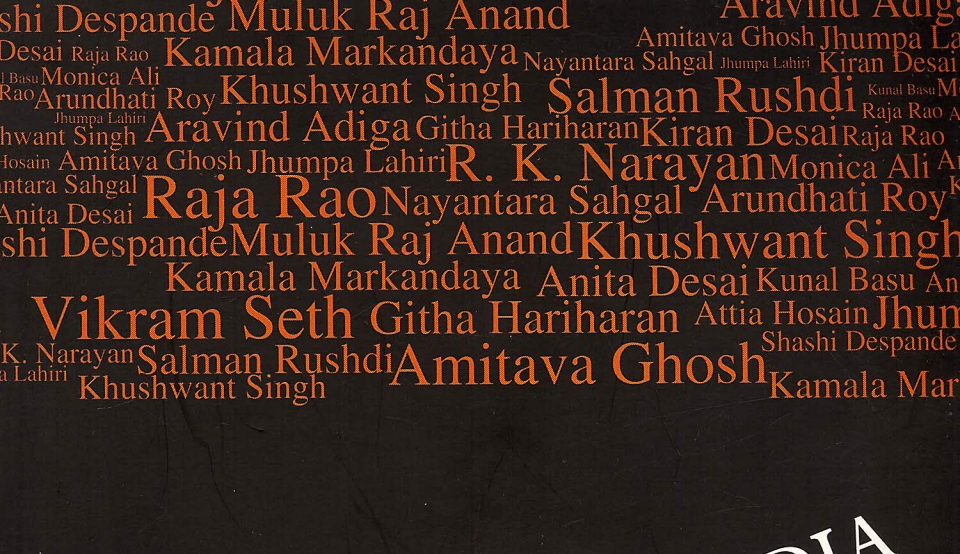
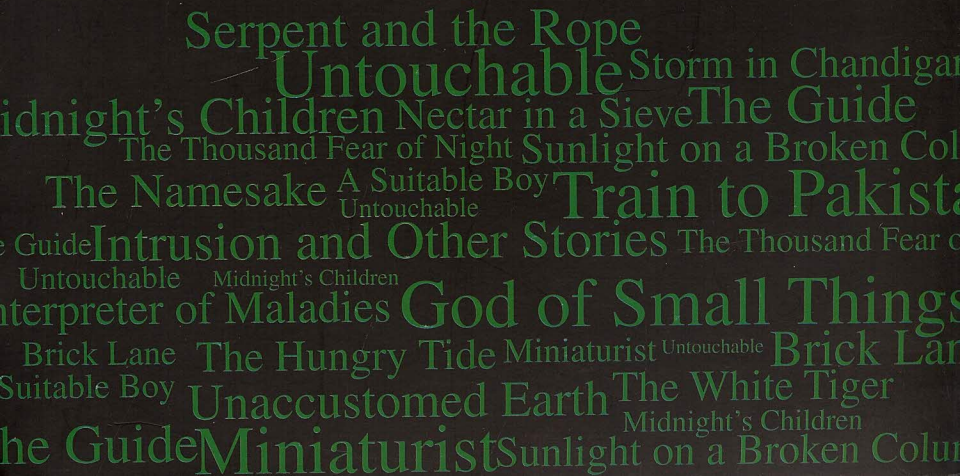


UNDERSTANDING INDIA

STUDIES IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

Ed. ARNAB BHATTACHARYA



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Studies in Indian English Fiction

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To Sir (Prof. Subir Dhar)

with love

To
Dr. Mala Renganathan
with thanks and
gratitude
—Arnab Bhattacharya

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Preface

Towards the end of *Aranyak* (*About the Forests*), a Bengali novel by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhya, Bhanumati, a simple tribal girl born and brought up in a forested village of Lobtulia, Bihar in India, asks Satyacharan, the protagonist of the novel: "*Bharatbarsa kon dike?*" ("In which direction is India?"). This question resonated in my mind long after I had first finished reading the novel, and, thereafter, every time I re-read it, I got inevitably stuck on that question. Scarcely did I read or hear a question which was so disarmingly simple, yet so frighteningly penetrating. I decided to be someone unlike Satyacharan who had no ready answer to offer. This book, which is the first of a planned series *Understanding India*, is a tribute to the feeling which overpowered me while I finished reading *Aranyak* for the first time. Although conceived years ago, it was only in the recent past that I actually embarked on editing this book. Unfortunately, it had to go through a longer-than-expected gestation period, primarily because the publication house which agreed to publish it suddenly closed down. That gave me some anxious moments about how to go about this book, and also some moments of embarrassment because by then some of the contributors had already sent in their articles, making me ethically answerable to them. At that moment, Sir (Prof. Subir Dhar) came to my rescue (as he always does) with his invaluable pieces of pragmatic advice which proved immensely helpful. That, of course, was not the only help that I got from him. He gave me suggestions on the thematic design of the book, about probable contributors some of whom happen to be his students, and also gave me journals from his collection to select articles from. Above all, his charming ability to be pleasantly disturbed by an importunate student like me at any odd hour of the day (more commonly, night), renders formal thanks-giving a rather shallow and bland way of acknowledging his effort. There was absolutely no other person whom I could think of dedicating the book to.

And, of course, Sheikh Salauddin bhai. He ensured that I would not have to approach any *Delhiwallah* (sic.) to get the book published. My gratitude to him.

Arnab Bhattacharya

Kolkata
September, 2009

'To Keep My Light Burning': Representation of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *Intrusion and Other Stories*

Dr. Mala Renganathan

[1]

Shashi Deshpande's works, both long and short, have fascinated as well as haunted Indian readers, especially female, from the time when her first serious novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) hit the literary scene. In the 1980s when her fiction made a space for itself in Indian English literature curriculum, there were not many Indian novelists writing in English, except Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal. Beginning her literary career from the 1980s, Deshpande still continues to be a productive writer and also a representative Indian writer writing about the dilemmas of Indian woman in the Indian family system. With ten novels, six short story collections and four children's books in her gamut today, and with no tag of Booker prizes and 'ground abroad, but bound home' tendencies nonexistent in her fiction, the aging writer, who won the Padmashree this year, has stood firmly to the ground of literature and education.

Deshpande's fiction writing differs entirely from that of other women writers of her times. She voices the lone woman, who is neither independent like Nayantara Sahgal's women nor dependent like some of Anita Desai's female characters. It is the voice of a solitary woman in the family situation, who thinks differently, who observes and responds to the people around her and tries to improve the situation around her, not with a reformatory zeal, but through a process of allowing the experience itself to seep in and allow memories to interlace and flash back and forth, and finally render a solution, which may be acceptable only to her. The 'patchwork' narration that she brings into her narratives through memory recall and flashback methods is unique to her fiction, where she almost

creates for the Indian woman 'a room of her own' or a 'woman's space to think, reflect and resolve'. Deshpande, a seasoned writer and good observer, has made a mark for herself in the Indian literary soil with certain exceptional qualities of her fictional narratives – like intuitive imagination, simple, lucid and observant narration, memory crisscrossed tales, dream narratives, focused storytelling, woman's point of view and sound criticism on family nuances and behaviour. The above characteristics in her works have made her short and long fiction come alive to the reader, who can sense the solitary, calm, observant eye of the female narrator throughout. Her titles impinge on negative dimensions of life like 'darkness', 'silence', 'dead,' 'shadows,' 'deceit,' 'intrusion,' 'terrors,' and 'lifelessness' ('Stone Women') and her female characters move in a twilight hour and ingregarious state. Even then the fact remains that her fiction deals with the woman's search for 'light,' identity, knowledge, or happiness or truth. Her fiction stages a search towards a solution to inner dilemmas, and ends with an effort to overcome terror or death or violence or deceit. The silence in her novels is a silence that speaks; and it is a silence that appeals to the reader.

Although the woman's question is very much a subject of debate in Deshpande's fiction, her oeuvre does not follow the Marxian logic or radical feminist line of thinking. The Deshpande women, functioning within the prescribed societal set-up, encounter and negotiate woman-centered disputations within themselves and within families to find a solution inside. Hence these women lack female sisterhoods and feminist weapons and make Deshpande not really 'eligible' to be called a feminist, even though the spirit of female thought and points of view are traced in almost all her tales and novels. In fact the feminist 'herstory' is very much present in Deshpande's narratives. A kind of gyno-centric 'recognition' of the woman's 'self' is reflected in her narratives.

Like Amitav Ghosh's novels and travelogues, Shashi Deshpande's literary outputs, with their richness of substance and sensitive narrations, have become the topic for many research works and critical books. Nonetheless Deshpande's novels and short stories have not received the national and international recognition that she really deserves. One reason for this negligence of a woman novelist writing for three decades could be that no critic has so far made a substantial study of her works. Of course there are exceptions like Jasbir Jain's remarkably authentic reading that points to the relevant characteristics of her short fiction and long ones—"The thickly populated world of her novels, the joint families, the working out of relationships within families and marriages, the fine insight

into human character, her boldness in the treatment of sex and sexuality, and the crossing of caste and class barriers." ("Shashi Deshpande." Pier Paolo Piciucco. ed. *A Companion to Indian Fiction in English*: (210). Similarly Chandra Holm's web page on Shashi Deshpande has contributed considerably to information and relevant criticism on her complete works. Despite the fact that she writes in English, her novels are not part of most Indian Writing in English curriculum. Even an M.A. or M.Phil syllabus that contains writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai as part of Indian Writing in English or Women's Writing courses, neglects veteran writers of Indian English like Shashi Deshpande, whose works represent the typical Indian woman's predicament.

Shashi Deshpande's critics, always proliferating in their attention to her novels, have hardly turned to render any critical attention to her short stories. In fact her stories deserve more attention not only as minuscular representations of her novels, but also as ingenuous collections noted for the author's focus and concentration on several vital issues such as female adolescence, pregnancy, childbirth, rape, violence on women, motherhood, etc. No critic has so far analyzed the link between Deshpande's short fiction and long fiction. Also, there is hardly any full-fledged study of her short fiction, except an odd essay or two. The study here aims to take up a consolidated thematic study of one short story collection, *Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993), which contains the most eloquent stories that are poetic in quality.

[2]

Shashi Deshpande's *Intrusion and Other Short Stories* (1993) is her fifth short story collection, the others being *The Legacy* (1971), *It Was Dark* (1986), *It Was a Nightingale* (1986), *The Miracle* (1993) and *The Stone Women* (2000). *Intrusion* comprises of nineteen well-written short stories. The stories that focus sharply on domestic issues—like marriage, family relations, woman's disappointment with familial life, female rejection of profession for the sake of family, domestic violence, rape, etc—are mostly told from a female point of view and also with a touch of quiet but quaint humor that adds to the otherwise pungent, damp atmosphere prevalent due to the female narrator's brooding over pain and suffering around her.

The stories mostly written from the woman's point of view fall into several thematic groups: stories that revolve around tensions / hypocrisies / idiosyncrasies in marriage; those that explore the Janus-

faced woman's dilemma of being caught between profession and family; those that reflect woman–to-woman relationships that integrate / disintegrate / reintegrate; the ones that explore woman's identity; stories which interpret epic tales in a modern context and finally tales that delve into socially designated roles of women making woman the social other.

The tales "The First Lady," "The Intrusion" and "An Antidote to Boredom" fictionalize the tensions, hypocrisies and idiosyncrasies in marriage. All three stories reflect the woman's boredom in marriage, arising out of gradual development of a sense of incompatibility creeping into the man-woman relationship that reaches a stagnation point, due to a lack of love and understanding, or, owing to sexual dissatisfaction, or sexual humiliation. "The First Lady" and "An Antidote to Boredom" are similar in their representation of female narrator's boredom in marital life and their route to extra-marital relations. If in these two stories, the woman feels her marital space being dampened through a lack of female autonomy and stagnation in the man-woman relations, the third story "The Intrusion" deciphers the female narrator's disappointment in marriage due to sexual violence and rape.

The story "The First Lady" exemplifies a woman's experience of emotional emptiness in marital life and her feelings of suffocation with her social image as the First Lady to a Gandhian politician. She realizes about her husband that, "...the passionate and dedicated face she had fallen in love with was incapable of loving another human being" (6). The marital situation in this story echoes Simone de Beauvoir's comment that "...marriage is today a surviving relic of dead ways of life..." (*The Second Sex*, 475). For the female narrator in the said story faces a marriage that is physically and emotionally dead, partly due to the husband, who vows celibacy following his master's principles, and partly because of her attraction to a young follower.

Further the dead marital life does not make her free of social duties she is tired of performing: "Gracious and dignified! I'm only a tired, old woman, whose feet swell up to grotesque proportions after an evening like this. And then the doctors come and look concerned and murmur comfortingly about exertion and strain, about medicines and rest" (5). Her own diagnosis of her illness points to how marriage has deadened her senses: "When they know, and I know, that the real trouble is I'm too fat. And I'm fat because I eat too much. And I eat too much because I'm bored. And I'm bored because there's no truth in anything we do or say" (5). Therefore, to quote Beauvoir, "...the situation of the wife is more ungrateful than formerly, because she still has the same duties but they

no longer confer the same rights, privileges, and honours" (475). The boredom she faces is serious and the absence of the woman's voice in a politician's life is brought out with a touch of humour that is classic, as seen in the manner in which the story ends:

> "We've lived too long." She said loudly and clearly as they reached their rooms. "We've lived too long." But he [her husband] had removed his hearing aid and didn't hear her (8).

"An Antidote to Boredom" is also similar to the previous tale "The First Lady" in the sense that, it retraces the thoughts of a woman's boredom in marriage. Eventually a serious issue such as marital stagnation is treated with a quaint sense of farcical humour. The woman storyteller's silent retort to her husband's routine demand for coffee explicates this humour: "I got the sugar, stirred the coffee. And suddenly, standing there, my saree 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?" (61).

The narrator then recounts her consequent refuge in a heterosexual friendship with a man she met in her son's school. The female narrator brings up a woman's point of the whole issue—her guilt as mother, her mixed feelings about her husband, her strong views about how a woman feels to be part of a loveless life, etc, thus:

> And there was the thought of Rahul [her son] too, some awareness in his eyes, a recent withdrawal from me, which made me wonder how much a child could see and understand. 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, forgiving. But I had felt in him an incapacity to receive and for that I hated him at times, though I knew I wronged him by that. For he was not a wicked man, not harsh nor cruel. Only unperceptive. And dull. And dullness is to me an unforgivable crime. (66)

At the same time her maturity makes her understand that her new-found friendship was not just an antidote to boredom, but a space where they could create a new world of her own, where "...we became different beings altogether, at once more interesting, more vital, more sparkling". (66)

Then the narrator protagonist relates her temptation to resort to extra-marital affair gradually and also the husband's timely intervention

to abort the attempt in the form his invitation for her to join him to Delhi for a holiday. This situation leads her to confront the fact about her mixed feelings for her husband and also her awareness of the social reality: "And then I knew, that he cared, and as if a dam had burst, a flood shame of guilt swept over me, drowned me". (68) The story ends in an expression of the double dimension of a woman's feelings—her realization that the husband does care and then her regret that she had let go of a friendship that was not an escapism, but the best part of her life : "I let go of the mirage I had grasped so long, and now I realized, when it was too late, the most piercing thought of all – that it had been no mere antidote to boredom, but the best part of my life. And I let it go". (68-9)

The story "The Intrusion" reiterates the frustrated or disappointed expectations of a woman in marriage and certainly evokes the reader's disapproval at the husband's insensitiveness to turn a much anticipated honeymoon into a nightmare by his forced violation of the wife's body. The story questions man's arrogance to cross boundaries i.e., man's intrusion into woman's privacy and his sexual endangering through rape and 'violation of woman's right to herself' (41).

All the above three stories—"Lady," "Boredom" and "Intrusion"—underline the message that the complication in man-woman relationships particularly arises out of man's inability or refusal to understand the woman's point of view in any issue, familial or individual. The disappointment of the woman living with such a husband gets very often ventilated from the woman's thoughts, as realized in the opinions aired by a newlywed woman in the title story:

> I want to know all about you [husband], I wanted to say. What you think, what you feel and why you agreed to marry me? And what did you think of as we went through all those ceremonies together, and do you like the things I do and will we laugh together at the same jokes, enjoy the same books? And there were all those fear crouching in me – would his breath smell and were his feet huge and dirty with uncut toenails, and did he chew his food noisily and belch after meals? I wanted to tell him how shy and frightened I was about exposing the mysteries of my body to him and how homesick I was for my mother's face, my father's laughter and my sister's chatter.
>
> But I could say none of these things to him. Even if I did, I thought, looking at his face, he would not hear me. He was all keyed up for a different experience and for him other things would come later. ("The Intrusion," 40)

Even if today's Indian women do not face the forms of oppression to the extent that women formerly faced in the form of discrimination, slavery, sati, domestic victimization represented by widowhood, dowry deaths, etc., they have to grapple with more modern forms of oppression like eve-teasing, discrimination against females aided by medical technology, sexual abuse of women in the form of trafficking and bride burning, and the dilemma of balancing career and home. Shashi Deshpande touches on the modern woman's dilemma in sustaining her marriage with its trappings of womanhood and motherhood and balancing marriage with her additional burden of career. Three stories in this collection represent woman's dilemma between career and family—"It Was the Nightingale," "Death of a Child" and "A Wall is Safer." The first two stories stand for the woman who chooses to prioritize career over family, while the third stands for the woman who feels trapped by her choice to privilege family over career.

"It was the Nightingale" is about woman's quandary of whether to privilege her career dreams / ambitions over her attachment to family. Jayu, the narrator oscillates between her decision to go abroad and her simultaneous longing to stay back with her husband. The images of the 'nightingale' and the 'lark' borrowed from *Romeo and Juliet* carry forth the analogy between the heroine's reluctance to part with her husband and her practical acceptance of the reality that she will have to part with him. What is interesting about Jayu is that she stands for a perceptive woman's recognition of the multitudinous selves within and her willingness to accept all, and not deny or submerge any of it. She does not want to follow in the footsteps of her mother and mother-in-law, who had to submerge themselves in familial chores and deny their selves. Hence the decision to leave family for career prospects becomes an impeccable decision for her. She feels that even marriage cannot sustain if the individual cannot sustain himself or herself. Hence she convinces her husband about the need to rekindle her energies: "To me, our lives are intertwined, yet they are two distinct strands. They are two lights that shine more brightly together, but to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone." ("Nightingale," 92). And going abroad to further her career prospects is one such act to keep her inner self or 'light' burning.

"Death of a Child" reflects woman's dilemma about balancing motherhood and her own individual self. It highlights a woman's experience of pregnancy and its aftermath—from her early detection of pregnancy, her refusal to continue with her pregnancy despite her

husband's resistance, to her abortion process in the hospital followed by her sense of guilt coupled with a sense of relief. The heroine of "Death of a Child" vacillates between her decision to abort her fetus and her temptation to preserve it. Yet she does not deviate from her decision to abort it. Her personal decision in this regard is rooted in her contention that pregnancy will lead to "years sliced off her existence again" or "years before she can go back to doing anything else", and "years when her actions are dictated to, not by her will, not by her desires, but by the sheer animal needs of the children" (46). She is not an escapist from her role as mother. She explains her unwillingness effectively: "It is because I care too much, love too much .... I have to give all of me or nothing. Now I want to reserve some part of myself, my life" (47). Hence she chooses to abort the child. But when she walks out of the hospital, she senses as though the ghost of her child walks with her.

The story "A Wall is Safer" reflects the uncomfortable feelings the female narrator faces about her decision to give up her career as lawyer in order to join her husband on his prospective job as agricultural research scientist. The tale begins with the drab routine of a homemaker she has soon got used in her rural home. It is the feminist lawyer's (Sushama) visit there, which disturbs her as it rekindles her past. No sooner than the visit is over, she feels the urge to carry on her work in her otherwise empty life there and this underlines the impasse that she is unable to resolve. The metaphor of the wall is an interesting way to represent this deluge of the heroine. A wall is there only so that one does not see what is on the other side. The building up of the fence around her rural house raises the argument from the servant Sitabai that the 'wall' is safer than the fence and this remark sounds meaningful to the narrator, who voices out her tight spot thus: "But suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then?" (120). While the heroines of "Child" and "Nightingale," being aware of family or motherhood as emotional traps, are able to deal with the Platonic as well as the pragmatic dimensions of their lives, the heroine of "Wall" is left with her choice of a domestic life and with "a fierce surge of longing to be one of those women who carry their work about with them – a writer, a painter, a musician...." ("A Wall is Safer," 121).

The two sets of stories discussed so far fictionalize man-woman relationships from woman's point of view. It is interesting to note that the next group of stories narrates the intricacies of woman–to-woman relationships, in which one witnesses female oneness, or even its disintegrative dimensions or sometimes degeneration in female

relationships followed by regeneration. "Why a Robin?" is about dead or dying female relationships and about the need to revive or renew relationships by building bridges. The story begins with the daughter's dissatisfaction with the mother for her inability to help her in her school project on the robin bird and the mother's willingness to talk on the peacock rather than the robin. The gap in the family widens with the husband and wife having incompatible tastes, and the mother left with the inability to cope with a daughter emotionally distanced like the father: "I am full of guilt these days. I am a failure – as a wife, as a companion, as a mother". (12)

However the narrator gets a chance to build bridges when the daughter attains puberty, the instant which lends the mother an opportunity to share with her daughter, her own fears of puberty, her closeness to her grandmother, her attraction for the peacock. And she narrates to her daughter the memory of a peacock "dancing once, brazenly exhibiting the glory of its fan, the sunlight flecking the blue and bronze with a golden dust that dazzled her eyes, made it for her, forever, the most enchanting moment of her life". (13) The 'robin' and the 'peacock' initially weave a symbolic narrative of father / daughter versus the mother standing for the 'common' and the rare', the 'literary' and the 'literal', or the 'epiphanic' and the 'rugged' respectively. But once the mother decides to build bridges through sharing, the communication leads the mother and the daughter to reach a compromise between the 'robin' that the daughter was preoccupied with, and the 'peacock' based approach that the mother had attached to her own life.

While "Why a Robin?" tells a delicate positive story, about building bridges between mothers and daughters, "It Was Dark," captures the dark moments of a mother's failure to build bridges with her kidnapped / rescued daughter. Here the bleak aftermath of the daughter's rescue is pictured, bringing out the uncanny reality of parental doubts and fears toward the outcome of the kidnap—whether she has been raped, or whether she has become pregnant. The mother experiences initial hesitation and a feeling of being ill-equipped to handle the situation; she then gradually overcomes this feeling, as she observes the sudden abnormal behaviour of the daughter, who utters nothing except the refrain 'It was dark', an expression that sounds ominous, and indicates the darkness within and the shadowy experiences she had encountered.

"My Beloved Charioteer" is a mature tale of a grandmother's love for her granddaughter and also her rekindled hope in life with the young girl's presence, amidst her anxiety as mother for her widowed daughter.

It revolves round three females belonging to three generations – mother, daughter and granddaughter. The grandmother as narrator tries to ease her daughter, who is reluctant to overcome the loss of her husband. The story ends with the confrontation of the mother with the daughter, in an attempt to force the latter to face the reality, through the recounting of her own experience of marital life and disappointment. She quizzically observes her daughter's behaviour thus: "She has never shared anything with me and now she hides her sorrow like a dog its bone. She guards it jealously and will not let me approach". (56) It is such capsule of narration, which the novelist employs to expose human eccentricity with a touch of humour and poise, that reveals how authentic, ambiguous and rich her analogies are.

"And Then" which describes a disintegrating female relationship, cages on a woman's apprehension of old age, her loneliness as a mother separated from her daughter, who is adamant to settle abroad. The story ends with the mother's recognition of having made herself weak and her final decision to take things in her stride and live independently.

"Can You Hear Silence?" is another story that pictures the minor woes of the female in a variety of female relationships of the mother—daughter, master - servant, sister- sister — all in one kaleidoscope of a middle class family of working parents with three female siblings. Their workaday life on a rainy day when the mother has to go to work and the daughters remain at the mercy of the servant, is narrated by the second daughter, and the tale thus told from the viewpoint of a small girl reveals the ebb and flow in the family peace as seen in the tensions between the father and the mother, between the dependent mother and the arrogant servant, between the older sister and the younger ones, the troubles of growing up, and the hope or worry for a better financial prospect for the family. There is a tranquil mood into which the tale treads, as the mother senses, that amidst these tensions and disruptions in peace there lies a sense of relief when one recalls peaceful times of childhood, or when one thinks of the peace within, when one is on one's own and when one can hear one's silence.

[3]

Most of Shashi Deshpande's fictional accounts are female-centered, staging a female vision of woman's search for identity. They also share sympathy with the universal female and a willingness to explore a typical female-

oriented solution to women's problems. Such stories are even viewed as feminist, as they present a gyno-centric vision to the story. "Lucid Moments", "The Inner Rooms" and "The Stone Women" are a few of such tales.

"Lucid Moments" traces the dying moments of a mother, who poses a peculiar problem to her daughter to find out the name and photograph of her own mother, who died when she was an infant. It irks her that women's identity is totally wiped by religious practices: "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)Though the narrator, Sujata, is unable to fulfill her mother's wish till her death, she vows to find out her grandmother's name one day. And she finds a way out, with a classic solution to the problem of woman's non-identity. She mounts up a framed photograph of her mother and attempts to play with her sister and young niece the female name game or identity play:

> I lift her up and she stares solemnly at the picture. 'She is your grandmother,' I tell her. 'Her name was Sumati.'
>
> 'And I,' Tiny points a little finger towards herself, 'I am Karuna
>
> 'And I,' I imitate Tiny's gesture, 'am Sujata.'
>
> 'And I,' Shilpa joins in the game, 'am Shilpa.'
>
> We laugh in unison, Tiny's delighted chuckles going on longer than ours. The darkness and despair lift. I can imagine my mother's pleasure in our laughter (79).

Thus Deshpande privileges woman's self and female identity, through exploration of mother-daughter relationship, where the daughter's role as the mother's sole name-keeper is emphasized, thereby refuting scriptures and religious rites that wiped out women's personal identity from the Indian society.

Another attempt at a gyno-centric viewpoint is achieved with a mythical woman's tale "The Inner Rooms" which discovers the inner story of a strong woman character, Amba, from Mahabharata. It begins with the rejection of Amba as daughter / mother / wife / lover and her reaction to the whole life around man and man-made rules, where women are mere pawns / spectators / victims. The story ends with peace restored in her inner self, a peace which is derived only through her self-immolation, a peace that was denied to her all along her life in the 'inner room', i.e., the palatial confines in which she grew up as a girl, the inner

self that feels always trapped and undeveloped.

"The Stone Women" reminds one of Simone de Beauvoir's ideas of woman as an 'erotic object.' "The purpose of the fashions," says Beauvoir, "to which she [woman] is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires; thus society is not seeking to further her projects but to thwart them" (543). "The Stone Women" describes the female narrator as a tourist visiting a stone carved temple with dancing women. She is accompanied by her husband and a tourist guide, whose appreciation of the stone carvings of women, their beautiful figures, the narcissistic dance and graceful postures—all these raise a doubt in the female narrator's mind, whether these sculptures are authentic or man-made.

Later, she comes to realize that her surmise was right, during her intimate moments with her husband: "You're wearing something new. I don't like it. It hides you", he says, his hands moving as if tracing the shape of my body. For some reason, when I look at him, eyes narrowed, mouth pursed as he gazes at me thoughtfully, my mind leaps back to those stone women in the temple. This is how they must have looked, I realize, the men who sculpted the women in stone, as they shaped them from their imaginations. As if I have evoked the sound, I even hear the tap tap of the hammer as the men chipped away at the stone, working out their fantasies on it, creating women with unreal bodies, women who played and sang and danced all day". (145-6)

This realization elicits the fear in her that by conceding to all his demands, she would be reducing herself to one of those "...women frozen for all time into a pose they have been willed into" (146), and makes her assert her individuality through the humming of Hindi songs that he disapproves of and wearing jewellery that she wants to. She even imagines hearing the sounds of the male hammers "working out their fantasies on it, creating women with unreal bodies, women who played and sang and danced all day". (145-6) This thought forces her to answer back to her husband that she feels comfortable wearing the silver bracelet that he disapproved of, as coming between him and her body. This assertion also brings back now on her tongue the tune of Hindi songs that she always repressed earlier because he did not like it. The woman's assertion of independence comes out as she does not want to be frozen / framed as those stone women chiseled by male desires / expectations of perfection.

Other than the stories on female relationships that become part of her gamut, there are also those on male relationships. Both categories of tales end with the epic style of affirmation that one ought to live life the

way one wishes or dreams to. "The Last Enemy" is one of her three stories from the Mahabharata in this collection. The tale, one of the tales told from an androgynous perspective, is a modern exploration of Duryodhana's last moments of his defeat in Kurukshetra war. At the outset, Duryodhana is found without armour, without any defence, at peace with himself, immersed in water. The coolness of the water quenches his fire within, allowing past memories to flash by—his misgivings about being always considered second best to the Pandavas, his consequent hatred and fear of them, his love and hate feelings for Draupadi, his doubts that it was because of Draupadi that things went sour between Krishna and him, his memory / satisfaction of himself as a glorious king, son and friend.

Amidst the approaching sounds of his enemies' advent, Duryodhana remembers Karna and his pitiable death in entrapment, his dreams of "royal glory and dignity of power and magnificence, not for himself alone, but for all of them". (106) The tale expounds his final realization: "It was for this that he had been born – to come and stand here, in the dirty waters of a lake, and be cold, lonely and alone. To know that this was the truth and the rest but a dream out of which he had now been awakened". (106) The title reflects the last enemy he had conquered —his own self, a self that confronts the truth of life.

"Hear me Sanjaya..." treats an exploration of the character Kunti (as narrator) from the Mahabharata and traces her regret of the war of Kurukshetra and her inability to believe that so many sons are dead. The title reveals the directive from the woman's voice to the male narrator of the Mahabharata (Sanjaya) to now hear the female view of war and violence by capturing crucial moments from the epic. She divulges to Sanjaya her views on the silent / silenced women in her palace, like Gandhari and her mothers-in-law, who were passive witnesses to male rancour and violence:

> Like Gandhari we have opened our eyes too late. What mistakes we make, Sanjaya, what terrible mistakes. Is that why we don't speak of the war? Because we are afraid we will ask ourselves why? What was it all for? I remember the few feeble cries that greeted my sons when it was all over – victors they called them. Victors? It's the dead who are the victors. They know it too now. Yudhishthira walks like a puppet, Arjuna's eyes are empty, and even Bhima .....(139)

While several stories in the anthology *Intrusion and Other Stories* project woman as man's sexual other, "Pawn" and "The Cruelty Game" present

woman as man's social other. "The Pawn" describes how a young man's initial liking for a young woman changes when he ponders over the impossibility of a marital relation in a situation where there is language barrier between the couple:

> It had been a dream, I now knew, and what have dreams to do with reality. After all, what did I know of her, or she of me? And what could I tell my parents about her? That she had a beautiful smile? I knew what my mother would say to that: you have to live together, other things matter more. And she would be right. Dammit, I didn't even know her language nor did she know mine. It would never work. (114)

Hence he decides to ignore his Platonic instincts by privileging his pragmatic thoughts on the woman, with whom he felt very comfortable in one meeting, 'a peculiar melting within him'. The story moves into the realm of irony, when his association of the woman and her parents as images of a pawn and the king/queen now impinges on himself as the real 'pawn,' who misses a wonderful opportunity of love and marriage with a likeable woman, being influenced by socially restrictive and collectively inhibiting ideas.

"The Cruelty Game" views the gloomy prospects of a widow in a joint family system and also sheds light on the game of cruelty that children can play on children influenced by adult social beliefs and its harmful repercussions. For example, the narrator Sharu ill-treats Maya, her young cousin, newly arrived with her widowed mother into their family. The story captures the tumultuous growing up of a girl child in a joint family environment; the woes of a young widow with a growing daughter; a girl child's first encounter with death, her first encounter with the reality of her father's death and her mother's remarriage, and her coping up with superstitions and beliefs in an Indian family environment; and an adolescent girl's narration of herself as witness to the good and bad events in a joint family atmosphere.

While most of the tales of this anthology are grounded in the Indian reality, "Ghosts" is grounded in the western reality both in its theme and locale. Yet in its content it is very much Indian, as it gives an Indian woman's account of life abroad. In its thematic orientation, the tale deviates from other tales that internalize woman's family experiences, and captures a woman's perspective on her empty life as housewife in a foreign locale—her innate boredom due to her solitude in a distant land (London), the silences that surround her, the alien culture of blank faces in the Tube, her refuge in TV to sink the silences, and finally the sense of loss of

glamour in Indian life in the alien soil. Such a microcosmic view as seen above is subsumed under the macrocosmic experience of the postcolonial individual's encounter with western intolerance toward Indian / Pakistani immigrants, who are all clubbed into one homogeneous group in the western eye. Shashi Deshpande's images strike the reader with the technique of contrast that shows the western and the Indian perception through the images of a 'grave' and 'the brightly burning, scorching, cleansing funeral pyre'.(85) The ambiguity in the word 'ghosts' enriches the complexity of the tale told. Here 'ghosts' points to the immigrant female narrator living like a phantom, in the sense of forgetting one's natural self, in an alien western land. Secondly it points to the rootlessness of the migrant Asian living under the contemptuous western eye.Thirdly, the word is an ironical pointer to the lifelessness of the western world, where people live like specters.The experience of the postcolonial woman as the other in a foreign land is brought home.

[4]

The detailed analyses of the nineteen stories so far conducted reveals that Shashi Deshpande's anecdotes, told mostly from a female point of view, stage an excursion into the various dimensions of family life of the female as girl, daughter, mother, grandmother, cousin and wife. In all these tales the private, introverted voice of the narrator, seeking to explore life around, in order to find a truth within, is revealed. In an unpublished interview with the present writer held twenty years back, the novelist described her women characters as "...individuals who are trying to think for themselves....who are trying to think for their own selves and not accepting what has been given to them" (Interview with R. Mala, AI 127). Most of the female characters in these stories are in a state of exploration, in search of a truth that lies embedded in their life situations. Whether it is the daughter in search of the grandmother's name, or the mother attempting to build bridges with the daughter or granddaughter, or the mythic characters from the Mahabharata, or the wife in search of a light within, or the woman abroad reacting to her loneliness away from the Indian hearth, all these women are in pursuit of their own selves looking for a condition of life that is acceptable to them as individuals.

The woman's search for truth is not a path that directs them to a spiritual reality or a Cartesian pursuit of knowledge and reason. Such a pursuance is rather an attempt to move beyond frameworks. It is an endeavour to think, do and accept what is acceptable to them as private

persons. It is an urge to 'keep the light burning' within—their individuality as women, their thought and response as individuals, especially as women. Any blockade to 'keep the light burning' would only result in 'intrusion' as it happens in the story with the above title, where the husband's patriarchal mode of behaviour intrudes into the self-dignity of the woman.

Shashi Deshpande excels in the ability to create poetry in fiction, mainly due to her repertoire of images and symbols used in a contrapuntal style, as seen in the contrastive symbols of robin versus peacock, nightingale versus lark, light versus dark, silence versus noise, etc. For these symbols occurring in contrapuntal rhythms create conflict in her fiction. The digressive quality in her novel, due to the use of dream sequences, flashback techniques and memory recall, significantly makes a rare appearance in her short stories. Hence her stories are more focused and concentrated in their narratives. They have a compassionate and an all-encompassing mood of understanding and concern for women who haunt these narratives. Through these female characters, Shashi Deshpande is able to illuminate female lives, their joys and woes, their peeves and puzzles about life, society and their inner selves, and finally the female philosophy of the need to 'keep the light within always burning.'

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The book is an attempt to comprehend and explore the multi-faceted Indian reality which has evolved over the ages. Indian English fiction which took shape in the mid 19th century, and developed full-fledgedly in the 20th, has been deemed a potent tool in that venture. Although a colonial legacy, the novel as a literary genre has been indegenized by the Indian authors. Indian English fiction, considered doubly colonial because of the language it is written in, has had to doubly decolonize itself, by way of indigenizing the language along with the form. The book intends to show how Indian English fiction can give us insights into the rich mosaic of cultures that India is, highlighting the areas of synthesis (uniform or spasmodic), and of dissonance. It does also aim at scrutinizing through the prism of Indian English fiction how far the western derived notions like 'modernity', 'nationalism','materialism' and 'feminism' have penetrated the traditional Indian collective psyche and value-system.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Arnab Bhattacharya is a professional editor, and a book and film critic. He is a regular reviewer of books in *The Telegraph*, contributing articles to dailies like *The Statesman*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *Doinik Statesman* as well. He has nearly 400 published book and film reviews, and about 100 published articles on social and literary issues to his credit. Recently, he has edited a book titled *Nationalism: Theories, Formations and Future* which has already been globally circulated and critically acclaimed.

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