Shashi Deshpande is one of the major Indian writers. In her writing career of nearly four decades, she has brought out twenty three books—ten novels, eight collections of short stories, four books for children and a collection of essays. As a writer she has addressed several social issues of contemporary India, worked through historical and traditional contexts, explored psychological conflicts and inner spaces, brought together time and space to create narrative meanings, and has related to multiple literary traditions of language gender and culture yet the act of writing has, more often than not, submerged into the fact of being a woman.

This battle between gender and creativity which the critics delight most in staging while evaluating a writer, especially a woman, is no less apparent in the context of novel and short story. Both are forms of fiction but the novel has caught up the imagination of the readers so powerfully that the short story has too often been relegated to an inferior position. The reason for the supremacy of novel as a fictional from and literary genre is its more than three century old tradition in Europe whereas short story as a term shakily established itself as late as 1933 in OED.
However, the fact remains that short story is much older than the novel. In all the excitement of the discovery and celebration of novel, critics and readers alike have tended to overtook short story as a separate and special fictional form. This in spite of the short story’s noble ancestry in fable, fairy, tale, myth, anecdote, (Biblical) parable, and in medieval romance and the tales of Chaucer and Boccaccio.

Like many great writers of fiction, Shashi Deshpande began her writing career with short stories, the first of which, The Legacy was published in a magazine in 1970. Her place as a novelist on the critical barometer is considerably high, and her reputation as a novelist has, as is quite often customary, stood in the way of the proper and balanced appreciation of her genius as a short story writer. This study, therefore, focuses on the short stories of Shashi Deshpande and attempts to emphasise the authorial preoccupations which have gone into the making of her short stories. It proposes to situate her as a major Indian story teller.

Born in 1938 in a Brahmin family, Shashi Deshpande grew in Dharwar and has subsequently lived in Bombay and lives presently in Bangalore. She is a prolific writer and her nearly too dozen books are a testimony of her amazing output. This becomes all the more remarkable considering the fact that her first publication, a collection of short stories, The Legacy, put together at the behest of her father Adya Rangachari, a renowned Sanskrit scholar and Kannada playwright, appeared in 1978. Two years later, in 1980, her first novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors, was published. Throughout the seventies she apparently wrote a number of
short – stories, publishing them in magazines and newspapers, some of which later found place in the collections of her short stories. The Dark Holds No Terrors is, however, not really the first novel to be written, the first being Roots and Shadows which was completed in 1978, but published only in 1983.²

The year 1982 saw the publication of a part-campus fiction and part-crime novella If I Die Today and in 1986, three collections of short stories came out in quick succession- It was the Nightingale, It was Dark, and The Miracle. Two years later, in 1988, appeared That Long Silence which brought her the Sahitya Akademi Award. And in 1993, after a gap of five years came out two novels poles apart from each other in plot construction and thematic thrust, the Binding Vine and Come up and Be Dead. The latter is once more a crime novel but stands in between children’s literature and adult fiction as it is a story located in a girl’s school. In the same year, Penguin India brought out the fifth collection of her stories ‘The Intrusion and Other Stories’. A Matter of Time came out in 1996 and Small Remedies was published in 2000. The Stone Women (2000) is sixth volume of short stories. The two volumes of collected stories which were published by Penguin in 2003 and 2004 respectively incorporate most of her published stories along with a few hitherto unpublished ones. Her penultimate novel Moving On came out in 2004 and ‘In the Country of Deceit (2008) is her latest novel. In addition to these fictional works, she has also published ‘Writing from the Margin and other Essays (2003) which includes several of her published enays, speeches, addresses and some unpublished prose- pieces. Deshpande is
also familiar with both Marathi and Kannada, as the first was her mother's language and second her father's, she has chosen to written in English. The other two have remained more or less 'spoken' languages. This is a subject which has come up for discussion in several of her interviews. English happens to be the only language she is competent in. But for the rest she admits it is a loss in more ways than one.

Writing in English in India, one feels sadly out of the mainstream. It places one in the same class as regional writers. She has reiterated this in her interviews with Vanamala Vishwanath and M.D. Riti.

In several of her interviews, essays and addresses, Deshpande has unequivocally stated her writerly concerns and defended her position as a writer. Writing from the Margin and other Essays contains statements about her choice of English as a mode of creative writing, her views on Indian writing in English and more particularly an explanation of her concerns as a writer. In the Dilemma of the Woman Writer she dwells not only on the conventional constrictive attitude to women's writing but also on the need to move on side that image, she reflects on the use of language and on the choice of narrators whether they should be male or female and the kind of psychology that may govern the choice of a narrator and goes on to comment on the use of anger and on the possibility of moving out of woman-oriented themes. On the other hand, she had dropped enough hints about her choice of creative writing as a vocation in her address 'On Women's Writing, a keynote address delivered at a conference organized at Tirupati. In her address she emphasized the need to deromanticise the image of woman as created by
male writers. The above two prose-pieces bring out her views on the art at creative writing vis-a-vis the role and position of woman writing. She seems to define her own work in several ways, first by describing what she found missing and later by describing what she has set out to do. According to her the dilemma of the woman writer lies in a sense of isolation and the absence of a model:

There was nothing, nobody I could model myself on. What all the English writing by Indian writers meant to me was this—I could tell myself, I don’t want to write like this, not like this, not like this.

In her address ‘On Women’s Writing’, Deshpande has traced the reasons why women are victims of a game of exclusion by men, a deliberately planned and cleverly executed strategy to marginalize women’s writing whether in English or in Indian languages. She avers that it is the lack of a distinct sense of self in the male portrayal of woman, a self that is most often missing in the writings of men. And this is why so many women have a sense of exclusion, of being unable to discover themselves in the literature of men.

Her simple question ‘where do I belong?’ posed in ‘The Dilemma of the Woman Writer’ is further expanded by her in the essay ‘Where Do we Belong: Regional, National or International?’. She is conscious of the extreme stances taken by some contemporary feminist writers and critics, and hence distances herself from utter sentimentalism and exaggeration which she considers as banal to the cause of women’s writing. Her view of a woman writer is quite sane and balanced:
Any woman who writes fiction shows the world as it looks to her protagonist; if the protagonist is a woman, she shows the world as it looks to a woman. This view, I have realized, makes a man quite uncomfortable. But to present this viewpoint is not necessarily to be feminist. It seems that it is, on the whole, difficult for a woman to be indeed purely as a writer.⁷

In order to overcome this dilemma, Deshpande traces out an alternative tradition and identifies with writers in regional languages. Her essay ‘Where Do we Belong...’ demonstrates a multiple belonging. When she was described as an Indo-Anglican writer at a literary meeting, she felt uncomfortable. She explains:

The acute discomfort this caused me was aggravated when, eventually, I came across other labels that were to be my lot: Asian writer, Indo-English writer, Indian writer in English, third world writer, post colonial writer and so on. A plethora of tiles none of which I know was right.⁸

To this discomfort was added a sense of alienation from the Indian English writers she read then. It means that she could not identify herself with other Indians writers in English, for by her own admission she had hardly read or heard about writers like Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. Naturally then, she had little kinship with them, she further adds:

At the same time, I was wholly shut out of the language literatures as well; the doors were completely closed to me because of the language I wrote. Ultimately it was an emphatic rejection of all the labels, a not this kind of feeling which made me seriously look for an answer to the
question—where do I belong? And the answer was as immediate as my rejection of the labels: why, I belong here! My conviction has since then become a passionate belief that English writing is part of the vast and complex scene of our country, one of the literatures that form the mosaic of what is called Indian literature.9

It is evident from the above excerpt that Deshpande wants to be read, enjoyed and evaluated as an Indian writer. In the same essay she has explained her position pretty well:

Let me make my own position clear, I began writing in English not because I chose to but because it was the only language I could express myself in, the only language I really read. Yet, I had two other languages at home, languages I spoke and lived my daily life in. Living in a small town in a middle class family life was, in fact, lived mainly in Kannada; English came into the picture only for certain purposes and at certain times. Later I moved to Bombay and lived in Parel, a lower-middle-class area known for its factories and factory workers. It was this atmosphere, indeed the liveliness and bustle of Bombay, that brought my writing into being, writing which embraced my small town childhood. My early stories and articles were published by magazines and newspapers in Bombay. And later when I wrote a book for children and, much after that, a novel, once again my publishers were located in Bombay and Delhi. My readers were people who read English, but lived their personal and emotional lives, like I did, in their own languages. The world beyond India existed for me only as a reader, not as a writer; as a
writer I did not feel the need to go beyond the world I lived in. This being the way it was, how could I have any doubts about where I belonged.¹⁰

Being what she was, the daughter of a Kannada writer, she, therefore, felt part of the literary world as well. Not only this her writing which came out from the same milieu, the same society; could never be alien. She had no doubts that her writing was as much part of the Indian literature as her father's was. She has the conviction that her writing is as much part of the literatures of this country as the writing in any other language. However, the fact is that there is no such entity as 'Indian literature'. We have many different ones, each literature with its own identity and history. Writing about the literature produced in English in India, Deshpande argues that English is a language that separates 'us from 'them'. By them she implies the colonial rulers, the British- in India.

In a prose-piece entitled 'Them and us' Deshpande recalls how her father's English education and four year stay in England resulted in a combination of the learning of Indian and English writers. This certainly may have shaped her sensibility as a reader and subsequently into the blossoming of her creative potential as a writer. She admits:

And while the bookshelves at home were lined with English books and we heard a great deal about Ibsen and Shaw, our father wrote plays in Kannada and was, forever, in moments of leisure, absent-mindedly and tunelessly intoning verses from the Gita, from Kalidasa and the songs of saint-poets in Kannada.¹¹

According to her, English was never given its place, it was subjected to indifference even during the few decades that followed
Indian independence. Since the formation of the linguistic states, each language has its own space in which it reigns supreme, the state in which it is the official language and is both protected and promoted with zeal. English is the outsider everywhere. Linguistic chauvinism, political patronage for the language of the state, the pressure of politics and of vote banks, as well as political correctness, have led to a situation in which English is not just homeless, it is the main enemy. An offshoot of this homelessness is that English has no focal point like the other languages have. Although the fact of English being the national language of India is theoretically untenable, she concedes that English is finding currency in India because of two things:

One, that in international arena, it is English writing that is visible and therefore recognized and known as Indian writing. And two, because the English media, being more powerful and widespread, projects English writing in such a way that it is seen to be the only literature we have.

But she cautiously adds that in recent times it has been getting such an excess of attention that it has attained a spurious importance, quite disproportionate to its merit and volume. For example, a review in the Time magazine of Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance called him a contender for the title of the great Indian novelist. The success of English writing in India, something the media continues to be obsessed with, seems to have brought on both anger and heart – burning. Despite the discontent of writers of language literatures in India, it can not be denied that today English writers have attained a worldwide visibility and acclaim. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhari,
Rohinton Mistry and many others have established Indian English writing as one of the best known, and in a way, one of the most successful literature in the world today. Indian writing has taken its bow internationally as Latin American did some decades back. And, except for a few translated works, almost all the Indian writing that is winning accolades, is in English.

There are several factors behind this success story of Indian writing in English for example, the theory of postcolonialism, the increase in the number and influence of academics of Indian origin in important universities abroad and the greater number and visibility abroad of diasporic Indian writers. But above and beyond all these, English in not today not just the language of the great world power, globalization has made it a dominant language throughout the world. All these factors have had their role in putting English right into the centre of international writing, making (some) Indian writers known the world over.

A remarkable feature of the recent rise of English writing in India is the unprecedented growth and importance of novel. It is of course, the visible winner with the God of Small Things and The White Tiger stealing the show with Booker prize. But other genres too are making a headway or a comeback, as is happening to poetry, which was really the beginning of it all. Actually, it is the poets who first found their own voice, the poets who were able to use the language easily and unselfconsciously. However, is spite of such poets as Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, A.K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Gieve patel, Keki N. Daruwalla and many others, poetry was pushed into the shadows.
Deshpande has a slightly different view of this scenario and explains her perspective as follows:

But to me, there are other, though less visible signs of success, which are far more significant than large advances and forcing recognition. I see a surge of self-confidence among the writers both in the use of the language and about their own identity... Many writers in English are as rooted in their regional identities as those who write in other languages.... They write as naturally as if they were writing in their own languages. That Jayanta Mahapatra is from Orissa, Kamala Das from Kerala, Githa Hariharan from Tamilnadu, Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhari from Bengal and that I belong to both Maharashtra and Karnataka - these identities are unmistakable. And if many writers are cosmopolitan and urban, this world is one that many Indians know today, hence their writing mirrors the experiences of many readers.13

Deshpande has also examined the much debated issue of Indianness in Indian writing in English. Her simple question is; Why is English writing being singled out? A Hindi or Kannada writer, for example, cannot be asked to speak on the idea of Indianness in his writing. It would not be an exaggeration to point out that English writing in India represents one of the historical ironies for it had to carry the burden of Indianness. The place this writing gained outside, right from the start, was as Indian writing, later, it became post colonial, third world or whatever, yet it was always basically Indian writing. This writing had to prove its credentials by making it clear it was Indian. What happens then is an exaggeration of what is generally considered Indian. Or, as
Ashis Nandy puts it, ‘stressing those parts of our culture which are unknown to the west and underplaying both those which we share with the west and those that remain undefined to the west’. In other words, emphasizing our ‘otherness’, the fact that we are the non west.

It is only English that seems to place the burden of being ‘Indian on the writer. It seems to be a legacy of our colonial past and comes out of the feeling that real life is elsewhere, that we are writing for others, they are the readers who matter and we need to explain ourselves to them. This is a kind of cultural domination, which is so insidious that one is scarcely aware of it. Sadly enough, the old imperialism is replaced by the new one-of market forces which is making its presence felt- marketing needs a slot, a brand name, a target audience readership. What this marketing strategy calls for is to have Indian books written by Indian writers, with a picture of India that the readership is familiar or comfortable with. The post-Rushdie era generated a small hope that our writing would learn to go out on its own terms but this did not happen. Shashi Deshpande wryly notes:

And Indian- English writing, after footing for a while on the raft of post colonialism, now clambered on to the luxury liner of international writing, with the tag ‘Indian’ continuing to be of eminent value. If the earlier novels had maharajas, sadhus, temples and fakirs, the new ones concerned themselves with national identity, national crises, with a search for roots and wound their ways through exotic landscapes, ancestral home and large families, the smell of spices wafting all around whatever it is
the setting is always obviously unmistakably India. This is even more pronounced in most diasporic novels.14

This emphasis on the difference from the west and the chaotic colorful quality of life here is a recent phenomenon Deshpande considers this exotic procedure of detailing India superfluous and market oriented for it is the evocative quality of life and it details that matters most she goes on to elaborate with a hint on her own practice as a writer:

"Similarly, the use of mythology is something Indian writers in all the languages resort to. Myths are the reference points in our lives for a great many of us and writers use them like a kind of code, or short cut. If I speak of -Dhritrashtra's blindness, or of Gandhari's self imposed blindness, I convey a great number of things to readers who are familiar with the Mahabharata. I don't need to spell out the nuances; readers will understand.15

Notwithstanding the lapses of current Indian writing in English it is undeniably true that our writers have not only been accepted, they have also been established in the west. Certainly the acceptance factor has been considerably enlarged by writers like Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhari, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy etc. The contribution made by these authors towards opening the gates for other Indian writers is enormous. At the same time, the fact cannot be ignored that most of these authors are, in the words of Pico Iyer, "a new breed of people, an intercontinental tribe of wanderers; people whose sensibilities and experiences are cosmopolitan, their mindsets comfortably close to those living in the west, even while writing of India.

13
It cannot be denied that by writing in English one enters, whether one intends it or not, the global world of English literature. It is also true that the slot made available to our writing in this world, unless one is extraordinarily lucky, or extraordinarily good, is that of exotica. The problem with being exotic is that interest in it can be a passing phase, a trend, a fashion and it can fade. Deshpande feels that the kind of patronizing acknowledgement Indian writers in English receive from the west can hardly ensure the permanence to their works. Therefore, she emphasizes the need for a readership that belongs to the writer’s immediate society, the people of his place, language and time. The readers must be the people who live the kind of lives a writer’s characters do.

While Deshpande appreciates the visibility of writing by the diasporas Indians, she feels troubled by what she calls ‘writing from memory’. She makes a perceptive comment on how she feels about it: I recently heard the writer Ved Mehta that exile meant a crystallizing of the memory of the earlier home, something that was invaluable to a writer. But I have a question: Does the memory get crystallized or fossilized? And how does one continue to write about a life and society without being an intrinsic part of its daily living, its dynamism? How does one cope with the language which keeps changing? And why does one often have a sense of the writer not only getting facts at second hand—but being careful to include all the facts possible, making elaborately sure that all the details are in?
She has also noted with displeasure the unhappy consequences brought about by the introduction of caste system or hierarchy in writing. The increasing number of divides one being created. It is regional languages pitted against English, English writers living in India against writers living abroad, diasporic writing against rooted writing, etc. A kind of caste system has come into being with some writing and some authors belonging to the privileged caste. On the other hand there is also a politically correct condemnation of English writing because it is elitist.

Shashi Deshpande contends that excellence should not be contingent either on genre or language. For her, context is of enormous significance in writing. Writing about herself she says: I have the same feeling of being wrenched out of my context when I come across the words ‘post colonial or third world’ applied to our writing. Undoubtedly all these labels are political and reflect realities of the political situation of the time when they were coined...To call me a third world writer is extremely humiliating. I am a writer belonging to a country with a very rich and ancient literature. How can you add the phrase third world to this literature? Post colonial too deprives me of my real and entire identity, it restricts the personal one to being the product of colonial rule and limits my writing to being no more than a response and reaction to colonialism.17

What is most objectionable to her about these labels is that they have been bestowed upon us by others, by academics from the west mainly, making us out to be the other, putting us in a certain slot, marginalizing us, creating a sense of inequality. At the same time,
however, she points out the lapses and limitations of English writing in the last decade or so, a dispassionate observer may easily notice that most of the excitement is media generated; in fact there is more sound than substance. The truth is also that the belief that English writing and writers are so wonderful exists only in English.

However, Deshpande guards against negative evaluation of literature be it writing in English or in languages. She comments: It is through a healthy, lively conversation between writers, and readers that a literature grows. To sneer at writing in English only because it is English, to ignore the languages in the midst of which you are living your life-both these attitudes are negative. There is nothing wrong with being influenced by other writers, ideas and movements, whether Indian or not. Cross fertilization is a very healthy thing. But if literature born in this country, out of this society remains distanced and estranged from its sister literatures, if there is no exchange of ideas between it and the literatures, there seems to be something wrong somewhere. Our writing comes out of this society, the emotional bonds are here. If it remains linked to its source, it will grow in strength and vitality. If it tries to delink itself, if critics help it to do that, it will become an exotic hothouse plant; no amount of critical boosting will be able to keep it alive for long. 

As an Indian writer, Deshpande is sensitive to the issue of a healthy literature. She affirms that a healthy literature needs a lively debate, a chorus of voices, with respect for another’s opinion, for another’s work. Bias there is bound to be, may be envy as well, both of which are very human; what we don’t need are malice, personal attacks, vague
generalizations, one-upmanship: what we do need are writers writing out of a genuine desire to say something, something that moves them, and free of the pressure of quick success, learning their craft through the process of writing, discovering more about themselves and the world as they write. Responsive and impartial readers are also required for the proper evaluation of their work. For this reason precisely, Deshpande calls upon the writers and readers as well to invent their creative energies: To affirm our reality, to write about it without reference to whether or not it is acceptable to the west is part of the project of the recovery of that lost self esteem (which was the worst thing that the British empire had brought about). 19

Although Shashi Deshpande is said to be shy of publicity she explains her own position both as a writer and a woman when it is required. Her distaste of any label attached to her writing is widely known. As she puts it:

Through the years I have rejected almost all the labels that are attached to me- and I call myself just ‘novelist and short story writer’. Truth is I am story-teller. I am deeply interested in human beings in the human condition. Through the stories I tell, I am probing into this condition, I am asking those questions most of us ask of ourselves sometime or the other- about death, about our relationships with one another, with society and our moral selves. My novels come out or these ideas and thoughts, out of people and not out of my living in India or being Indian. When you create people, you need to bring in the reality of their lives- that they live in a certain place, in certain condition, speak a
certain language, etc. But these are facets of a complex and large picture that is closer to the truth of human reality than these mere facts are.\(^{20}\)

In a talk given at a Sahitya Akademi 'Meet the Author' programme in Delhi in February 1996, Deshpande talked at length about her writing, influences on her and her priorities and concerns as a writer. This talk was later published as 'The Power Within' in Creating Theory: Writers on Writing edited by the noted critic and scholar Jasbir Jain in 2000. She corrected herself by remarking that both the writer and the person inhabit, in a sense, the same space.' She goes on to explain the factors which played a vital role in the shaping of her creative genius:

It was when I began to write this that I discovered that there are three things in my life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: That my father (Adya Rangacharya) was a writer. That I was educated exclusively in English. That I was born a female when I speak of my father's being a writer having influenced me, I do not speak of genetic factors, nor do I mean by this that I was consciously shaped by my father to become a writer. The influence was far more subtle and indirect and I can see it only now, through the space of time that separates me from my childhood. The number and variety of books at home, for example, and their accessibility, so that I was an obsessive reader at a very young age. There was also the atmosphere at home, the conversations and discussions that went on between my father and his friends, the play reading and the rehearsals that took place in our house- all this created a world of words and ideas that held me enthralled as a child... Equally important were my father's ideas and beliefs, Born is a very orthodox
family, he had very early moved away from orthodoxy and a hatred of it that stayed with him till the end. A great advocate of rational thinking, his four-year stay abroad gave him a love of western liberal ideals. And on returning home in 1930, he fell in love with Gandhism. All these ideas were part of my childhood. However, the greatest gift he gave us, his children, was intellectual freedom... we were free, even encouraged to think for ourselves. There was this as well, that my father being a writer made writing real to me. It was work, it was a profession, it was a way of living. And so when I began writing, I knew it was serious work, never just a hobby which is what it is often considered to be; specially when you are a woman.21

At a very early age, English became her language. She has made numerous references to the literary influences which lent a definite mould to her evolution as a writer. She adds: I read enormously, from Lewis Carroll and Stevenson to Jane Austen, the Brontes, Deickens, Hardy- in fact the lot. Strangely, I came to the lightweight stuff later, I read Enid Blyton with my children, moved on to Asterix, Tin Tin and now I revel in Charlie Brown, Beetle Bailey, Hagar the Horrible and all those creatures who make our morning papers bearable....my father taught Sanskrit, wrote in Kannada and had married a Marathi speaking wife. Home was, therefore, a harmonious mixture of languages.22

Although Deshpande has no regrets for her entire reading being in English, she feels a sense of loss at having been cut off from her own languages and literatures. It is certainly an enormous loss for a writer, For it meant that she was, in a way, divorced from a whole literary tradition.
To compensate this loss, Deshpande traces out a tradition for herself thorough women writers she mentions as she does through her identification with writers in regional languages. There are at least three different traditions she relates to, two which she acknowledges and the third which she does not. She is vociferous in her acknowledgement of Jane Austen’s influence and refers to her on several different occasions. By doing this she acknowledges her affinity with a woman writer who turned to realism in the age of romanticism. The tradition of the nineteenth century women’s writing is acknowledged in many different ways as is her affiliation with women writers of the regional languages or other Indian languages. But she is silent about her predecessors. What kind of a tradition she had inherited as far as Indian women’s writing in English was concerned when she published her first collection of stories in 1978?

That short stories were the starting point of her writing career hardly needs any emphasis as Deshpande herself has reiterated this fact time and again in her talks, interviews and essays. As she as clearly stated:

Above all, I wanted to write and I wrote copiously. Soon I found that the women’s magazines of the time Femina and Eve’s Weekly readily published and I got a readership the extent of which I realized only years later. I know now that the fact of publication helped me to grow as a writer. Writing without publishing, is like acting in your room before a mirror, it is never the real thing. Publication and readership makes writing real:
It was a short story “The Intrusion” that was the turning point of my writing career. It was a story that almost wrote itself. For the first time I had a sense of power within, the knowledge, as Graham Greene puts it, of the unconscious collaborating with me. To have this happen is, as many writers have said, a heady experience. And with this story I broke through another barrier. It was a story of a woman’s first experience of sex—with her own husband who is still a stranger to her. It was years before I dared to call myself a writer, but the beginning of knowledge was here.²³

She has asserted that, in effect, she found her voice here. This consciousness of her own voice, a very important development for any writer went into most of the stories, she wrote after ‘The Intrusion.’ The stories and the novels that followed, she admits, marked her out as a ‘woman writer’ a woman who wrote about women. She has very mixed feeling about this label also, as she explains:

Yes I did and do write about women. Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society. It comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoining on me by society when I know that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of my conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that the society has of me as a woman. All this makes my writing very clearly ‘women’s writing.’²⁴
According to Deshpande, gender is undoubtedly, one of the most important factors that shape our lives; it is also true that our experiences are very often related to our gender. Nevertheless, these gender based experiences are part of the human experience. Hence her emphasis on human is of great significance: And, as a writer I deal with these experiences the same way a writer does with any experience. I also expect such writing to be of interest to all human beings. However, I found out very early in my writing career, that women's experiences are believed to be of interest only to woman, that women's problems, ideas and lives are specifically and narrowly considered to be only women's problems, ideas and lives, not human ones. It is male problems, male ideas and male experiences which are human. I also realized that in a world dominated by male values, in which the class struggle and the caste struggle are taken seriously, the gender struggle is not.

Both as a writer and as a woman Deshpande is aware of the way in which women's lives, their contribution and even their movement have been pushed to the margins. In fact, the woman's movement is the only one, she thinks, against which the weapon of ridicule has been consciously, consistently and fairly successfully employed. If feminism is not regarded as a joke, it becomes a boring kind of mass moaning, a large scale nagging. That women's writing, like their lives, lacks weight and significance is an ample proof of what patriarchy has done to women. For long, she had to struggle against the feeling that her writing was second class/ inferior writing for the sole reason that it was about women. She explains her stance as a writer in the following excerpt:
Yet I knew when I wrote *The Dark Holds No Terrors* that it was a serious novel about a serious human predicament. And then I wrote *That Long Silence*, almost entirely a women's novel, nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A life time of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally, the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own.26

Admittedly, with the writing of this novel Shashi Deshpande crossed another barrier. It was with it, as Naipaul puts it, that she defined herself through her work. No doubt, she frankly admits of her coming to terms with feminism: It was with this articulation of all that had been in me through the years that I came to feminism, to a consciousness of myself as a feminist. I read a great deal after this- Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One's Own*, along with Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, have been the greatest influence on me. But it was not these books that made a feminist of me: they were merely confirmatory.

In a later prose piece entitled ‘Why I am a feminist’ Deshpande dwells upon the reasons for her being a feminist, though in several of her interviews she has dismissed this label being attached to her writing. What is more important to her as a writer is an awareness of oneself through one’s knowledge. And knowledge, she feels, instills a sense of power in an individual. However, she hastens to add that her gender had, in no way, made her work inferior, it is rather more invigorated and potent. Yet she recognizes the problems which a woman writer has to encounter in a patriarchal/male dominated society. She believes that
women’s writing is considered marginal. For it still is and continues to be a man’s world. And therefore a woman is seen as not a man, her mind is not a man’s mind, her writing not a man’s writing. She feels puzzled and resentful for she is always referred to as a woman-writer. At the same time, she finds it quite disconcerting that a (woman) writer is put in the context not of writers but of women writers. This kind of ghettoisation makes her angry for she rejects the idea of categorizing literature on the basis of gender as ridiculous and grossly unjustified. Her brief and succinct statement explains her authorial position in a befitting manner:

I admire versatility but I have learnt to accept my own limitations. I am able to define myself as a novelist and short story writer. I don’t think any qualifying words are necessary- neither ‘English’, nor ‘woman’ nor ‘feminist’, nor third world’, nor even post- colonial.27

So for her, the process of writing is one of making discoveries. In discovering the people, things and the world around us, we often tend to discover ourselves. But according to Deshpande, one cannot have any writing without faith. As a writer she believes that a moral vision exists at the heart of all literature and that without this strong faith in the moral nature of human being, literature is worthless. She urges: I believe that writing is not just a craft, nor, as it seems to be becoming, a business, not even a mere profession. And therefore the writer has be true to herself/himself.28

Moreover, she concedes the fact that all good writing is a socially committed writing, as it comes out of a concern for the human predicament. But she rejects the quarrel about mainstream and marginal
literature. Like Albert Camus, she believes that the greatness of an artist is measured by the balance the writer maintains between the values of creation and the values of humanity. It is precisely for this reason that she finds the mainstream theory of literature abhorrent. According to her, all writing that probes with honesty and artistry into the human satiation is mainstream literature. Therefore, she is justified, more so, in considering English to have become one more of our ‘bhashas’ as G.N. Devy terms them.

On the question of committed writing and herself being called a feminist, Deshpande has responded with clarity and conviction. To be a feminist has meant to her an acceptance of her womanhood as a positive thing not a block. Feminism is a movement that has grown out of and built upon prevailing social needs. She, therefore, persists on the issue of gender- equality: And therefore, the issue of gender- equality, which embraces everything from female feticide and equal pay to dowry and rape, has to be faced. Those who are afraid that women will turn freedom into license forget that the needs of daily life impose their own restrictions on human liberty. But often there are no limits to human cruelty. And cruelty has to be opposed. To be silent is to be abet it.29

While considering the ideological and practical role and function of feminism vis-a- vis her authorial disposition and work Deshpande takes into account the question of writing and activism. In her essay ‘Writing and Activism, she traces the origin of activism in the specific personal situations of a writer. Incidentally, she finds it true for the Dalit writers in India and for women writers everywhere: The truth is that personal
reasons trigger off the writing most of the time, reasons that come out of the writer's own life. The writer is not writing of social evils, but merely expressing a personal, sometimes an intensely personal anguish. It is difficult, almost impossible, I would say, to control the flow of creative writing within the narrow banks of political and social reform, or of any message at all.  

Although she does deplore activism as such, she is painfully conscious of the inadequacy of the writers and intellectuals when they are pitted against a momentous crisis of national proportion. Even though the writers and intellectuals perceive how gradually and insidiously the fabric of society is being undermined by dividing people on the basis of caste, religion and language. The idea of one nation amidst its multiplicity being eroded is a favorite fare for media hype but, in essence, it is only a hoax. She feels both frustrated and anguished by the inability and, by the impotence of writers and intellectuals to contest this idea. Perhaps, writers no longer believe passionately in anything but self interest and self-promotion.

It is for this reason exactly that Deshpande keeps her distance from plain protest writing. She, thus, refuses to be enamored of becoming a radical writer for its sake. In her view, a writer becomes an activist at the cost of other writers being excluded or marginalized. Her advice to younger writers is that instead of trying to pose as an activist they should be able to deal with the media. Be media savvy that is.

In many of her talks and essays, Deshpande has highlighted as well as criticized the marginalization of women, particularly women writers. A
writer's sensibility is shaped by the natural abilities and social surroundings with normative codes for gender separately for men and women. In spite of all this the basic fact remains that all of us share the common destiny of all living creatures of birth growth, survival and death, we go through the same human destiny of pain and suffering, of joy and hope. These factors, which unite us, are far more important in our lives than the gender differences which divide us; it is we who have made these important.

Unfortunate though it is, writers carry the gender difference into their writing lives with them. Our experiences are different and in a sense we inhabit different worlds. Deshpande has explained:

My writing originated in the fact of my being a woman in the society I live in, it is shaped by that fact. The way I see the world is colored by this fact of my being a woman, by the historical and social circumstances of women's lives. My themes, therefore, my characters and, possibly to a certain extent, even my language, may differ from a man’s. Equally important is the fact that the physical conditions in which we write vary enormously because of our roles in life.32

In her discussion of women's writing, Deshpande poses a significant question: why is women's writing, specially when it deals with women's lives, considered to be both insignificant and marginal? To find the answers to this and similar question one has to go into the history of women, to the fact that we live in a patriarchal society, in a patriarchal culture, which in effect means that this is a man’s world. And therefore, the laws, customs, practices and beliefs are unduly inclined in favour of
men. She argues that the history of women is, as Virginia Woolf said, that
of invisibility and silence in public life. And so, in the same way as
women’s lives are regarded as being less significant than men’s, writing
by women too is considered minor, inferior and trivial... serious literature
is supposed to be written by men about men, when women write, it is
never regarded as just ‘writing’, it is always ‘women’s writing’.

Nor can one be just a writer, one is always a ‘woman writer; Even
a personal introduction uses the word ‘woman’ which Deshpande
considers amusing and ‘a kind of visual tautology’. Marginalization
begins here, for with this label one is steadily edged away from the group
of writers in general. She uses the context to explain her personal
standing as a writer:

For I have seen that the marginalization of women is in many ways
reflected in any own marginalization as a writer; to have, in a manner,
been bound up in what I can only call a vicious circle. I first got a
glimpse of this when I went to the editor of the Sunday section of a
national newspaper with a story of mine. The editor obviously considered
my story, like all writing by women.

Deshpande admits that her next observation came from something
that kept repeatedly happening. English writing by Indians has been, in
the past few years, attracting a great deal of attention. A few names
invariably have a stellar role in every article or overview of English
writing. The fact of ‘women writing’ has almost inevitably stuck with her
literary creations, as she puts it:
My name, if it figures in the list at all, goes among the women writers’ appearing almost invariably as a kind of footnote. I have therefore had to ask myself – putting aside the quality of my writing; After nearly three decades of writing, after eight novels, nearly a hundred short stories, three national awards and students all over the world working on me, why is it possible to be as dismissive of my work? That it has a great deal to do with the fact that my work has always been labeled as “Women’s writing” is something I have never had any doubts about. What continues to amaze me is that it should be possible to have such an attitude after a century in which feminism has been such a major force. In course of time, Deshpande has learnt by experience that to regard women’s writing, irrespective of everything else, as inferior, minor and trivial, is not an objective value judgment, but a male subjective assessment; it is men who think this way. For her, the real greatness of a writer lies in coming to terms with her/his identity in the work. A writer defines herself/himself through the work. Hence Deshpande has remained true to her calling, ‘though I knew that by doing so I was putting myself out of the mainstream and on the margin. In fact, I realized that my writing was rooted in my consciousness of what it was to be a woman in the society I lived in.

Despite the personal and social obstacles, Deshpande has kept going. She has remained and still continues to be committed to the act of writing in spite of no monetary rewards or big prizes. She admits “But I had what matters most to a writer : a desire to write and a belief in myself.” Besides this frank admission, Deshpande has two regrets in
matters of writing: she has not yet written a 'first class mystery novel' she had always hoped to write; secondly she regrets too that she gave up writing for children.

The foregoing discussion of Shashi Deshpande’s views on writing, women and on her own concerns and anxieties as a writer reveals that she considers writings especially by women, a serious and profoundly significant business. As a writer she is interested in human beings for she finds them fascinating. Our endless variations, our essential sameness. Our strengths, our frailties. Our overwhelming desire to live, our anguish at what life offers us. And above all our relationships with one another.

Each novel is a voyage of discovery to me, a discovery of myself, of other humans, of our universe. Writing is for me part of the endeavour to understand this process, to articulate the human struggle, the human triumph.

Although Shashi Deshpande remains silent about her predecessors, and, to some extent, about her contemporaries also, it is undeniably true that no writer is an island. Her silence and dissociation might be interpreted as one of her defense strategies. To situate her as a writer, it is relevant to see what kind of writing was being done in the Indian languages in the fifties and sixties when Shanta Rama Rau, Kamala Markandeya and Nayantara Sahgal emerged on the Indian scene. Some of the early writers were Ismat Chugtai (b. 1915), M.K. Indira (b. 1971) Shivani (b. 1923), Rajam Krishnan (b. 1925), Mannu Bhandari (b. 1931), Abhuri Chhaya Devi (b. 1933), Nabaneeta Dev Sen (b. 1938) and Jeelani Bano (b. 1936) also belong to this period. Were these writers more radical
and outspoken than their counterparts writing in English? Did language separate them from the others in any significant way? It is almost impossible to make any facile generalization, but at one level language did make a difference. Attia Hosain (b-1911) regretted the loss of a language as she was introduced to English at the age of three. These women enriched the treasure of Indian literature by capturing hitherto unexplored or neglected areas and dimensions of human life and experience. For example, I not Chughtai user Urdu in all its robustness. She is radical both in her choice of theme and use of language and critiques in one stroke both patriarchy and religion. Chughtai's Terhi Lakeer (The Crooked Line) went one step further than Markandaya's Some Inner Fury as it went on to discuss an interracial marriage and its breaking up.

Another writer who belongs to this generation is Mahasweta Devi (b. 1926), social activist and writer who had gone on to write extensively on tribal matters. Almost every language has thrown up some remarkable women writers, sensitive, outspoken and critical of the state of affairs in the country. They have worked with gender issues or through them with national issues questioning the complicity of power with patriarchy. Family relationships took a priority of over individual concerns either through metaphor or through allegory. Women wrote from their positions of exclusion and marginalisation, even as they worked within a male tradition, managed to forge one for themselves, rendering the question of role models considerably irrelevant.
Caste and class had also greater visibility in the writing in the bhashas. U.R. Anantha Murthy's Samskara Stands as an exemplary case. When these issues penetrated the writing in English, as in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Raja Rao's Kanthapura, the issues came to be more directly involved with the freedom struggle, Gandhian ideology and the liberal ideals of modernity, justice and equality and equality. All this raises a big question: Where is one to locate Despande's work? Critics, by and large, have focused on her female protagonists in the novels and issues related to feminist concerns and modes of resistance. Mukta Atrey and Viney Kirpal have brought out a monograph titled, Shashi Despande: A Feminist study of Her Fiction (1998), Suman Bala has edited a collection of essays, Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande (2001). The various essays focus on the self image of the protagonists, their constructions of the self, modernity and memory. Amongst other edited volumes is one by R.K. Dhawan, The Indian Women Novelists, Vol. V (1991) which includes several essays, some of which are repetitive. None of them really interrogates any serious issue. But the plus points are an essay by Deshpande hereself, "On the Writing of a Novel", and perhaps the first critical attention to the two detective novels. A far better critical evaluation is available in the volume edited by R.S. Pathak, The fiction of Shashi Despande (1998). Though the volume works dominantly through feminist approaches, it explores other aspects, as for instance myth and folklore, imagery and Indian ethos.

Of full-length studies, the earliest is Sarabjit Sanjhu's The Image of Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande (1991), its main value in
being an early work but it belongs to the 'image' studying school which does not explore the processes that 'make' an image. Mrinalini Sebastian's work The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments departs from the 'feminist' and 'image' trajectory of critical analysis. The book gives a disproportionate attention to postcolonial arguments focusing on Bhabha, Spivak and Said. The first hundred and forty pages are devoted to theory and less than a hundred pages to Deshpande. Despite this and several other limitations, the work is valuable and interesting on account of the number of questions it poses. Is she authentic? Is she Indian? And does the focus on her work necessarily lead to a provincial essentialist kind of criticism? Sebastian also opens out several other aspects of her work, of reading differently and contrapuntally and of relating Deshpande's work to questions of resistance.

Similarly, P.G. Joshi has taken up the issue of women empowerment and postcolonial discourse in his study, Shashi Deshpandey's Fiction: A Study in Women Empowerment and Postcolonial Discourse (2003). He analysis Deshpande's novels in the light of postcolonial theories of literature and concludes that the change in the position of woman in any society is a reliable index to social change in general. of all the studies mentioned above, Jasbir Jain's Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writing of Shashi Deshpande (2003) is the most balanced in so far as it offers a close reading of Deshpande's fiction, her non-fiction and interviews in order to interrogate the strength and limits of 'feminist' positions. Jain takes up the position
that Deshpande's work makes a significant contribution to the novel of becoming. Her assessment, like, Deshpande's work is context sensitive and seeks to locate her in the multiple contexts of the present and the multiple traditions of the past.

Writing Difference: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande edited by Chanchala K. Naik is the latest addition to the criticism of her works. The sixteen essays and one interview the Shashi Deshpande included in this volume attempt to explore and evaluate the 'writing difference' in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Closely focused on her major concerns such as the enigmatic fissures in human relationships, the extent of rootedness of author's work in issues such social activism, cultural representation, postcolonial contexts, and narrative of the self. Shashi Deshpande's essay 'Writing and Activism' and her interview with Githa Vishwanatha are the additional charms of the volume.

A part from these studies there are several articles, essays and reviews scattered over journals and edited volumes. The interviews given by Deshpande, though off quoted, have not really been analysed for the resistance they offer to facile interpretation. They need to be placed chronologically in order to understand both- the writer's attitude to her writing and the writer's attitude to her critics and their interpretation.

Since the present study seeks to explore her short stories or short fiction, it is desirable to undertake a survey of critical attention devoted to her short stories. G.S. Amur's 'Introduction' to her first volume of stories 'The Legacy and other Stories' was perhaps the first critical venture to assess her fictional craft as also to launch if. Shama Futehally's review of
the said volume was equally encouraging. T.N. Geetha's article in Dhawan's edited volume The Indian Women Novelists focused on a general assessment of Deshpande's stories. S.J. Savitri, however, had written her M. Phil. Dissertation in 1990 on the short stories of Deshpande but it was not published. R.S. Pathak's volume on Deshpande includes two essays on Deshpande's stories, the first by A.N. Dwivedi and the second by S. Santani. In their study of Shashi Deshpande's fiction, Mukta Atrey and Viney Kirpal have devoted a chapter to the analysis of sixteen stories. However, it is Jasbir Jain who has written at length on Deshpande's stories and has devoted a full chapter to their discussion, running over a space of 37 pages, which speaks of the extent of critical attention invested in them. T.M.J. Indra Mohan's edited volume, Shashi Deshpande: A critical Spectrum (2004) contains two critical essays on Deshpande's stories. G.S. Balarama Gupta's Scholarly paper 'The short story Writers: Self, society and Emancipation' deals among others with some of Deshpande's stories in the context. This paper was published in Between Spaces of silence: Women Creative Writers (1994) edited by Kamini Dinesh.

Although Deshpande has written over the period of nearly four decades more than a hundred stories, only forty five of them were finally selected for publication in collected stories brought out by Penguin in 2003 and 2004 respectively. It is not that the editor Amrita Bhalla had a free choice in the selection of stories, the selection was made with the consent of the author. Before this Deshpande's stories were largely published by Writers Workshop Calcutta which brought out her five
volumes, with a sixty volume published by Penguin in 1992 (The Intrusion and other stories).

One of the reasons for the relative critical neglect of her stories may be the prevailing misconception that stories are, by and large, a by product of the novels. Shiv K. Kumar aptly observes that the post independence short story is characterized by greater inwardness. This inwardness lies at the root of all human experience. Indians short story writers in English, both male and female have been engaged in exploring the possibilities inherent in the genre and many of then have polished and refined their craft to perfection. Like Indian drama in English, the short story has invariably remained in the background. The studies of short story and writers in India are so meagre that an enthusiast may find it an uphill task to prepare a bibliography of the critical material available on it. Not surprisingly, even a critic like M.K. Naik has called the post-1947 short story ‘chips from the fiction workshop’ in his second volume Indian English literature: A Critical Survey 1980-2000 (2001).

Krishna Daiya’s study ‘Post-independence women short story writers in Indian English’ deals with the thematic concerns, characterization and style in the stories of Shashi Deshpande, Anjana Appachana, Anita Desai, Prema Ramakrishnan, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gauri Deshpande, R.P. Jhabvala, Manju Kak, Shalan Savur, Tara Deshpande and, of course, Githa Hariharn. She has examined the themes in Deshpande’s stories. As she has stated:

“Deshpande mainly dwells on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness
and alienation of a sensitive woman pitted against an ill mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her.\textsuperscript{40} No doubt, Daiya’s study of women story writers is a welcome move in the direction of critical assessment yet she seems to be immensely preoccupied with woman’s issue and as a result she has overlooked the profounder human interest in Deshpande’s stories.

This study is based on the premise that Deshpande’s stories are self contained, finished works of art. They also serve as a ground for experimentation of themes and ideas, attitudes and narrative approaches. What is more interesting is the realism that pervades her novels informs her short stories too. Neither its implications nor its variety have surfaced in the critical material available on her.

Home, family, human relationships, marriage, myth and a sense of loss are the themes common to her novels and stores. Her concern with death has hardly received any critical attention. For example, in her early detective novel, \textit{If I Die Today}, it is murder that interests her. The act of murder has led to an analysis of death and the sense of deprivation caused by death to a full-fledged poetics of loss as she studies the impact of bereavement on the bereaved. The interweaving of details is another technique which she uses effectively to knit her plots together. In the stories sometimes one may come across the technique of story within the story.

For Deshpande, short story is a precious medium in so far as she started her literary career with a short story. The present work proposes to explore her short stories from the ground reality upwards. Beginning with
family as the nucleus of human life, the kinships and ties, the study proposes to look at the thematic concerns such as man-woman relationships within and outside family, concern with loss and bereavement, the use of mythical figures and related issues like rape, widowhood, male desire for a son, the loneliness and alienation of a veteran politician's aged wife and so on. The institutions of family and marriage as patriarchy has constructed them form the basis of her stories as well as of her novels. Deshpande has realistically shown how these institutions are beginning to crack under pressures of various kinds. Joint families have given way to nuclear families and the sense of security and feeling of consolidation are replaced by individual concerns and self-interest? This inevitably leads to loneliness and prompts people to forge relationships beyond one's limited family, further it is birth and death that compel the individual to confront the existential loneliness. Bereavement brings life to a standstill before it pushes the individual towards self questioning and introspection, as relationships, morality and the meaning of life are revalued and realigned. It is important to see the relationship between the shorter fiction and the novels both where themes and treatment are concerned.

Deshpande is not only concerned with the givenness of life, she also explores the various ways in which the individual self is formed. As the self is constructed by a multitude of forces, the members of family are influenced in a big way. Of those the first in the family are affected most especially if the child is a girl child. The basis of family life remains the man-woman relationship ever as this has to expand and embrace other
ties to sustain itself. Social constructs and social roles impact family relationships in multiple ways. Paradoxically, just as the woman is at the centre of the quality of family life, she is also enclosed within it. The movement from and towards her is both centripetal and centrifugal. Familial roles do not enclose or confine the man in any comparable manner. Hence the chapter that follows seeks to highlight the complex web of relationships as they find space in her short stories.
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