

# IDENTITY CRISIS IN SHASHI DESPANDE'S *SIT WAS THE NIGHTINGALE*

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## Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande is one of the most significant novelists and short story writers in India. In all her short stories and novels, she portrays her protagonists as common, dependent, self-governing and traditional working women. She believes that the women's predicaments have still not come to an end. She has been fighting to get the justice for women through her works. She has also been writing intensively about the Indian women's attitude in the work place and painstakingly guiding the young generations through her short stories. In her short story, *It was the Nightingale*, she chronicles the life of a working woman, Jayu, who seeks her identity from her family members. She finally travels abroad leaving her husband and her own family in India. She cannot live between tradition and modernity. This paper presents in detail the trials and tribulations of the protagonist Jayu who fights against all deprivations.*

**Keywords:** *Shashi Deshpande, Identity Crisis, Search for Identity, Equality, Feminism.*

## Introduction

Shashi Deshpande differs herself from other writers by her novels and short stories. Even, in her short stories, she takes women as her protagonists. These protagonists are taken from unborn baby to old woman. These worldly prevailed women characters are abducted from the Indian background. She takes up her writings by the tool of English language. She manufactured her intentions in it as "it is the only language she can accost herself in". (Of Concerns, Of Anxieties, 1996). *It was the Nightingale* is one of the finest short stories written for the working women. Jayu, the protagonist of the story, is confined to the household work. Presently she has to accomplish the economic problem faced by her family and this crisis cannot be taken over by one person's income. She acclimatizes to give big hands to eradicate this problem. Hence, she decides to work in any one of the foreign countries for getting of a high salary. For that, she leaves her family in India. In order to indulge her identity in her family, she has to acquire a job with a decent salary. She feels that securing a job is a way of gaining respect from others too. Ashoka Rani rightly puts it in her words that:

“A woman’s commitment to a career reflects her desire to fulfil her own potential. It amounts to the rejection of an identity based solely on a relationship – as a mother, wife or a daughter.”(Bala,2001)

However, it is very difficult to carry out both the responsibilities at home and at the job, especially for mothers of young children.

### **Jayu’s Quest for Identity**

Despande’s strong argument supports to reduce the pain of the working woman. In this short story, Jayu, the protagonist, is an educated working woman in *It was the Nightingale*. She is going abroad for her career for two years. She has to get a bigger salary for her family on her returning. She really struggles hard to put away her longing and even puts off her pregnancy for the sake of working in a sector for earning more money. She thinks that her life will be pleasant on returning to her husband after two years. Consequently, she cannot share her experience with her husband during those two years. This becomes a barrier between the couple. She is exhausted by the office work and returning home late, as usual, due to her bundle of works. Uncompromisingly, she struggles in her inner desires and regains her stamina. By this, she cannot sleep. Whereas, she feels guilty of her decision and she sees her husband waiting for her arrival. When she reaches her home, her husband has prepared food for both which they eat together and go to bed. The whole night they keep on talking about practical deals, business matters and different things. Jayu loves her husband very much. She is unwilling to leave her husband. Her love for her husband makes her feel that he should not have accepted her request to work in a foreign country.

According to her husband, she is a stubborn and obstinate woman for her ambitions which ultimately becomes her weakness. Her husband says to her “You know, Jayu, I believe it is not pride or ambition but obstinacy that is your real vice, after all.” (*Deshpande,1993*). He talked himself about her decision that if she had changed her decision, he would have faced anything for her. Later he probes into the reason for Jayu’s decision to go abroad in search of a job. He listens to her reply. Sooner, he refuses to accept the reason as he feels that it is an inappropriate, and goes to the extent of forbidding her from going abroad.

### **The Loss of Women Identity**

Jayu dribbles to describe him the entire story of her mother. Her mother was a scapegoat. She hid all her desires for the ingratitude family and vehemently felt for the loss of her identity. Her life was dilapidated for her family and finally outraged for not having an ambition in her life. By now, Jayu frankly expresses her disgust to pursue her mother’s life. She feels that her stay with her husband is a pleasure to her but the news about the arrival of her mother-in-law has had its own impact. However she is happy that her mother-in-law’s arrival is scheduled only in the following day. Her husband sorrowfully hurries her to prepare for her journey. She hesitates to separate her husband and reluctantly reaches to the airport along with her husband. She immediately requests her husband to forgive her leaving her husband alone in India. He then has

to return home all alone. Suddenly she reminds how she neglected to meet her relatives (Sumi, Jayu's sister) who came to send her off. She says that she has privacy with her husband to fight and discuss before her departure. She will have with her all memories from the house. Even she carries bundles of guilt and walks towards the life of a professional woman.

The story grunts women's social conditions on leaving the security of her domestic prison, dreams and all. The women are brought up with the well-built Indian tradition and culture both in their parental house and in their in-law's house. Presently, the people should expect from women. They also fulfill the family necessities and the demand is resolved by the contribution of women taking up a job. They are also hacked to take the family responsibility and gradually forget their happiness at home. They feel squeezed and hurt in every works' process. The living place is habituated as Hades.

The author consciously portrays the working women who are facing excessive pressure from both the sides (their family and job). Despande consoles the working women with her harangue like Jayu who are not able to balance their profession and family. Jayu can go abroad and prosper in her profession but she can't carry with her anything except the reminiscences of her family life.

The Nightingale, Jayu is alienated by her guilt for not giving a baby to her family and she hopes that her career will bring reputation and identify to herself and to her family members. On the contrary, some of the elders still believe that the woman's attitude should have certain conventional codes. They are of the opinion that women should stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and you're safe. For all outside appearances hers was a happy family, her husband was in a top position, they had two children - one boy - and one girl - and she was yet another wife and mother whose life centered around her family and her home- nothing more. (Nirmala, 1990, p.53-64)

Her short stories frankly render that her protagonists are created as modern and educated Indian women. They struggle to follow both their elders' traditional ideas and their own ideas. They still insist that she should not go out the four walls of the house. Yet the revolutionary characteristics of the modern woman urge her to walk out of the conventional roles of a woman (daughter, wife and mother). On talking about the importance of human relationships, a woman should live with her family with the right inclination than her working places. At this point Despande interviews with Vanamala that:

It's necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or a mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writing. What I don't agree with is the idealization of motherhood - the false and sentimental notes that accompany it. (Pathak, 1998, p.13)

The women are adulated as being reformers to other women and not for themselves. They are rebellious only in their dreams.

Deshpande wishes to vivify her protagonists' anguish psychologically in every story. Women themselves strongly hold the emotion that the married woman should either live with her unadjusted and misunderstanding husband or leave him without crossing the limit of her tradition. Chandra Nisha Singh (2007) highlights the statement of Despande on marriage from Manu's thought mentioned in *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*:

The institution of marriage is the most glorified and sacrosanct pattern of existence socially, religiously and sexually; hence, it is treated as an ideal form for a civilized social organization and for the propagation of the species. But it is also, significantly, the patriarchal weapon that finalizes the complete subversion and social obliteration of woman and although constructed as the apotheosis of fulfillment for both man and woman, it acquires centrality in woman's life only and contains both her space and her identity. (Chandra Nisha 49)

The role of marriage becomes a major part in a girl's life. Her family members take it for granted that they themselves can choose her groom as aerated. From the feminine point of view, it is presented to a woman as a trap from which her liberation is restricted entirely. Eventually, Despande's protagonists live desperately and their husbands and relatives allow them insignificantly. Jayu amplifies her own fate as an authentic, poignant, middle class educated woman in the story. This story is weaving a magical web of Jayu's emotions. Simon de Beauvoir has taken the possibility to convince all the women to reduce their anguish by such words: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". (Beauvoir, 2001, p. 295)

Jayu alleviates to be independent and to contribute to the family expenses. By earning, she almost enriches her family with the needed repository. Ultimately, she surrenders her marital happiness for the sake of preserving her identity. She bestows her energy to the family for indulging them in the unruffled life. But she has failed to receive love and care from her husband and is also betrayed. She repeatedly and happily imagines that her husband affectionately calls her as Jayu. She might be struck with this unforgettable incident. On sticking with the prestigious career, she leaves her husband and relatives in India. She assumes that her husband does not encourage her constant decision. She also feels that he is not a perfect match for her, and she puts it in her own words that he is "understanding-but-not caring" (89).

### **The Unbreakable Wall**

The adamant and determined attitude of Jayu has formed a gap between herself and her husband without having quarrels among them. It remains an unbreakable wall and smashes the marriage. She will be away for two years and she will have to live alone but with those experiences. She inquires in pain to have aspersion from the society, "Can we stand two years of separateness?" (90). She altogether knows about stopping the depth of longing and its agony by taking hatchet. She determines not to miss the opportunity to avenge the indifferent husband. She also constitutes her memory to justify that her decision is right: "To me, our lives are intertwined, yet they are two different strands." (92).

## Neglecting the Traditional Role

Jayu consigns this unpardonable separation from her husband to the world and she herself determines her plight. She is constrained that her mother's life story should not be repeated to her. She (her mother) sacrifices the whole of her life for the sake of her family. Her role is to be a mother to her child and wife to her husband. She countermands to have any other preferences in her life. But Jayu's state of mind is different. She has to, primarily, prefer her career. She cremates herself that she will no longer be just a wife and mother. Moreover Jayu hoists her character as a modern woman and frequently proves that she is not a traditional follower. She shows such a revolt against her husband as: "Now the child will have to wait. We will not let it be born yet." (91) She has to fight against her family members to bring out her identity: "To me, our lives are .... like two lights that shine more brightly together, but to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone. But for her husband it is not pride or ambition, but obstinacy" (92)

Such is her reality with a typical Indian mentality. All women impugn to have the strong will to give a child to her husband. Differently, Jayu neglects her husband's expectations and her husband never forgets to say the life story of his mother as a perfect model. His mother is selfless, entirely loving and sacrificing towards his father. On one such occasion, Jayu's mother-in-law tells her that :

I never went even to my mother's house once after my mother-in-law died, because if I did, who would look after HIM?" (92)

## Feminism

Despande's short story, *It was the Nightingale*, has reflected the definition of feminism. Her writings are based on Man and woman. They are living in the multilingual society with satisfaction. But feminine gender partially gets satisfaction. Generally, a woman is portrayed as a slave to man among the family members in society and in stories. They are not being induced. But they want to live liberally. Likewise Snitow (2019) says that "Woman" is my slave name; feminism will give me freedom to seek some other identity altogether". The writers of women and the women writers also address multi-faced problems of woman in their works. Shashi Despande's novels and her short stories support the female who are still living under the suppression of the masculine. Even though they passed away, their works frankly still expose the women's anger and resistance through the theme of identity and equality. Merriam Webster (2020) defines "feminism" as the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the genders or organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Those interests range widely, but they equal pay, family leave, and even the ability to walk down the street without feeling unsafe".

## Search for Identity

Jayu wants to experience her identity among her family members. 'Identity' has the multidimensional meaning sociologically and psychologically. The word also reveals its

significant through one's biographical experiences with its groups and the particular person's nationality, region, culture and language or this identity also comes from the particular group of society. The identity terminology was taken from the French word 'Identite'. It can be predicted "that one aspires to their characteristics, values and beliefs (a process of idealistic-identification), or malign when one wishes to dissociate from their characteristics (a process of defensive contra-identification)" (Weinreich and Saunderson, 2003).

Erik Erikson is also one of the theorists talking about the identity crisis effectively. Identity crisis is the terminology, is coined and believed that it has not been one of the most solvable topics with the different opinions among the literates. According to Erikson (1970), he wants to do the intensive analysis and exploration in different angle in identity which began in childhood. He studied the cultural life among the Yurok of northern California and the Sioux of South Dakota. This study helps him to develop his ideas on identity and identity Crisis. He describes identity as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters" (Erikson, 1970).

### **The Impact of the Identity Crisis on Other Novelists**

Identity crisis has been used as one of the themes in *It was the Nightingale*. It is almost sparkled for the perfection and illustrated for the readers in other writers' writings. The techno-thematic fabric laid the foundation of the new Indian English fiction. The techno-thematic fabric was redesigned in the novels of R.K.Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao. Their works are *The Dark Room* and *The Guide*, *The Untouchables* and *The Coolie*.

In this stream, Anita Desai gave a powerful entry through her novels. She established the tremendous concept, identity crisis in the thematic set up in her novels. Shashi Deshpande also knit around the complex idea of the crisis in identity in her novels which express the value of human life. Particularly she talks about the man and woman relationship. According to Kanza Zia (2019), "A society with more than half of its population under identity crisis, where women are raised with the mind-sets of getting ready to be someone's plus one, can only progress as far enough as this thought. Such a mentality hints that a woman has no identity of herself, be it at home or at the state level. She is either represented as someone's daughter, sister, mother or wife. Although all these are the roles she plays in her lifetime, but they become her identity in our society".

Shashi Deshpande's short stories are generally about the studies of women as individuals. These women have the age differences finding out from each character that is considered only as the primary. The loneliness of the Jayu in *It was the Nightingale* is not only the manifestation of

the inner psyche. But she also might have thought about to give the female child to her husband after their marriage. However, she determines to go to foreign country. Her husband and her mother in law will murder her female child if she does not live with them. She might have felt like:

A woman gunned down her husband for honour here in the district Hangu on Friday. Police arrested the murderer. According to police, the incident took place in Sorazai area of district Hangu of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) where a woman shot dead her husband Muhammad Khan 40, while sleeping in his house. SP Saddar Circle Abdul Salam said that the police detained murderer woman who in the preliminary investigation revealed that her husband used to rape her daughters, which led to the incident. The body was shifted to hospital for post-mortem and the police after registering a case against the murderer of husband have started an investigation. (Taseer, Shaheed Salmaan 2020)

While talking about a man's valour and his achievement in the moral stories. The society forgets to register the achievement of woman in the same story. The society opines that the man has identity in his society. So he takes intensely his selfhood and identity among others comparing to woman (his wife). If the identity is not there for man, he will do many adventures in his life to gain it. Similarly, women also try for that. The feminists talk continuously in their writings about the loss of identity in their writings. They take some illustrations from the epics and modern stories too. Especially, the Indian woman protagonist like Jayu expects that identity to be provided to her because she leads her life in the Indian diaspora community. The increasing debatable situations also say that the man and woman are living in the post- globalization era. They need some ethical changes in their lives and they do not follow their parents' life style as a slave to others because it spreads that all are equal. Later, a man is equal to another man and not to a woman. Women feel that Indian life style is entirely contained with partiality, discrimination, intention and expectations to the particular gender. No doubt, problems are spread like racism in family circumstances. It is no longer threatened to the human beings but it stands before man.

A man or a woman can get different jobs in different places. They can also be separated and decelerated their relationship by getting the salary in the working place. They follow the different diet. But these differences can even be seen in difference species is fundamental. But these male and female genders are living together. They still fight and talk about the rights in their society, even though man and woman is being a husband and wife, they have differentiated themselves physically and mentally by their different appearances and expectations. Women's first encounter is to get back their rights from the society. They have to enjoy the equal rights among their family members. In comparing to some of her novels and short stories, women are still in traumatic situation from the compassion of post colonial country. They have been tired fighting for liberty with their equal gender for the number of years. Eventually they ask the male gender to provide the freedom from the imprisoned married life. At last, she decides to go away from the cultural back ground society. So they migrate from India to other country.

In *It was the Nightingale*, Shashi Deshpande's protagonist lives in male dominated society. She faces some problem which she has been facing from her mother-in-law. Her protagonist still searches her freedom, choice of working place and career, rights, equality and so on.

### **Jayu's Strong Decision**

Jayu accumulates herself as a determined woman by the persistent work for her family without sacrificing her identity. She would have felt greatly that her mother should be with her forever than her husband. She remembers that her mother's sacrifices are great. She recalls about her mother that:

Who [Jayu's mother] tried to live her life through her husband and daughters... Who tortured herself and tormented us. Who made her own hell and gloried in it. (92).

While thinking of her husband's powerlessness, she starts blaming him that:

He does not know, he will never know, how I have fought myself. How I have longed to give ambition and success the go-by and stay with him..." (90)

She has nurtured a savage in her "which kills all such self-destroying doubts." (91).

She is not emotionally dependent on her husband. She is opposed by the wrong thoughts of the unchanging society on women, she says, "Life held nothing, literally nothing, apart from husband and children." (92) Instead of sacrificing herself for her family, she sacrifices the comforts at home. She tries to stand on her position and she laments on her inability that her pain of separation is not exposed to her husband.

### **Conclusion**

Shashi Deshpande's protagonist is endlessly exasperated to prove her identity to her husband and his family members. She portrays her capability of the working women's timeless work, head ache, frustration and predicament. She is dovetailing the unbearable restrictions from the ever day life from her house as well as in her career. She insists that women should live within the relationships without losing their decorum and fulfillment. She intensifies that the downcast woman must be consoled and compromised from her family's *douceur* and she urges her protagonist not to go beyond the family circumstances as a downtrodden. If a woman wishes to break the society given rules, she will see emptiness in her life better than having mental depression in her living place. Deshpande recognizes that her inner feelings can practice together with her protagonist Jayu. Deshpande as a woman declares that she knows women better than men and also she adds that "perhaps my books are more about women, and that's about it." (Interview to Dickman, 1995, p. 32).



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