her son’s school. She falls in love with him. Shashi Deshpande holds the view that when women get love, friendship and understanding, the isolation and loneliness of women are driven away. This is clearly seen in the protagonist of this story. When she leaves the company

because of her sense of guilt, she realizes that it was not only an antidote to boredom but also the best part of her life.

In “A Man and a Woman,” the writer narrates a story of a widow who comes into physical contact with a boy of 17, her husband’s younger brother. However, she becomes overwhelmed by her questions of morality and convention. She is also beset with existential problems: “Where to? Where shall I go, Manu? My parents are dead. My brothers... no, I can’t live with them. And I have become incapable of living by myself” (“A Man and a Woman” 38). Another story in this volume entitled “The Widow” has a lesbian touch about it. It also centres on a widow whose physical needs are not satisfied. She lets out two rooms to a newly married couple and pesters the young woman in her husband’s absence.

The title story in “It was Dark” (1986) depicts the immense pain of a 14-year-old girl who has been raped. The life of the protagonist in this story is totally devoid of all light and joy. There is nothing but darkness all round. Shashi Deshpande states that, “There was no enemy but the dark, no fear but the fear of being alone” (Deshpande 23). The story also describes maternal anxiety and paternal worry of handling the police case, medical termination of pregnancy and so on.

“It was Nightingale”, from the third volume of Shashi Deshpande’s short stories, portrays man-woman relationship on a different footing altogether. Jaya, the protagonist of the title story, is Deshpande’s new woman who is very much career-conscious and is yearning for an independent existence and identity. Her husband allows her to go abroad to advance her career. The story depicts her mental agony because of the traditional idea that the wife’s devotion to the husband is measured in terms of service to him. Though she is a modern woman, her mind does not allow her to act freely when she separates herself from her husband.

“Anatomy of a Murder” exhibits a different kind of love -a filmy, villainous and gruesome one. The protagonist of this story is a young slum-dweller who is working as an assistant in a grocery shop and he is fond of movies. A white skinned, well-educated and middle-aged woman becomes infatuated with him. The story demonstrates the disastrous impact of romantic and melodramatic movies on young minds.

Deshpande explores the feeling of loneliness in the short stories entitled “And Then,” “Ghosts,” and “Why a Robin.” The anguish of widowed mother in “And Then” is heart rending. With the husband dead and the son settled away, now it is the daughter who announces the decision of going abroad. All leave her alone, one by one. The title story “Ghosts” depicts the sense of loneliness which can be a problem in one’s native place. The protagonist has accompanied her husband to UK and feels lonely and deserted, as her husband remains out of home for most of the time. “Why a Robin” deals with the isolation of a mother. It presents the hostility of a 12 year old daughter towards her less educated mother. The mother says, “I didn’t have the key to open this beautiful child, though she is mine. I don’t have the key to her father either. It is as if I am, in my own house, confronted with two closed rooms. I am condemned to sit outside and gaze helplessly at the closed rooms” (“Why a Robin” 11).

Thus, most of Deshpande’s stories give voice to the predicament of woman. She does not let the family disintegrate. None of her protagonists walk out like Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Whatever is the cost, the family ties are not severed. Though the bridges are broken, they are not demolished.

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**MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

- Natarajan, and Vadivambal. "To Cry or Not to Cry: Delineation of Women in the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande." *Literary Quest* 2.6 (2015): 45-51. Web. DoA.

**DoA – Date of Access**

- Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.