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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

The Prologue of Victims

J. Hemalatha

Asst. Professor
Dept. of English
SVCET-Chittoor

A. Lokanayaki

Asst. Professor
Dept. of English
SVCET-Chittoor

&

Dr.K.Kumar

Librarian,
SVCET-Chittoor

Abstract

Telling stories and listening to others have a perpetual appeal to man from very early days. It is impractical to find an adolescent who has in no way asked for a story. In the other dimension it is highly impossible to find an adult who does not enjoy a well-narrated yarn. We can consider the Era of Independence as the Era of Social Awareness as well as the Era of disenchantment. The social evils such as ignorance, corruption, hypocrisy and redtapism continue to dig at the very foundation of our social structure. This does not mean India is not on the way to progress. There is an overall improvement in general health of the nation, in the fields of industry, science and technology. But the rank and file is not impressed by this since the consequence of this so called progress has not percolated to them, whereas the higher authorities and the intellectuals put on an act of patriotism. It is the picture of this India that we generally see neglected in the Indian short story in English.

In “The wed lock” Deepa is a character a well-known person to tackle any sort of huddles in her life. In anyone’s life central character made herself to overcome any sort of difficulties to make own plans in the journey of her life.

In “A struggle of nuptials” Anju a girl is awaiting for her marriage, her mental struggle between her desire for self-identity and the pressure has to bury under the name of marriage. One cannot keep making war all the time.

In “The Heart of Women” Alka who is sophisticated in her behavior and manners has got married to a man who never minds her feelings.

Key words: Jamming, horrendous, traumatized, subservient, submissive, audacity, poignancy, heeled slippers, superciliousness.

The wed lock

In the whole world, women have been suffering for centuries to believe that they are in every respect inferior to men and God created them to play a suppressive role, helping and assisting in the efforts of men. Epics of all countries reaffirm this notion. In the tradition-ridden

India, steeped in superstitions, this conquest of women is complete. In a country where large families had been the norm, the woman had to please not only her husband, but her in-laws, about half-a-dozen or even more of them.

This conditioning was made complete with role models like Sita, Sumathi and Nalayani. The women had to sacrifice everything, all her desires and ambitions had to be spider in the web and she should always be willing to please the elders in every respect. Though many women had tried their best to put themselves into one or more of the role models, their psyche has been very deeply wounded and they have been sacrificing themselves out in their life. Though no one cared, In fact they were put on pious.

It is such a society and such women, that Shashi Deshpande have chosen to portray in her fiction. Many such women are portrayed in her short stories. Only some of them have been victimized by men or marginalized by their kith and kin. Many of them have been victims of themselves jamming all possible escape routes, flaming within the result of the condition they have been subjected to learn helplessness as psychologists would call it.

One such person is Deepa, the protagonist of “Travel Plans” who has just been married to a man settled in the United States of America and is eagerly looking forward to her entry into that El Dorado. Imaging her disappointment when all her dreams and expectations are crushed in a moment with the eye-opener that the man is already married which fact he has kept hidden from his parents and even goes to the extent of marrying a girl just to please them and abandon her the next day without any qualms.

The story starts with a mention of Parijaat tree, which the author uses as a symbol of a marriage going to dogs and takes us straight to the protagonist and her conflict. Deepa is in her in-law’s house. She has been living there since her husband tied the bridal not to her to satisfy his below par mother and rushed back to the U.S. But then, her romantic dreams had been traumatized by the revelation of a relative of hers. He knows that her husband Shriram is already married and is living with the other woman. “May be,” he offered helpfully, “they are not married”

The poor girl is obviously torn by her doubts, which are beautifully catalogued by the author.

“But this horrendous is unending. It astonishes me that my fears and discomforts don’t seem to reach these two people I live with. Perhaps they do sagacity it; perhaps they know everything and are just pretending. How do I know?”

“No, they can’t know it’s impossible.

Why, then, did they be resolute on such a hasty wedding?

That’s always how it is, stupid, with men who live abroad.

Why did they make no hassle why did they say ‘just a trouble-free wedding, don’t spend too much money?

Because they’re decent people, that’s why.

And why don’t they eternally ask me when I’m amalgamation him over there?

Why do they say nonentity about my exodus?” [40]

However many answers she finds, the questions keep prop up just the same. But the most horrible thing for her is to imaging their conversations.

“He’ll fluctuate, now that he’s married he’ll forget about that woman, all his desirable was a wife, he’s a first-rate boy, in fact, didn’t he get nuptial just to gratify us? He cares about us. He knows we necessitate someone here to help us, how many sons would have done this…….” [40]

All such feelings and thousands of other questions keep nerve-racking Deepa. She cannot even fix on how much the elders discern, whether they know at all. Are they candid or are they putting up an act, to shield their son?

Deepa has written to Shriram asking for the precision, but barely has the audacity to be given the retort. But earlier than that, the elders have by now taken tenure of her, principally the mother-in-law. [41]

“He’s ill at ease when she tries to avow her clout over one. But for her, it is correct and customary. She never thinks of me as an alien. I’m the person she has had in mind since Shriram grew out of puberty, the one she has known will be the part of their family the day her son gets married.....Her daughter-in-law.”

After this revelation, there are so many things which are revealing to her; his lack of enthusiasm while touching her, his sitting apart, his diminishing eyes, having just emptiness in them. “It had like a block of ice to me,” recalls Deepa.

While going to office, Deepa feels a sense of release which she displays by racing her motorbike. There she receives the letter from Shriram, the one she was eager after hope she would never receive. It shocks her, sending a nervous chill all over her. The letter is full of apologies and excuses, explaining that he did it all to please his below par mother and feels sorry for he has ‘deflowered’ her.

Deepa goes to her maternal home, just to find everybody gripped in their own affairs. There will be no use talking to them. She lies down in the bedroom, trying her best to placate herself. But images of her wedding night keep lingering her. Even that, ‘the high point of a woman’s life,’ has been a fusty and substandard affair. He feels sorry for that. But there is much more to it than just the physical relation. Her entire psyche has been affected, and now stands betrayed and desperate.

She goes to her in-laws’ house to find her mother-in-law in sickbed. Without a thought, she starts attending on her, readily, with a sense of belonging. The openness with which she uses ‘we’ amazes her. She even phones to her mother informing of her mother-in-law’s illness. All for the reason that she has been brought up strictly according to Indian tradition. It may also be because of her alteration, her concern for a colleague – human being.

Contrast this with the heartlessness of her husband, who got married to an American but could never congregate enough audacity to inform his parents of it. His apparent distress for his mother notwithstanding, he cheats them very shoddily. He thinks that he is not spoiling the future of an educated, talented girl.

We hear such things very habitually – of young men going overseas, marrying someone there, and while they comes India they marry someone of their parents’ choice, just to please the elders. Why cannot these men, who want be lionized and worshipped just because they are men, gather enough courage to divulge the truth to the parents? The woman has to bear all those up to her existence. Once a wedding ritual is over, everything is over for the woman. In this story, the author says that Deepa is thinking of opening a travel agency which she thought about before. But what about a married life? When will Shriram and his like be brought to books? These and some more questions remain unrequited, yearning for an answer.

The story is beautifully narrated. The characterization of Deepa as a full-grown, civilized, sophisticated woman is admirable, adding to the poignancy of the tale. The title of the story is sarcastic with the travel plans never made, but the central character being hard-pressed into making her own plans for her flight of life.

A struggle of nuptials

“The Homecoming” is a versatile tale in which we see women’s problems of many types. The entire main typeset are women, and each has a different point of view, in harmony with the mind-set she has refined.

The protagonist is Suman – a juvenile girl, still toddler to her mother, who is subservient, trusty, submissive and caring, all that one will give the impression of being for in a ‘good girl.’ She obeys when her mother sends her to work in her place, tempting her with ‘a good breakfast before going to school.’

Her elder sister, Anju, on the other hand, is very different. She resents the great idea of working as a housemaid. “Yes, yes tutor her to become like you – to work like a plague and be gratifying for the leftovers they give you, for the unattractive place they allow you to live in.” [152]

Her mother is realistic. She is acquiescent to her lot. “What is wide of the mark with her doing a diminutive work, and having something filling in stomach prior to she goes to school? What can I offer her nevertheless?” [152]

The leading role, Suman, is in high spirits with her lot. She starts flattering Tai, her mistress, perceptibly. She cherishes every lobby group she makes. She is all out to please her in every way she can.

Deprived Suman does not have any hunch of what is in store for her, for all of them. The entire world of hers is to be turned topsy – turvey. Anju, who had always been feeling locked in a detrimental place, out of the blue announces that she is going to get married and get away from it all.

“Marriage? You think it’s a game? A child’s game? You meet a boy you know nothing – neither his caste, his home, nor his family.” [153] Anju’s mind is already made up. She is unwavering to boast her way. She is even yell out to her mother who tries to purpose. “I am on familiar terms with why you crave to stop me. You don’t crave to baggy my pay.” [153] Asserting that she does not want to fritter away all her life, crackdown the dirt of other people’s homes. Anju gets married and she even flaunts her newly won position ‘exquisitely walking in high – heeled slippers’.

Then comes the taciturn surprise. Anju comes back, a crust – traumatized bride, cocooned all within her. What is terrible of arrival it is!. Then comes the disclosure that she had been desolate by her husband.

Suman feels feeble. She cherishes an affectionate hope that her mistress can do something, though she cannot define what that ‘something’ can be. “Tai knows what to do; she works in that place where they help women.” The child seeks Tai’s help who assures to visit them.

Her mother does not support of any external intervention since that is against the time-honored folklore. No one can help when it’s her own husband who ill-treats her. The ties between the husband and wife are consecrated; the Indian folk strappingly hold on to this opinion though actual events attest otherwise. The husband can do anything to his wife, no one, not even the police, can hold up.

The sleeping Suman is woken by the noise caused by the man’s beating his wife, Anju. He is heartless, vicious and cruel. No one in the household can withstand the sight of Anju being beaten black and blue, but there is slight they can do. The man is too strong for all of them put together.

What comes as even more brutal a shock to the reader is the attitude of the mistress. Tai, who sounded be helpful the day before, is now totally helpless. She can do nothing more than being a silent bystander to the scene of the ill fated woman being bundled and dragged rancid to her “home,” – it is an irony that she has made a home for helpless as the illiterate and poverty stricken mother. Both the women display “learned helplessness” of the same measure, though they are in a social context apart.

One slight satisfaction is that the story ends with a gleam of hope, however badly lit it can be. After the entire occurrence is over, leaving everyone taken aback, Suman tidies the room saying “She’ll come back, we won’t let her stay with him. We’ll bring her back Ai.”

“Bring her back? How? You’re talking big. Big, girl now, huh?” [161]

Suman says nothing, but tresses back gallantly at her mother. After she’d done tidying the room, Suman lies down in her place. For the first time in months she did not perceive the beam streaming through the window.

Usually Shashi Deshpande’s women characters take life as it is, though it hurts them. After all, one cannot keep making combat all the time. But she seems to feel there are occasions when one is driven to the extreme.

Anju has to suffer for her idealistic mind-set to life. She has not trained herself to submit to the circumstance like Suman, the subservient daughter. But why should Anju be so viciously treated, why be supposed to fate be so unkind to her? There is no answer other than that men like her husband have been made to believe that viciousness to the wife is a natural thing to do, which they take remedy to often to give find expression for to all their frustrations and even to prove, sometimes to themselves, that their masculinity is in dexterity. It is the retort of the mistress which is horrendous. In spite of her education and social awareness, she is feeling helpless, a classic example of learned defenselessness.

The mother’s picturisation of the foulness of the family is excellent. With a few strokes she is capable of drawing a picture of poverty. The single bedroom where everyone fights for space, the bedwetting brother, the startled look on the mother’s face when Suman complains of pain in her stomach, her relief when she knows that it is not a symptom of youth – all this add up to a picture of total helplessness that is haunting the family.

The author also uses a few symbols very effectively. The mirror newly purchased by Anju, the morning sunshine is Tai’s house. Anju’s high heeled slippers, her hairclip which is a symbol of her pride at first and becomes a symbol of slavery at the end – all these are effectively used.

Naturally there are a number of stories by Shashi Deshpande wherein she portrays male bigotry which expects self-abnegation from the women. They are immersed only in their own life, not even pausing to think of the woman as a human being with a heart of her own. It is such people who cause permanent hurt to the female psyche and yet be totally insensible of it. One such person is the fiancé in “I Want.....”

Shashi Deshpande here speaks of a girl awaiting her marriage, her mental struggle between her desire for self-identity and the pressure to bury it under the name of marriage.

The Heart of Women

Alks, the protagonist, a woman of twenty seven, awaiting her marriage, is tired of proposals and rejections. Everytime she has to come, do a Namaste and sit before them as if she were a thing being exhibited. Later the news will come that she is rejected – “they’ve refused.”

She wonders how do they know, after seeing her for just a few minutes that she will not do? How can they know about her at all? These are all the typical questions of the educated women now-a-days. In a patriarchal society, these questions never lead to conclusions but only to confusions. As we are educated never lead to conclusions but only to confusions. As we are educated we learn to obey the society and conceal our wounds as well as our pains. This story clearly focuses on the censorship of our womenfolk. Whenever she is exhibited, the woman in Alka is fuming and protests, but she is callously crushed. Her words, “The tenth time, I’ve been exhibited and inspected” [146] depicts her wounds. There are thousands of such Alkas across the country.

To her parents it is a shame that they have a daughter of twenty-seven and not married. When the boy’s family come to visit her, her father asks whether they want to ask the ‘girl’ some questions. The word ‘girl’ wounds her. Why cannot he say ‘Alka?’

He asks her father whether he could meet her and talk to her in private. Her father readily agrees without even asking her. Despite the fact that this ready authorization infuriates her, feeling helpless she sits there, listening to the conversation as if she was an outsider.

Then a meeting of the ‘boy’ and the ‘girl’ takes place. They go to a restaurant. For a long time he has been ordering something. He does not look at her directly. But soon he falls into an easy intimate tone, as if they knew each other well. She feels outraged as if an intimacy she does not want is being forced on her. At the beginning he says,

“I don’t suppose you intend going on with your job, do you, when you’re married?” [147]

She is bewildered ‘Is this to know each other?’ Then he enumerates his expectations. She knows that he expects her to say, ‘Yes, I can, Yes, I do. No. I won’t.’ She cries within her, “I want.....I want.....I want.....what about me?” But he never asks what she want; nobody asks her-not even her parents. She waits patiently, though she is getting irritated. She expects somehow he may ask ‘what do you want?’ When compared to his wishes, her desires are very childlike – a man, a husband, a good companion, a good marriage, children. But he doesn’t give her a chance to question or to answer.

That night when she goes home, she angrily avoids her parents. She doesn’t know what to do or where to go. At last she goes to her father. When she wants to reject this proposal her father openly displays his fear. He has made patient enquiries and is satisfied with the boy. A decent boy with a good career and a good family, what more one asks for? It is an irony that the bridegroom can go on telling all the things he wants, because he is a man. Whereas nothing but getting married without uttering a word is what they all want on her part, because she is a woman. They all want her to fit in to then mould they have made.

Once again her wants drop off. They can understand if she asks for a man with a four-figure salary or a man with a car. But if she asks for a man who understands her, they will call her crazy. When her father asks her straightforwardly what she wants. Alka has to reply. Her tears are not contrived, they are real. But she cannot articulate her wants in the way her parents can understand. Her worry is that the man she is about to marry is enormously self-centred who thinks only of himself and is looking for a compliant, obedient, self-sacrificing wife who will be happy to please him in every respect but will not expect in any way to be pleased by him. He expects absolute surrender on her part. She has to be pleasing not only to him but even to his mother. She has to cultivate learned helplessness and learn to live according to the expectations of her husband and in-laws.

The man in “incursion” is in no way different. He has made, perhaps even before his marriage, his own plans for the wedding night, which he euphemistically calls honeymoon,

which is purely a physical affair as far as he is concerned. He goes about the planning and execution furtively perhaps because it is not decent to talk about these things to his newly married life.

Consulting her, or taking her into confidence regarding a matter to which she is an equal partner, is out of the question as far as he is concerned. The woman on the other hand, has her own views on honeymoon, which she believes will be taken into consideration.

In this story Shashi Deshpande reveals how a heart is wounded under the name of marriage. Marriage is a must in Indian society; never mind what is her ambition, what she thinks of life, she has to put herself within the circle of marriage.

A woman who is sophisticated in behavior and manners has got married to a man who never minds her feelings. When the girl objects, her father threatens that he has two more daughters to get married. She wants to achieve something; but her father thinks her marriage is an important responsibility to him. No one asks her if she agrees; it has been taken for granted. When she goes to her father he asks 'Why?' again and again. And, "what will you do then?" In a panic I had asked myself, "What will I do?" And I had thought of a thousand answers, but none to the question. 'What's wrong with him?' [149] Being helpless, she married than man. She expects nothing but understanding; understanding of her husband.

The honeymoon is approved and she takes it as a fine chance to understand him. But he takes it a fine chance to have physical union with her. Even from the beginning he awaits 'those moments' eagerly. He goes all out to take momentary ownership of a remedy used by the company executives. After a long and mind-numbing walk, they arrive at the resort. The room had the usual insipidness and impersonality where people stay for a short time and go away; just a hodgepodge of stale smells. The room boy has gone out after getting their order for tea. Though when he was in the room, she was painfully aware of a secret smile, a smirk on his face that showed an awareness of what they had come there for. She feels uneasy when she realizes that the place has often been used for shady purposes by the higher ups. Then her husband suddenly bursts into speech, telling her how fortunate they are to get that place for their honeymoon. He is blind to the insinuating looks of the servants. His emphasizing of the words 'complete privacy' sickens her. It does not look like a place where families come and stay. She feels that the men who came there did so with 'other women' – she dares not have a look even at those beds. The sheets looked grabby and the pillow covers nauseatingly fatty. She wants to ask them to change the covers and sheets but she was afraid of the room boy, who gave her meaningful looks, would perhaps make lewd jokes and laugh aloud with other servants. The husband's sweat smell, hard cheeks, uncut toe nails, noisy chewing of food, belch after meals, the dirty bedspreads, bug smell in the hotel room, everything is abhorrent to her and she feels awkward.

He seems unaffected by the atmosphere or any miserable and as he bums a popular tune. It is obvious to her how unaware he is of everything but of what is to happen between them, 'making them truly husband and wife'. She thinks "a month back we had not even heard of each other.' When he calls out her name, using it so familiarly, she is startled and is a little angry too. When he tries to embrace her and kiss her, she turns her face away from him; he lets her go abruptly with a foolish, angry look on his face. Almost with a note of frenzy, he asks,

'What's this? Why are you behaving like this?'

'Like what?' I tried to keep my tone level, innocent.

'Avoiding me. Don't think I haven't noticed it, ever since we came here you've been.....been.....avoiding me,' he ended lamely.

She stood silent and stammered at last, “We.....we scarcely know each other.” He was puzzled, “Know each other? What has that to do with it? Aren’t we married now? And how will we start getting to know each other if you put on such a touch – me – not err?” [207]

She wants to say that she wants to know all about him. “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.....I wanted to tell him how shy and frightened I was about exposing the mysteries of my body to him.....”. [207] But she knows that she can say none of these things to him. As he is all keyed up for a different experience, he will turn a deaf ear to her. But how can she have sex with a man she scarcely knows?

Shashi Deshpande frankly exposes the typical Indian males, who are literate but not educated. There are women who cannot suppress their spirit of freedom. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers they expect some understanding from their husbands. But when they know that they are tied up they adapt themselves; they learn to be helpless.

And then she has drifted off into sleep at some time, has a confused dream that she is lying there on the beach, where she has so longed to go and that the waves are pounding on her. Suddenly, she wakes up to realize that the sound of the sea is real, but she is on bed, not on the beach. And it is not the sea that is pounding her body, but he, her husband, who is forcing his body on her. She is too frightened to speak and tries to push him away but it is like trying to move a rock; without uttering a word – his movement had the same rhythm, the same violence as the movements of the sea; yet, “I could have borne the battering of the sea better, for that would hurt, but no humiliate like this” [208] what he does is an intrusion into her privacy, a licensed rape.

Shashi Deshpande practically portrays the young lady’s sensitive nature, her mental anguish, her fear of exposing the mysteries of her body to him, her home sick feelings. Periyar E.V.R. has once said that in India every wedding amounts to violence against woman. This story reminds us of that. Shashi Deshpande has the ability to choose right titles. “Intrusion” is a very appropriate title. Shashi Deshpande boldly depicts in this story that though people seem to be cultured, women are still treated as slaves, for is it not true that a woman should be a courtesan in bed?

A.V.Gopal Reddy puts it “As long as the woman is innocent and pretends to be innocent and submits herself, she is likely to have a smooth sail in her conjugal life. On the other hand, if she chooses to offer any resistance for whatever reason to the impatient/ugly advances of the ‘stranger – husband’ on the wedding night, it could lead to mortification through violence or rough treatment of her body.....’Intrusion’ is a measure of inadequacy of the male superciliousness and swine power and prominently delineates how the right of a woman to her body and her privacy is hunted to be sullied.

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