

**HYPOTHETICAL SHELTER: MARRIAGE IN SELECTED
WORKS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE, BHARATI MUKHERJEE
AND SHOBHA DE**

DRVIBHA BHOOT

ASSTT. PROF. DEPT. OF ENGLISH

JNV UNIVERSITY, JODHPUR

RAJASTHAN, INDIA.

Abstract

*One may see that love as a basic source to seek fulfilment and as a part of human instinct. The biological attraction towards the opposite sex is also manifested by love. In the western world the desire and the response to it acts as central to it acts as central for the institution of marriage. In the Indian context culture, caste and class dominate ones response to the love and sex – finally marriage. In a patriarchal set-up, feminine traits like case, empathy and nurturing one undervalued and considered as feminine traits. We hold Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, Buddha with great reverence for their emblems of care but when it comes to the women in our society, women with these virtues are devalued. In the absence of reciprocal care, many suffer silently gross psychological and physical repercussions, while some protest, some remain silent. These repercussions are severe and far reaching. This paper studies the effects of marriage on the psyche of the protagonists in *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, *Wife and Socialite Evenings*. The investigation is about the age old belief that marriage means security, power of expression, fulfilment, freedom, love and social respect. Here I have tried to throw a light on how stable these thoughts are. Is this institution not delineating towards a counter cultural domain? What is the actual condition of the couples who are married is also under the eye.*

Key Words: *Women, Status, Subordinate, Marriage, Patriarchy.*

**HYPOTHETICAL SHELTER: MARRIAGE IN SELECTED WORKS OF SHASHI
DESHPANDE, BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND SHOBHA DE**

-DR VIBHA BHOOT

“We talk of revolution – political and economic and yet the greatest revolution in a country is one that effects improvement in the status and living conditions of its women.”

- JawaharLal Nehru

Humanity has been inspired by man-woman relationships. Love has been an abstraction and has been conceived variously and vigorously. It has been the cause of war as well as peace she sacrifices form great works of art. When the western religious literature covers the topic of man’s love and reverence for God, our literature eulogizes love – Radha and Krishna, Meera and Gopal, Dushyanta and Shakuntala and not to forget Shiva and Parwati. Jesus is not borne of love or marriage; his is the Immaculate Conception. Marriage is at the center of existence in our literature. It’s a bond, approved by the society. Care-giving, nurturing, inter-personal relationships and more over emotional security is provided by the institution of marriage. One can define himself through the context of family and community through marriage. To validate one’s own membership in a particular community, certain principles should be followed. Hence marriage, to a certain extent, becomes mandatory in Indian context.

In the European Renaissance, two main writers Petrarch and Dante produced their texts on the basis of their love of Beatrice and Laura. They produced love songs and tales relevant to European literary history. Cynical Shaw asserts that the easy domesticity of marriage makes the idealized and idolized love as interesting as a plate of muffins. It is an agency, in India that regulates our attitude towards sexuality. The function of marriage is to assure the future of our society through reproduction. Marriage is a single social unit where differences amongst individuals are seemingly dissolved. The sanctity of the familial relationships is established. This paper reveals an insight into the nature of a woman’s mind in respect to her role as a wife, a mother, a daughter in relation to an individual.

Traditionally, in the Hindu marriage the position of the husband is expected to be an authoritarian figure and who tends to dominate the wife. The wife is a subordinate who merges her name, personality, life style and actually her entire life into that of the husbands. Although the institution of marriage has undergone a lot of change with time, yet here we study the traditionally accepted form of a marriage. PromillaKapur opines, that “natural companionship, respect, material comforts, satisfaction of emotional and physical needs, in marriage.” (Promilla, 8)

The inability of a man to understand such needs challenges the individuality of a woman and is a threat to their marriage. We as Indians have the traditional, mindset, of ignoring the woman's needs. It was in the novels of Anita Desai that marriage from the point of view of women was discussed for the first time. Anuradha Roy writes in her book, *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian women writers*,

"Marital relationships have almost inevitably been the focal point of the novels written by quantitative difference in tone and perception in the novels which adopt an explicit or implicit feminist stance. The emphasis is not on the development or mechanics of the relationship but on the forces of which work together to make the relationship a farcical exhibition of togetherness. Functioning along fixed parameters, marriages become an arid formality, devoid of contact." (Roy, 81-88)

Possessing a deep insight in the human psyche, Shashi Deshpande focuses on the diminished interest in marriage of the protagonist Sarita in *The Dark holds No Terrors*. She is a modest, sensitive and a good humored woman who longs to break away from the rigid traditional norms. She is a doctor during the day but a "terrified trapped animal" at a night after marriage. Her earlier experiences, which show the gender discrimination by her mother, had been a cause of her sorrow too. The rejection by her mother fills her adolescence and feeling of hatred towards her mother Adesh Pal observes. "For Saru the very word 'mother' stands for old traditions and rituals, for her mother sets up a bad model, which distorts her growth as a human being ... thus the strange childhood experiences false up her inflated ego and her thirst for power over others." (Pal, 74-75)

Her childhood becomes a period of emotional injury. She takes her mother's words for true. "You killed him, why didn't you die?" Why are you alive when his dead?" (191). Saru feels being injured unjustly when she experiences the absence of motherly love. She is timid and suffers mental conflict due to the imaginary guilt and fear instilled in her during her childhood. The interruption of her filial relationship due to the death of her brother makes her dissociate totally from her mother. She says, "If you are a woman, I don't want to be one." (63) She leaves her parents house to be the wife of a sadist husband, Manu. She is adamant not to yield to the traditional views of the mother in the matter of the hierarchical and caste difference with Manu. But soon Manu gets jealous of her professional identity when the traditional equilibrium is broken and the wife is more respected by the neighbors. Manu becomes irritable and his inability to accept the reversal of the traditional roles makes him a morose. He considers his roughness in bed as "ardors of love." Saru asks him, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (200)

This question makes Manu even more conscious of the reversed position held by them. That night Manu attacks and physically assaults her in bed. This nightmarish incident is repeated and increased every time he is reminded of his inferior status. "Panic then pain. There it was, for the second time, what I had just lulled myself into believing that it was just a nightmare. The hurting hands, the savage teeth, the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar

body. And above me, a face I could not recognize.” (112)Saru’s efforts to confront Manu the following morning are often aborted by his normal behavior. She is unable to put the two men together and unfortunately this dichotomy never ceases. Now she is left with no choice. She is to blame herself for her love marriage. She goes back to her father after having become and a hapless victim of a disastrous marriage. She yearns for emotional security and attachment. She tells her father that her husband is a “sadist”. She tells him about Manu’s brutality and expresses her helplessness. Her father, after listening to her, leaves and goes away. Many a times she wants to tell her father “Baba I’m unhappy. Help me, Baba, I’m in trouble. Tell me what to do.” (44) But her feelings remain inside her. She is in acute confusion. She goes away to her father’s house she does remember the little needs of her children. ShashiDeshpande doesn’t glorify her protagonist. She sympathizes with Saru. She wonders, “Would it always be a failure, any attempt to reach out to the other human being? Had she been chasing a chimera all her life, hoping for someone? Perhaps the only truth is that the man is born to be cold and lonely and alone” (219). She understands that there is absolutely no need to run away from the darkness. “The dark holds no terrors, but that the terrors are inside us all the time. We carry them with us, and like traitors, they spring out, when me least expect them, to scratch and maul.” (85)

She realizes that marriage is no guarantee for happiness. She leaves to see the reality clearly as an individual. She gets the news from Manu that he’s coming. She tells her father to ask Manu to wait and leaves the house. She is determined not to come back. Deshpande, through this novel brings to the light that marriage is the only option for an Indian girl. However, qualified or educated she might be, she has to tolerate the mental constraints delivered to her by the system of oppression in a patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir says “A free and autonomous being like all creatures – (a woman) finds herself living in the world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other.” (Beauvoir,xxxv)Delineating the swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed, the life of senses as well as the heart-wringing anguish of the protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a, failed writer, ShashiDeshpande’s another character fails to achieve completeness in marriage. Silent and sensitive, Jaya is haunted by the questions related to her identity. She is obsessed by the question “Who am I?” “She is “an utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible.” (Deshpande, 69)

Hence her agonized cries – “I can’t hope. I can’t manage. I can’t go on.” (70) Her stifling, suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set-up effaces her feminine identity. Jaya’s husband Mohan, is a engineer who cares for money status and material comforts. He prospers well. He takes her for granted. With no dearth of material comforts, she is an outwardly a wife with a comfortable life. SumanAhuja observes :“Jaya caught in an emotional, eddy, endeavors to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but an ephemera ... an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and failed writer. (Ahuja; 2)

Jaya, as a girl, was taught by her father to have confidence in herself. Her name is symbolic of victory and her father had encouraged her to be resilient and courageous. Her grandmother chided her that her marital life would be a disaster as she asked too many questions and retorts. She was pained to become obedient and submissive “a husband is like a sheltering tree. As it was as if she had said ‘mau’ to me. I ignored her. After so many years, the words came back to me. A sheltering tree. Without the tree, you are dangerously unprotected and vulnerable.” (32) And Jaya proceeds to “keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.” (32)

She marries Mohan not out of choice but out of convenience. He is from the same caste, decent good looking and has a job. Ruminating on the past, Jaya sees how her marriage has reduced her to a mere automation. Memories plunge in often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. The dejections and disappointments of unrequited selfhood, the illusions and pining of love and the yearnings of completeness in companionship, make the stream of Jaya’s consciousness. She revolts but in silence. Jaya is protecting her autonomy perpetually. She never says “yes” if she is asked whether he has hurt her. A dominating husband and a suffering wife – that is her tie with Mohan. Rebellion and suffering in Jaya has a proclivity for being transmitted into an artistic expression. In her there is an inner need for creative fulfillment but this creative expression is inhibited by the lack of privacy and of sheer physical space to effect and work in. Virginia Woolf attributed woman’s lack of creativity to her not having a room of her own. Jaya says, “like a disease, a disability I had to hide from everyone.” (97) Her urges are silent. Yet she writes. She took up the stuff to please the publisher and made her husband proud. “That column, yes, it had made me known. My profile silhouetted in black that accompanied each article frightened me each time I saw it. It was like seeing someone masquerading as myself, or as if I was masquerading as the woman who wrote that column.” (119)

Jaya, suppressed at every stage in her life, tries to become an ideal wife. In that pursuit, she snips of the bit of her every time. The loveless married life makes her efforts a total failure. Stereo typicality and dissatisfaction according envelop her. There is hardly any communication between her and Mohan now. Marriage subjugated and enslaved her. Women pay for their happiness the cost of their freedom. For Jaya, “in this life itself there are so many crossroads, so many choices” (192) with her traditionally muted self, she wobbles between the past and the present. Her lack of genuine feelings in writings makes her a failed writer. Her silence for seventeen years reduce her to fragments unprotected, and unshelled. “Distance from real life. Scared of writing. Scared of failing. Oh God, I had thought, I cannot take any more. Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine – as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul and Rati’s mother.” (148)

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most significant contemporary writers, who has dealt with the problems of expatriates. She portrays the western traditions which are always in conflict with the Indian traditions. The trauma that the expatriates undergo is under observation. *Wife* is about pre-marital and post-marital experiences of Dimple Das Gupta. She is a girl of twenty and has high flying dreams about marriage. She thinks that marriage would

bring in freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund raising dinners for noble charities, "Marriage would bring her love." (Mukherji, 3)

Bordering on the grotesque, she seems to have a warped thinking even after the cosmopolitan perception of hers. She is worried about her "rudimentary breasts" (4) She is a complex person full of contradictions. After her marriage, she is terrified of living in Africa or North America but she manages to camouflage her feelings before her husband. Her schizophrenia is explicit when she talks to herself in the oval mirror. "Dimple Basu is an exciting name." (19) She tries to prone to herself that she is happy. She tries to convince herself that it would be easy to love Amit. She wanted to think and act modern. She gets pregnant out cats green chilies to get back to normal and maintain her excitement of marriage. She squeezes her stomach to "... face a vile thing out of hiding. She began to vomit and would crouch in front of the toilet bowl with both elbows on the rim and watch the arc of foul vomit crash against the sides. The vomit fascinates her" (30). She wants to abort the child. Though she liked mice, she viewed them in a different light in her depressed state. She kills the mouse on the baby clothes. She is calmed when she finds out that the dead mouse was pregnant. She wants to get rid of her child. She skips the rope till the child gets aborted. Amit feels remorseful and miserable. She hates being ignored by Amit." I feel sort of dead inside and all you do is mad the paper and talk to me about the food. You never listen to me. You hate me. Don't deny it: I know you do. You hate me because I'm not fair and fat." (10)

Suicide is very much on her mind. She becomes more and more manic depressive. Although she had failed to develop a meaningful relationship with her husband, she behaves like a dutiful wife by keeping the tasty portion of the meat for him. Inamdar says "Dimple is a psychic study of an abnormal woman. She has nothing to do with the problem of immigrants. Therefore she angers her husband by making fun of his dress, spilling curry on his shirt front. She goes to the extent of condemning the gifts he brings for her. Her abnormality reaches the climax when she ships her way to abortion." (Inamdar,40)

Dimple kills her husband finally as she derives pleasure by killing. She is a sadist and derives self-satisfaction from killing. She is an escapist. She wants to break away the traditional taboos of a wife. Lack of communication stifles her and disintegrates her sensibility. She nightmares of suicide, violence and death. Her dislike of Amit's way of life makes her dislike the world around her and loot at it cadaverously and neurotically. "She thought of sleeping bodies as corpses." (Mukherji,59)She asserts her identity by inflicting pain on others. She asserts her womanhood, shows her power by hurting others. Her sanity is lost in pursuit of her discovering her identity. She loses her contact with her identity due to her constitutional temperament and self alienation. "Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled her with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne." (117)

Amit appears to be a projection of her neurotic self and she murders him in a neurotic frenzy. The novel speaks of the psychic breakdown of an Indian wife in America. The murder of Amit is an assertion of her American identity and quest of voice. She succeeded in achieving a

modicum of satisfaction for masochistic drives. For her the whole society is a punishing agent. Marriage and the Diaspora bring her to this state. She is displaced by these two agencies. Her insanity is due to the rootlessness. She is not able to cope up with the westernization too. The expatriation leads her to the metaphysical experience of exile--an exile that affected her mind – her psyche and her entire personality.

The hollowness of man-woman relationship forms the core of *Socialite Evenings* by Shobha De. Khushwant Singh represents an old age view about Indian women: “This is all most Indian women know of sex – an unpleasant subject to men’s desire – necessary in order to have sons, bearable because of its brevity” but Shobha De presents this idea assertively and forcefully in *Socialite Evenings*. Women are dominating in De’s books. Karuna in *Socialite Evenings* is subordinate and says “we were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered us was trivialized. The massage was our priorities. It was taken for granted that our needs were secondary to theirs.” (De, 164) Due to the pressure from her parents, Karuna marries her husband and not her boyfriend and ends up in an unhappy marriage. She says – “And even though I had married well in my parents’ eyes [...] I was stuck in an increasingly meaningless marriage. [...] What was wrong with my marriage and what had gone wrong? [...] My marriage went sore because I married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. My husband was not a villain. He was just an average Indian husband – unexciting, uninspiring, untutored.” (64-65) She has a desire for an extravagant life and the submissive nature of her mother is the cause of her dislike of a middle class family. She marries but later finds her husband as “an average Indian husband.” (65)

She is under utter bewilderment when she is expected to live the life of a subordinate in marriage like her mother. Her modeling stops and she is made to feel inferior by her husband. Her passivity and powerlessness is irksome to her. She came across Krish after joining theatre. Her husband wants to divorce her suspecting her paternity. After the denial of alimony by her husband (which she is not interested in) she moves out to reach to the pinnacle of success. She treats marriage as an obstacle to her success and wants to live uncomplicated life without marrying. There should be no man to dictate her terms. Most people think that marriage is mandatory to move in a society like India. The economic worth is at the core. Marriage was considered holy in Vedic times, not just for sex. The nurturing element was the priority. Here, with the women we dealt with enter an unrealistic vision of life and transform them into what was unintended. Did marriage actually bring in physical, emotional and monetary shelter? Don’t they float on the clouds of alienation after they are married? On the account of the mental disposition of the protagonists marriage becomes a baneful account. Marriage is an institution which re-affirms the quality of reticence in a woman – demure and enduring. Even after years of marriage her slightest disagreement over a decision causes infamy. Some are able to handle “the weight of that long silence” and some give up.

Works Cited

Ahuja, Suman. Review of "That ... in Times of India" Oct, 8, 1999.

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

De, Shobha. *Socialite Evenings*. India: Penguin, 1989. Subsequent page references are parenthesized within the chapters.

Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, India 1990. Subsequent page references are parenthesized within the chapters.

Inamdar, F.A. *Contemporary Indian English Fictions* ed. K.N. Awasthi, Jalandhar: ABS, 1993.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990. Subsequent page references are parenthesized within the chapters.

Pal, Adesh. "Ego – Self Crisis in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande". *Changing face of women in Indian writing in English*. Ed. M.Q. Khan, A.G. Khan, New Delhi: Creative Books, 1995.

Promilla Kapur. *Love, Marriage and Sex*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1973.

Roy Anuradha. *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999.

HIGHER EDUCATION &
RESEARCH SOCIETY