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‘Gendered Home’ in the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande**Jayanta Rana**Asst. Professor in English,
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Home is a geographical space -- a site where we live but it is also ‘an ideal and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings’¹. Somerville(1992) has picked out seven key aspects of being at home: shelter, hearth,(emotional and physical well-being),heart(loving and caring relations), privacy, roots(source of identity and meaning, fullness),abode and paradise(ideal home as distinct from everyday life)².Down the ages, we have associated ‘home’ as a haven, far away from the hostility and surveillance of the outside world. It is in the privacy of home that an individual gives expression to his ideas. The domestic items from curtains and furniture to books and records all contribute to the development of an individual. In all its details, a home is thus crucial to how an individual establishes his world.

Significantly, if a house establishes one’s world, then, it is still very much a man’s world. Marion young (1997) brings in Luce Irigaray’s ideas to explore the gendering of home:

“...man can build and dwell in the world in patriarchal culture [Irigaray suggests] only on the basis of materiality and nurturance of women. In the idea of ‘Home’, man projects onto woman the nostalgic longing for the lost wholeness of the original mother. To fix and keep hold of his identity man makes a house, puts things in it and confines there his woman who reflects his identity to him. The price she pays for supporting this subjectivity, however, is dereliction, having no self of her own.”³

In the process, the subjectivity of males gets emphasized while everything that a woman does within the confinement of a home bolsters the male idea of ‘home’. Young emphasizes four important attributes of home that should be available to all people: “safety; individuation, whereby each individual has place for the basic activities of life, privacy; and preservation.”⁴ Unfortunately, what a home promises to a male member of society, is denied to a woman. Inside a home, a woman is not safe, not an individual, and her privacy is denied in most cases. This differential treatment is undoubtedly has its roots in gendering of home which is crucial in lived experiences and imaginaries of home. The gendered nature of home has been a major theme in the short stories of Indian women writers. Their writings are evocative of the frustrated lives of women inside the patriarchal home and also about how women go about resisting it. In this article, the short stories of Shashi Deshpande (b.1938) would come under close scrutiny as they explore the ‘silent’ but simultaneously creative and fulfilling lives of Indian women belonging to different ages and socio-economic conditions. These stories are about how, for these women, home is often not a haven: it is not a space in which they can claim privacy and autonomy.

Home promises an individual a space where he can relax and be confident about oneself away from the prowling and scrutinizing outside world. However, in the gendered space of home violence has always been a constant companion of women. This can range from physical assault to verbal intimidation and harassment. All these contribute towards

the breakdown of the myth of 'home' as haven. Consequently, camaraderie in marriage also gets replaced by deathly silence. In Deshpande's short story *Can you hear Silence?*, the fear and anxiety of the child is palpable as she gives voice to the violence in the household which is now a daily occurrence:

‘It's terrible when he (the husband) is angry. He doesn't see us; he does look about as if we're all ghosts.’⁵

The story depicts a married couple in the family space through the eyes of their child who is happy to find them in their 'legitimate' place: 'there's a papa shaving, squinting at himself in the mirror, ... And mummy's in the kitchen.'⁶ This is home as 'haven'—it is cozy till the peace is disturbed by the next round of violence. Deshpande, in her stories, unequivocally, emphasizes this all permissive nature of violence in women's lives whether they live inside the security of home or work and survive the outside world. As women grow up, they are encouraged to build a wall around them to keep themselves away from the scary outsiders, resulting in the gradual internalization of fear which ultimately leaves them defenseless and less-confident of themselves. Marriage is that desired aim in a woman's life when finally they would no longer need to live inside that 'invisible wall': in reality, one sort of circumscribed life leads to a different kind of dependence. In Deshpande's *It Was Dark*, a woman is reminded of how submission to a man's wishes makes life a lot less difficult: 'I had submitted and miraculously, it had made things easier.'⁷ She, however, decides to let her daughter live inside the walls but only to find her child sexually abused. This does not startle her as she grew up with the constant fear of violence that now stalks her daughter's life. In a male-dominated society manly violence has been as 'normal' as 'womanly' submission. If men grow up learning to be violent in his actions, women also learn to cope up with the one singular piece of lesson: 'you must submit.'⁸ Submission is key to safety and peace in a gendered home which has different codes of behavior for both male and female. Refusal to toe the gender- line could be always violent as the newly wedded woman learns at her cost on the honeymoon trip in Deshpande's story *The Intrusion*. The 'complete privacy' of the hotel room allows the husband to do what he wants to do completely 'unaware of ... [his wife's] feelings leaving her 'completely sickened'. Privacy is as alien to a woman as control over her own body in a patriarchal set-up. The story, therefore, ends with the husband 'pounding' his wife's body and soul: '... the intrusion into my [the wife] privacy, the violation of my right to myself.'⁹

Parental home, on the other hand, promises not only shelter but also security away from the hostile marital home. However, as she enters into a new home post-marriage, she gradually loses all that she holds dear relating to her parental home. Nostalgic memories are all that remain: 'when I was a child we lived in a house surrounded by trees. I often woke up to see a sparrow hopping into the window near my bed.'¹⁰ Still, she could go back into a past when she felt overjoyed even with the sound of rain falling on a tiled roof. The protagonist of the story calls everything of the past home 'beautiful'. This is evocative of her 'inner peace' now, sadly, lost to squabbles and tortures of a marital relationship. The idea is also echoed in Vandana Singh's short story, *The Wife*, in which the protagonist does not even have the comforts of the parental home. Her parents are dead leaving her to wonder 'where was she to go?'¹¹ Her marital home has never been hers: it has been a 'sarai', a temporary stop on the way to the other place.' The role of a wife entailed years of tight-rope walking but, at the end, she is free to go

her own ways which promises “a single current of cool air, the forest’s breath, the lifeline of dreams”.¹²

Deshpande has been unique in the ways she has charted this history of gender violence from contemporary reality back into mythical times of the Mahabharata. In *The Inner Rooms*, a retelling of the ancient epic, Deshpande represents Bhishma as a patriarchal lord who abducts three sisters to forcibly mate them with the ‘idiot’ Vichitribriya. While the two of these sisters accept their abduction, Ambalika refuses to fall in line. She sympathises with Bhishma as a man trapped inside ‘other people’s ideas’ but a life inside the four walls of a home built on forceful abduction and a shameful violation of women’s dignity is inconceivable to her. She, therefore, goes out into a life of freedom but also suffers for her sisters lost in their ‘inner rooms’. Inside their rooms, these women live to breed male child, perpetuating and strengthening the patriarchal cycle. Only Ambalika could escape that ‘degradation by rejecting that same husband in an open assembly’.

Feminists have been vociferous in highlighting the home as a gendered space whereby people are differently positioned in relation to gender and quite differently experience their lived space. Massey (1991) has coined the term ‘power geometry’ to underline the gendering of home-space:

“... places are shaped by power geometry, whereby different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections.”¹³

The housewife, thus, lives an isolated life, is denied her own space and privacy because the household is organized in such a manner that she constantly serves the need of the male members and patriarchal priorities. This differential approach has been advocated even by John Ruskin in his lecture ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ which was published in the volume *Sesame and Lilies* in 1865. In this lecture, Ruskin presents women as passive, self-effacing, pious, graceful and as innocent as flowers. This promised garden of household is bounded by walls—a safe ‘haven’, promising security and shelter for women. In other words, Ruskin presents women as a synonym of home:

“... And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is...”¹⁴

On the other hand, a man is seen as an adventurer who crosses all boundaries to taste his mettle and manhood. However, more than a century later, feminists now identify home as a major site of women’s oppression where they are denied their identity. Home is, undeniably, the site which instead of securing women’s lives is quite opposite: violent, insecure and indifferent. This violence is a recurring theme in the short stories of Indian women. Moreover, home, for women, turns into a veritable prison. In Deshpande’s *The Inner Rooms*, the protagonist gradually realizes how “relentlessly ... the world had closed in on her, pushing her into the women’s rooms”¹⁵ Both men and women are socialized into playing the gender roles to perfection. Thus, a boy who grows up to be a man, invariably, plays the same patriarchal game “according to some foolish rules made by men”. This ultimately results in loss of his ‘self’. The home is where these rules are ironed out –men dictate and women give in with or without a fight. This is the space where a woman’s spirit is domesticated. Her life gets lost in the endless chores of the household which is vital to the institution of marriage. The household work is celebrated and simultaneously

denigrated as ‘paltry’ in comparison to a man’s job in the outside world. Dolores Hayden (2002) points to the importance of a woman’s job inside the four walls of a house in these lines:

“Each household has a kitchen and laundry to clean, and separate living areas require the individual supervision of children. They also involve nurturing activities, cooking, home remedies for illnesses, emotional support for family members, arranging recreational activities, keeping in touch with the relatives, interaction with business (shops) and institutions (schools). But all these are unrecognized”¹⁶

Marion young (1997) is also unequivocal in appreciating the ‘creative value’ of household work, although, it remains ‘unnoticed’. In Deshpande’s *A wall Is Safer*, the protagonist tries to stifle her spirit and keeps herself confined inside a wall: “with a wall, you can’t even see what’s on the other side.” She tells her friend Sushama about how busy she is with all her domestic work:

“I have enough to do. I cook, I clean, I wash, I iron, I read, I listen to music, help the kids with their lessons...”¹⁷

For all her efforts, she has been crowned as the ‘self-effacing’ wife of a successful man. However, this does not take away the emptiness of her existence although she has hardly any time to ponder over her problems. Betty Friedman (1963) delves down into a homemaker’s psyche to highlight the problem of women’s confinement, denying them self-fulfillment:

“As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’ ”¹⁸

Marriage is supposed to be liberating for a woman when she would no longer need to live inside that ‘invisible wall’. In reality, one sort of circumscribed life leads to a different kind of dependence. Here, rules are set: men would live a vibrant life outside while women need to slog all day long at home. It is therefore quite normal for the wife to be jealous of her husband in *A wall Is Safer*. However, in *Why a Robin*, despite all her attempts in fulfilling her roles as a mother and a wife, the protagonist gets branded as a failure. This gendered nature of housework is clearly linked to the ‘power geometry’ at home. Again in *Antidote to Boredom*, a husband-wife relationship runs on formalities which turn the home into a cage for the woman. Home for the male member is about certain privileges which he comes to expect and demand. As long as the home is not disturbed, daily chores are performed and things are where they should be he is hardly bothered.

From a feminist perspective, these home-making activities of women are problematic in a number of respects as Dolores Hayden (2002) notes in her book *Redesigning the American dream, The future of Housing, work and family life*:

“...homemakers ...often found that the only time their work of cooking, cleaning, and nurturing compelled attention was when it was not done.”¹⁹

In this Deshpande story, the husband finds everything, in the household, in order and is not disturbed even by his wife’s extramarital affair. After twelve years of marital life they are now locked in a relationship not mired by cruelty or harshness but proves to be tiring and

irredeemably 'dull'. Deshpande presents her female characters living 'self-effacing' and 'pativrata' lives to the hilt but just inside the surface a kind of discontent brews:

'... suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then?'²⁰

Deshpande should know about this inner discontent as she clearly states in her essay *Of Kitchens and goddesses* '...being a goddess can be very tiring'.²¹

If Ruskin believed in a 'walled garden' for women, that 'garden' of home could not make women secure, self-reliant and free from violence. An alternative to Ruskin's idea is found in what Deshpande has to say about women's liberation: "... an understanding of oneself is what really liberates."²² In Deshpande's stories, the female characters go through, forced to live by the patriarchal rule-book and give up their individual aspirations but they always know what is happening to them. The self-realization comes at a great cost to them, leaving them sad and pining for that elusive sense of happiness. However, as Bunkse (2004) said, 'Home' is also sometimes a state of mind.²³ Deshpande's women find their creative expression in everything they do inside the households. In *A Wall Is Safer*, the protagonist refuses to be branded as a mere 'exploited' woman despite being a full-time housewife who cooks, cleans, washes in a deadening routine. Moreover, she has this 'fierce surge of longing 'to be a creative artist. Likewise, in B. Chandrika's *The Story of a poem*, the protagonist looks to poetry to get out of a claustrophobic life of daily chores. She seems to be happy reciting her poems even when she is busy peeling vegetables. Her poetry seems to rescue her into "into another world that has rain, the rhythm of rain". This creative work promises the women, locked in a suffocating home-space of patriarchy, the lightness, freedom of an alternative – the mindscape- an open space where women can live and work to her heart's content. Until that happens, women like Sushma in B. Chandrika's *The Story of a Poem* would continue to tear away her poems into small pieces as soon as her husband and children arrive at the doorstep. Sushma loses her 'poem'-her freedom- because she still remains "the ideal wife and the ideal mother" in the gendered home.

Notes:

1. Blunt Alison & Dowling Robyn, *Home*, Routledge, U.S.A., 2006, p.3.
2. Somerville Peter, *Homelessness and the meaning of Home: Rooflessness or the Rootlessness?*, *International journal of Urban and regional research* 16(4):529-539, December 1992.
3. Irigaray Luce, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Cornell University press, New York, 1992.
4. Young Marion, *Intersecting voices, dilemmas of gender, political philosophy and policy*, Princeton University Press, New York, 1997, p.148.
5. Deshpande Shashi, 'Can You hear Silence?' from *Intrusion and other Stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.24.
6. *Ibid*, .P.24.
7. Deshpande Shashi, 'It Was Dark' from *Intrusion and other Stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.32.
8. *Ibid*, .p.32.
9. Deshpande Shashi, 'The Intrusion' from *The Intrusion and other Stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.41.
10. Deshpande Shashi, 'Why a Robin?' from *Intrusion and other Stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.12.

11. Singh Vandana, *The Wife from katha Short Stories by Indian Women*, edited by Urvashi Butralia, Stanza, New Delhi, 2007, p.167.
12. Singh Vandana, *The Wife from katha Short Stories by Indian Women*, edited by Urvashi Butralia, Stanza, New Delhi, 2007, p.169.
13. Massey D., *A Global Sense of place*, *Marxism Today*, June, :24-9, 1991.
14. Ruskin John, *Queen's garden from Sesame and Lilies (Lectures)*, Arc Manor, Maryland, 2008, p.59.
15. Deshpande Shashi, *'The Inner Rooms' from Intrusion and other Stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.95.
16. Hayden Dolores, *Redesigning the American dream, The future of Housing, work and family life*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2002, p.82.
17. Deshpande Shashi, *'A Wall Is Safer' from Intrusion and other stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.120.
18. Friedan Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*, W.W.Norton, New York, 1963, p.15.
19. Hayden Dolores, *Redesigning the American dream, The future of Housing, work and family life*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2002, p.84.
20. Deshpande Shashi, *'An Antidote to Boredom' from Intrusion and other Stories*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1993, p.121.
21. Deshpande Shashi, *Of Kitchens and goddesses from Writing from the Margin and other Essays*, Penguin, Viking, New Delhi, 2003, p.18.
22. Deshpande Shashi, *Writing from the Margin from Writing from the Margin and other Essays*, Penguin, Viking, New Delhi, 2003, p.159.
23. Bunkse E., *Geography and the Art of Life*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2004, p. 94.

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