Shashi Deshpande is a distinguished writer of contemporary India. In a writing career of four decades, she has written ten novels, eight volumes of short stories, four books for children, a volume of essays and more recently, translations of her illustrious father Shriranga’s works into English. Several of her novels have been translated into a number of Indian and European languages. Though her work has received belated critical attention, critics have, by and large focused on her novels, taking into consideration her women protagonists and issues related to feminist concerns and modes of resistance. Some critics have attempted to discuss her work, particularly her novels, in the context of postcolonial theory. Strangely enough, her stories, which constitute a sizeable portion of her literary output, have received only casual and lukewarm attention from the critics. This critical inattention is evident when one looks at a handful of articles on her stories. The present study, therefore, seeks to analyse her short fiction so that Deshpande’s mastery of this genre may be adequately
established. At the thematic level, her stories contain a good deal of similarity to her novels though the focus in the stories is circumscribed and pointed. It is worthwhile to point out that this study consciously avoids a detailed discussion of the formal and technical features of her stories for the precise reason that her stories are usually written in the first person narrative with non-linear plots. The study is divided into seven chapters.

The opening chapter of this study is entitled 'Introduction. It takes into account the life and works of Shashi Deshpande and considers the centrality of gender in her writing. There is a brief survey of the critical reception of her work in India and elsewhere. Majority of critics tend to categorise her work as woman-centered and gender-specific. Hence terms like, 'feminist' have gained a wide currency with reference to her writing. On her part, Shashi Deshpande has stated an aversion to descriptions and the plethora of titles which inevitably attach themselves to writers and their writing today. She dismisses these essentialist and reductive labels and definitions which are so integral to academic theories of the time. In fact she considers herself only a novelist and short story writer. Truth is, she is a story-teller who is deeply interested in human beings, in the human condition. Through the stories she tells, she is probing into this
condition. She asks questions about life, about death, about our relationships with one another, with society and our moral values. She also adds that her works are 'not' not Indian, not Indo-English, not woman, not-feminist, not third-world. Instead, she prefers to be called just a writer as the labels are more often than not constricting and limiting. The choice of gender and private spaces is; therefore, deliberate for her works deal not only with ordinary women in ordinary, urban situations but stem from a firm belief that our lives are, to a great extent, governed by gender. Women, she feels, have not participated in the process of word-making, the stories, myths and legends in our Puranas, epics and kathas have been written by men. Her seminal statement on her authorial position has come to stay as her manifesto, "my writing comes out of consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman.' Evidently this statement is justified by her novels and short stories. Her short stories, in particular, substantiate this remark for they give a perspective on women in their complex and real relationships. Realism that pervades her novels informs her short stories too.

The second chapter deals with family which emerges as a central concern in her short stories. Apparently, families are usually seen as a unit
binding the members together on individual, social and psychological planes. However, the network of family-relations is more complex than it appears. In depicting the families in her stories, Deshpande writes about mothers and daughters, grandmothers and wives, women working outside the home, negotiating a balance between tradition and modernity. Within the orbit of family, women analyse or just express their insecurities and fears and desires. The central focus of this chapter is on mother-daughter relationship as some of her stories depict poignantly the mother-daughter relationship seen from the perspective of a mother trying to reach across a barrier to her daughter. Deshpande examines the problematic of the mother-daughter relation in some of her stories to show how the image of motherhood is a stereotype, framed and conditioned by myths. So, she exposes the idealism attached to Indian mothers and lays bare the reality that mothers are essentially human beings; they do not always love, self-effacing and sacrificing, they can be selfish, angry and nasty too at times. Daughters too sometimes are loving and sympathetic to their mothers but a number of stories present an uneasy or conflictual mother-daughter relationship. This explains the fact that both mothers and daughters are after all human beings and the pattern of their relations continues to change according to the situations of life.
The third chapter considers man-woman relationship in Deshpande's stories which foreground the problems faced by women in Indian society. Needless to overemphasise the fact that society in India and elsewhere in the world is indisputably male-governed with women still remaining on the margin. Despite the loud claims and proclamations of women’s emancipation empowerment and man-woman equality, women are at disadvantage. Even the institution of marriage privileges men more than women. Women in Deshpande's stories make efforts at reconciling the personal aspirations with thwarting traditional social structure. However, very few-of her women protagonists out step the bounds and restraint though they remonstrate, and sometimes rebel against the constricting and oppressive social norms. But the consequences of such rebellions invariably come about as suffering and loss on the part of women. As all the codes of society are framed and governed by men, women are bound to follow them.

A discussion of the multiple concerns forms the content of the fourth chapter. These multiple concerns are parent-child relationship, extramarital relationships, domestic violence against women, inter-caste marriage, abortion, the plight of the girl-child, the pain of child-birth, lesbianism, political and social issues, the loneliness and alienation of
older women in the family etc. While dealing with these issues and concerns, Deshpande presents the various colours on the spectrum of human life. Her stories offer a critique of the ills prevailing in Indian society, though she consciously abstains from extending any moral suggestions or solutions of the problems posed in the stories. However, the issues inspire further questions and evoke responses in the readers to wake up to the realities of life.

The fifth chapter of the study is devoted to a discussion of the sense of loss embedded in many of Deshpande's stories. Deshpande is sensitive to this vulnerable aspect of human life. Death, bereavement, separation, grief, sorrow and suffering figure as various dimensions of the sense of loss. As a realist, Deshpande prefers to deromanticise life by showing its pain and ugliness and stresses the need for a meaning in the absurdity of existence. Birth and death compel the individual to confront the existential loneliness. In Deshpande's stories, as in her novels, death is a major concern. It appears through its actual occurrence in the present or through the memory of narrator drawn back to the past. Thus, it spans both present and past, affecting the lives of the bereaved ones in manifold ways. Death and loss by death affects people in different ways. It may cause bereavement, acute pain of loneliness, rejection, leading the
affected person to a dilemma and occasionally to a negation of life itself—suicide. Her stories ostensibly project the view that suffering and loss are part of human destiny.

The penultimate chapter bears the title ‘Mythical figures were also human beings.’ Deshpande’s preoccupation with realism affects her reading of myths, and she honestly undertakes a reinterpretation of myths in many of her stories. These stories contest the male interpretation and portrayal of women in myths. While admitting the value and importance of myths in our life, she hammers on a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them by women writers in India. Myths form the cultural fabric of our society; hence they are essential and need to be retained. However, she strongly feels that myths more often present idealized picture of the mythical figure, creating a distance from the realities of day-to-day human life. Her stories depict the mythical figures like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Amba and Duryodhana with all their humanness. What Deshpande tries to establish, in effect, is the individuality of these mythical figures as human being, divesting them from the aura of divinity and idealization. By subjecting these mythical figures to creative interpretation, Deshpande has explored the depth of
their inner life, their consciousness. In doing so, she has had to demolish the stereotype in order to bring out the grain of their humanness.

The seventh and the final chapter entitled ‘Conclusion’ sums up the observations made in the preceding discussion. It tries to establish Shashi Deshpande as a great short story writer who has perceived, interpreted and depicted the human condition in all its complexity. As a writer, she does not subscribe to any theory of political correctness and remains content with how she looks at human life and how it appeals to her.