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WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THE INTRUSION AND OTHER STORIES: A STUDY IN PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Finally rejecting the level of a feminist, Shashi Deshpande has always been writing about women. There is no feminine mystique in her portrayal of women. Instead, her novels as well as short stories have women protagonists living in a very patriarchal society and, yet trying to define themselves, to find a niche for themselves, a space to call their own, a voice to express their thoughts to live a live according to their wishes and desires to fulfill their potential as human beings.

Keywords: 'ghettoisation', marital fidelity, kumkum.

Introduction

The Intrusion and Other Stories is about the relationships that women have with others- men as well as other women and is these relationships that give a room to access the emotion and psychological aspect of a woman. If women's writing can or does appeal only to women readers, then there is a serious danger of 'ghettoisation', of such writing being left only on the periphery, of always having the tag of women's writing without an adjective to describe it. As L. Kannan puts it:

For a woman, her works are no less a process of self actualization as her life is. In both, she wrestles with the host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes, precipitated by not just the myths, legends or the collective memory of the inherent conservative elements within a community, but equally with the ones thrown by the movement of feminism itself.

In this collection of short stories most of the stories have a female protagonist at the center analyzing, remembering, recapitulating or evaluating a relationship. In most of stories it is the family relationship with another female - a mother, daughter or granddaughter- or a male - a husband or a father. Interestingly, there is no sibling sister- brother relationship though a couple of stories do have a sister- sister relationship. The bonding of women takes on various forms, for example, a daughter needs her mother the most in times of trouble. Deshpande poignantly describes the instinctive reaching out of a daughter for the mother in the times of pain, sorrow, fear, despondency etc. in 'Why a Robin', the closer to her father and she finds the mother insufficient in many ways. "I'll ask Papa. He's sure to know, he'll help me" (10). While even the mother feels "I don't have the key to open up this beautiful child, though she is mine" (11). Father and mother formed a close circle to which the mother is denied entry:" The reading lamp casts a halo of light around their glowing faces but the light does not reach the corner where I am sitting"(12). But then within a few hours, as the daughter menstruate for the first time, standing on the brink of womanhood; she instinctively reaches out for her mother. She wants the mother to stay with her, hold her close, allay her fears, and the mother feels "joyous, exalted' as if I have found one key, opened one door" (14).The closed space, the intimate circle of mother and daughter is impregnable and out of bound for any male. Like the safe space, the mother and her past become a safe apace for this young girl who is suddenly made of her body, her sexuality, her fearlessness which distinguishes her form the male of the species.

In It Was Dark, a 14-year old rape victim attempts to come to terms with the terrifying experience. The mother attempts her come out of the trauma but the young girl continues to stare at the ceiling, "with black and unseeing eyes", (32) isolates and alienated by her experience. In her novel The Building vine, Shashi Deshpande had juxtaposed rape in marriage and outside it- the rape of Kalpana and Meera. Here too, the mother

thinks of her wedding night when she remembered her mother's words. "You must submit" (Ibid) and it was only submission that had made thinks easier. The child finally relates to the mother and allows her eyes to shift their focus from ceiling onto her mother. The unnamed 14-year old becomes the victim of the outrage against the female body-rape. To the mother it seems as if being a female meant building walls with negatives around oneself:

Don't-don't-don't- you're female. They taught me to build a wall around myself with negatives from childhood. And then suddenly, when I got married, they told me to break the walls down. To behave as if it had never been. And my husband too- how completely his disregard of that wall had been; I had felt totally vulnerable, wholly defenseless. I won't let my daughter live behind walls; I had thought. (31)

From the outrage against the female body, Deshpande moves on to the women's sexuality, motherhood and the choice to abort one's child. For eons in our patriarchal society it has been the prerogative of the male to decide where or not a child should be born. In 'Death of a Child' the protagonist decides not to have a child that can welcome into this world. She feels, "The third time in less than four years. It isn't fair" (44). Sita in Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Wanted to retain her child in her womb and not allow it to be born in this violent-ridden, callous, loveless world. Here the mother decides that she will have the third child because "Children stifle your personality. You become a mother, nothing more"(45). She feels quite strongly about it, about being stifled, about being pushed into a pre-ordinate role: I feel trapped. I feel like an animal….. I cannot imagine that the main purpose of my life is to breed" (Ibid). And so, against the half-hearted consent of her husband, she decides to have MPT- a medical termination of pregnancy. The woman makes a choice that she is the master of her body, her life and her destiny. Yet, she is confused and Deshpande portrays realistically the ambivalent feelings of a woman towards he own decision:

I feel heaviness in my own breasts. There is a hollow feeling within me. I'm filled with strange thoughts. Where have I heard that, after an amputation, a person continues to feel that amputated limb? It itches, it hurts, it exists. Now like a phantom limb, my child seems to cling to me. Now, when he does not exit, he asserts himself. I am conscious of the piercing pain in the place that 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. But for me, my child would have lived. I tied to delude myself into thinking it is fate. But I do not believe in fate only in inevitability. And this was not inevitable. But, yes, it was. I could have done no other thing, acted in no other way. (50)

The anonymity of many of these characters in their being unnamed gives them their universality too. The need to reach out to a child, one's own child, is common threat linking many of the short stories in this collection. In 'The Cruelty Game', the recently widowed Pramila Auntie places her child Sharu's needs even above her own personal sorrow. In spite of all the criticism she decides to celebrate her daughter's birthday, while in 'My Beloved Charioteer', Ajji finds it impossible to reach out her daughter Aarti who has isolated herself totally after the sudden death of her husband. The mother here feels helpless at the silence of her daughter.

Nine months I carried this daughter of mine in my body. I felt every beat of her heart, every movement of her limbs within me. But-and my doctor told me this and then - my pains and shocks could never penetrate to her, she was insulated against them. Even now she is protected from my pains, even now. I have no protection against her pains. I suffer with her, but like all my other emotions, it is a futile suffering. For, I cannot help her. I can only fumble and blunder and make things worse.

The absence of women in family photographs or in the family tree the total obliteration of them or their contribution in the family is an issue that has been dealt with many woman writers. In Deshpande's 'That long Silence', the protagonist Jaya argues that as women do not find a place in their natal family tree. But this does not happen very often and even the names of the girls are changed at marriage for various reasons. And then the identity of a woman seems to be at stake because the identity associated with one's name is suddenly snatched away and one may very well begin to wonder 'Who Am I?'

In 'Lucid Movements', the dying woman (a mother) suddenly wants to know her mother's name- the mother who died while giving birth to her first child (who is the dying woman). The daughter realizes that the mother is probably thinking of tat pre-wedding rite, in which priests call out names the couple's ancestors- father, grandfather, great grandfather. The names roll off their tongues with a musical, sonorous solemnity (74). The mother's name is not even mentioned. The women are there but they are not known only by relationship- Ajji, Akka, Amma, Kaki. They are only the roles that they have to act out and the real woman with an identity of her own is never seen, never allowed to appear. After the death of her mother the daughter decides that names are important and wonders "Can I prove to my mother- my mother? No myself - that even if they never chant a litany of their names at a wedding, these women are real?"(79) She wants to make sure that these women in the temple in the story 'The Stone Women'. Men from their imagination create the sculptures and many of them have nothing to do with the real women of those days. In fact gender becomes the distinct category bearing social meanings through social, cultural and psychological transformation. The women in these sculptures are portrayed as charmers, as dancers, as courtesans and real, as they seem to have no professional characters. The entire aims seems to be just exhibit their charms and sensuous moods: "The image of woman as displaying physical charm emerged predominant wit eclipse of her mental accomplishment, creativity and her focused seclusion and consequent isolation from the productive process of contemporary society" (Vashishtha, 111).

Marital fidelity, especially for women, is an accepted traditional Indian value. In portraying the husband-wife relationship, Deshpande veers from the extreme compatibility of 'It Was The Nightingale' to the possibility of infidelity in 'An Antidote To Boredom'. In the former story she describes the pain of parting which seems to affect the husband more as "And yet his pain pierces my armour of understanding but-not-caring" (89). Yet their love making is described with no frills attached:

And then we are lost. No, not lost. Found, because this is where we really find each other. We do not have to search. Each goes out to the other and we are merged in a oneness that is absolute. I give all of me until I am only a hollow ecstasy. And pain…….later we lie in the usual serenity and peace that descends on us after loving. (90)

As she prepares to leave, she realizes that being away for two years may be "a fearsome period. Two years of experiences that we will not share. And each one a brick that can become a wall between us" (pp, 89-90). Here is a contemporary middle-class woman who chooses to place her career aspirations above her domestic demands and responsibilities. On the other hand, the latter story is about a bored housewife who is looking for some colour, meaning and excitement in her otherwise drab, uneventful, predictable, routine existence. She justifies her decision to have an affair:

I felt no guilt towards my husband, because I would be depriving him of nothing, nothing he wanted. How often I felt in myself a boundless capacity for loving, for giving! But I had felt in him an incapacity to receive and for that I hated him at times….. he was not a wicked man, not harsh, not cruel. Only unperceptive. And dull. And dullness to me is an unforgivable crime. (66)

The marital relationship is analyzed from the woman's point of view in the story Intrusion, too. The newly-wed wife is unable to accept sex so soon after marriage with a man she feels is still a stranger to have even though he is legally her husband. She wishes to know him better but he cannot understand why that is important." Know each other? What has that to do with it? Aren't we married now?" (40). To her it seems as if sex even with her husband when it is against her wishes was" an intrusion of my (her) privacy, the violation of my (her) right to myself (herself)" (41).

Man's definition, desire and demand for sexuality were enshrined and thrust upon woman's management and negotiation of her body. (Singhi, 56)

In delineating the relationship of women in society and society norms, Deshpande subtly interweaves the stigma attached to widows in a story about children-' The Cruelty Games'. As the title appropriately suggests, women are stigmatized for no fault of theirs. As Pramila Auntie tries hard to lead a normal life after the death of her

husband, everyone seems intent on reminding her of her widowhood status. Even grandmother raves, "Take that off, why do you have that, take it off "(128) referring to the *kumkum* which is permitted to be used only by women whose husbands are alive.

This collection of stories portrays women attempting to break out of the pre-ordinate, pre-defined roles. These stories appropriately and abundantly succeed to bring forth the emotion and psychological aspect of women especially from Indian society. Deshpande has also succeeded in revealing the real condition of women in India in this century.

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