CHAPTER-II

QUEST FOR AN IDENTITY

Etymologically speaking, the word 'identity' is derived from the Latin word 'idem' which means 'same'. As per *Webster's new Dictionary and Thressaurus*, 'identity' means 'absolute sameness' or 'individuality' and also means 'oneself'. *The Cambridge Learner's Dictionary* gives the meaning as 'who someone is' or 'the things that make one person or group of people different from others'.

As a country acquires a national identity of its own, human beings also have their own identity. Human beings' identity can be tied up with relationship, profession, caste, culture and nationality. They can be identified as father and mother, son and daughter, husband and wife, widow and widower, in the context of relationship. They can also be identified as teacher, farmer, businessman, author; with castes - such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian; and nationality - Indian, American, etc. Being human is also an identity.
Images of woman, as reflected in works of literature, even by men, exhibit an earnest attempt to study her temperament, moods and attitudes. One psychological portrait of her by Anne Z. Mickleson presents her in these paradoxical features as follows:

"Woman has been regarded as inferior, yet somehow meant to be man's spiritual guide, half-divine, intermediary between God and man, but looked upon as temptress/sinner, as well. She is passive but inclined to mysterious activity during certain phases of the moon; showing initiative, but lacking the practical sense to select the correct – detergent for her washing machine; biologically weak, yet able to lift heavy bags of groceries and hefty children..."

She further observes that woman is "...incapable of logic but full of cunning arguments; sexually pure if watched: uncontrollably sensual if not curbed; too feather-brained to create a great work of art; psychologically subject to breakdown if faced with business or professional competition; yet designed by nature to bear, nurture children, act as her husband’s helpmate, help him to fulfill his potential and resign herself to her limitation."
Kamal Kumar Majumdar (*Antarjaliyatra*, 1961) opines that the idea of an identity is often marked by the names of continents, huge chunks of the world: Asian identity, Third World identity and so on and so forth.

Human beings’ identification with a larger geographical entity is quite a known one. In the contemporary globalized, multicultural, postmodern times, there is a tendency to pigeonhole human beings into national, political, religious, racial, gender, caste or such other ‘identities’. They are often classified into distinctly identifiable groups: Men, women, white, black, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish.

The Indian women writers’ short story in English surveys honestly the women’s situation in the patriarchal milieu. A deep understanding and keen observation is reflected in their short stories. The short stories discover the manipulation of woman’s body and mind by the institutions of motherhood, family and sexuality. In this list of exploitation, wife-battering and rape are extensions through which the male satisfies his sexual ego. The supremacy of patriarchy prevents women from playing any active part in public affairs, which results in loss of identity.
A brief survey of the plight of women in society is unavoidable to understand the short stories written by the above said writers.

Patriarchy prescribes obedience, sacrifice, submissiveness of woman. Patriarchy prevailed even in countries like England in the 19th century, during the reign of Queen Victoria. Philosophers like James Stuart Mill pleaded for more independence, educational opportunity and decision-making choice to woman.

Feminism has come a long way. Since J.S.Mill’s time, it is a world-wide phenomenon today.

Only India has not changed or has not changed much. The Indian woman still does not have an identity of her own, does not have a voice, cannot protest, cannot take decisions, on issues concerning her own life. She is no better than a slave of her husband or the household, of her mother-in-law and in-laws who treat her with disdain and disrespect. A female child is brought up to look forward to marriage as the supreme fulfillment of her life, at an appropriate age. The husband is all in all for her. He is her ‘Parameshwara’.

The Indian wife prefers death to widowhood. Dying as a ‘Sumangali’ (with her husband alive, that is unwidowed) is her most cherished dream. A widow’s life is synonymous with
miseries and helplessness. Her appearance at any auspicious function is taboo. She has to cook for herself, and wear red or white sarees, cover her shaved head with the palloo of her saree if she is a brahmin.

Marginalization of woman is very much at the centre of the short stories in English written by the Indian women writers. It is indeed necessary to go into the cultural roots of the Indian male attitude to woman to understand social phenomenon of woman's marginalization. Patriarchy and scriptures have joined hands-in depriving woman of her natural human rights.

The Indian shastras have accorded the same status to woman that they have done to the untouchables, in some ways. She is supposed to be unclean on the days that she is menstruating. She is not supposed to enter the sanctum sanctorum of temples. Women cannot become preists, and so on and so forth. In a word, woman is also supposed to be a sudra. A pardah system in a particular community is a symbol of her slavery.

Things may have changed to some extent. But the Indian mindset is still rooted in the past. Patriarchy is very much in existence even today.
Literary creativity has always been considered a highly enigmatic activity. Books, diaries, letters written by women writers carry the stamp of their gender. Their writing includes such issues as marginality, femininity and it is just as well that feminine writers should focus on women's feelings and desires. Helene Cixous opines;

"Woman must write about herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons; by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement." 2

A view of oppression and marginalization unites most of the women's writing. Their writing is more a concern for women and is meant to establish a new identity for women, to understand the female predicament. It also visualizes the image of woman. The image of woman can be viewed from two angles. What she is (i.e. biologically) and what she has to be (i.e. socially constructed). A woman is accorded a rigid role model and various labels for her by the society.

To focus on the image of woman is the most recent development. Many efforts have been made to highlight the
position and image of woman both in family and society. Anglo-American liberal feminists inaugurated the new image of woman by raising questions on the equality of the sexes in political and legal rights. Marxists-Feminists' objection is on the ground of unequal treatment of females as against males regarding opportunities and parity of pay in the systems of production. These two major arguments have given birth to several questions on the emergence of the interlopers— in every aspect of a woman's existence— her productive and reproductive powers; her sexuality and morality; her mobility and her political, legal, social, economic rights.

It suggests that women wish to get rid of the dark corridors of their existence and be in the light and sunshine of freedom; they intend to cross the threshold.

Down the ages, the image of woman in the traditional-bound, male-dominated Indian society had been very unenviable. The place for women was assigned within the four walls of the house. There was a clash of male-female identities in the rigidly custom-bound milieu.

Women writers tried to eradicate these labels and reject the role model. They have given a different image to woman, and tried to redefine the traditional image of woman.
They identify the deep-rooted causes leading to oppression of women and endeavour to remove them as far as possible. They expose the inequality in all respects in the social milieu. They try to erase the clash of male-female identities through their raised voice.

Shashi Deshpande in an interview states:

“"I believe that the female of the human race and species has the same right to be born and survive, to fulfill herself and shape her life according to her needs and the potential that lives within her."”

The literature of any country is the store-house of the cultural and sociological etiquettes of its people.

The role of the writer, opines Jaiswal, is to feel the pulse of the society; he should know its sickness and suggest such cures as are in consonance with its culture.

There is a lot of difference between male and female writing in their modes of expression. Women’s writing raises the issues of ‘marginalised women’, repressed by the ‘patriarchy’ or ‘silenced by their circumstances’. They write from a woman’s point of view. They concern themselves with the plight of the Indian woman trying to understand herself.
and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and above all, as a human being.

In this context Virginia Woolf says:

"There is the obvious and enormous difference of experience in the first place; but the essential difference lies in this fact: not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself." 4

Literary creativity has taken up "Identity Crisis" for one of its themes. It is also to be noticed that women's writing has taken the issue in all seriousness. The word 'identity' and 'quest for identity' has become a part of their writing.

Shashi Deshpande has displayed her abilities as a concerned writer with regard to the life of women. She is primarily concerned with the recognition of woman as a being, an autonomous being. As Mary Wollstencraft Shelley remarks,

"It's time to bring about a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost identity, and make them a part of the human species..." 5

Deshpande's stories focus on women's search for their own identity, an awareness of 'selfhood'. The female
protagonist Jayu in her story *It was the Nightingale* is a self-centered, ambitious, egoistic and career-oriented wife. She desires to go on a two-year professional tour. But she wishes like other women to give up her ambition and success, go and stay with her husband, throttled by his love.

Her wish is to be a dutiful wife, like a traditional woman. She has positive feelings towards her husband. A perfect mutual understanding can be seen between them. Their lives are intertwined, yet they are two distinct strands. They are like two lights that shine more brightly together. But she wants to keep her light burning and she feels that it is her sole responsibility.

Her thought is to pursue her quest for an identity of her own. Though she chooses to remain in the family, a change has been wrought by the advice of her mother. Her mother’s image changes her feelings and being a working woman she decides to pursue her career by being away from her husband for two years. Deshpande captures Jayu’s inner feelings towards her mother, which reveal her fears and doubts.

Jayu says:

“Now from this distance, I can understand her. Even feel sorry for her. Then, there was only dislike and
contempt. And anger at what she was and what she was
doing to me. A woman who had nothing of her own tried
to live her life through her husband and
daughters...who made her own hell and gloried in it.
And so for me, each step out of home had been a battle.
Each success is a treachery towards her. Now I am free,
but the fear remains......will I shackle myself?” 6

She decides to assert herself as an individual. She is a
wife and also a working woman. This is her identity. Moreover
she desires to emerge as a strong-willed individual to face life,
to share responsibilities. She knows the fact that breaking off
the bonds of family and to adopt a new way of life is rather
difficult. Yet she sticks to her decision to desert her husband
for two years to fulfill her ambition. The housewife in
Deshpande’s A Day Like Any Other also tries to preserve her
identity. She too wishes to get married, to have children and
to be a dutiful wife like Jayu and

“She had what she wanted and she saw no meaning in
life without all this.” 7

The story narrates the melancholic plight of the
housewife when she learns about her husband’s affair with
another woman through a female informer. The housewife
does not react like any other woman. She does not rave or become hysterical on hearing the news. At last she does not like to take it seriously. It seems that she does not want to lose her happiness, her comforts and security. She is aware that it has taken years to build a relationship between herself and her husband, and it will take only ‘minutes to destroy’.

The news makes her realize her position or her selfhood or what she is. She puts questions to herself. Her questions prove that an awareness emerges within herself.

“This face, this body....is that all I mean when I say ‘I’? Is that all he says when he says ‘my wife?’ The thing we have built between....does it all depend on this face, this body? Love.... I wish I knew what it meant.”

Shashi’s protagonists are not satisfied with the traditional concept of woman which tells them to be a girl, and be a wife and to play their appointed roles. They are not ready to accept the given limitations. They are eager to cross the marginalization.

When her husband returns home she asks him about the news she had heard but calmly. The husband is frightened by his wife’s calmness and promises her “a lifetime of fidelity, of loyalty.” Here she discovers one thing, and that
is, he has not spoken of love, which proves that he has never loved her.

She has not taken the infidelity of the husband seriously. Yet she is ready to be what she was earlier, it means she plaits her hair, prepares tea for him, hugs and kisses him and says 'I Love You' in the evenings when he returns. She feels proud of her individuality, decides not to change and thinks that

“he will have to accept her as she is”

She is happy by discovering her ‘selfhood’ her true self.

“Life is her own”: the “words and the thought grow in her, fill her with a rare and fearful happiness, a feeling of being suspended in space and time all by herself.”

The stories focus on the questions of woman’s identity, self, fulfillment. The awareness of ‘herself’ is noticed in leading a life of her own, in married relationship and in sex relationship. The ceaseless quest for an identity of the wife echoes in every married woman, who is in a dilemma between her selfhood and inevitable emotional oppression.

Shashi Deshpande’s short stories deal with “woman’s struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian Society,
to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most of all as a human being."  

The mother in her story Death of a Child also wants to preserve some part of her self and her life. It reveals her inner desire to possess an identity of her own. The story is about a woman who is pregnant for the third time in four years. Contrary to the husband's wish, she wants to abort the child, because she feels:


The mother could not feel satisfied even after the abortion. She pitied her own condition when she could not come out of the mental guilt of killing her own child. Her words bear witness to this.

"I feel a heaviness in my own breasts
There is a hollow feeling within me....
I am conscious of a piercing pain in
the place he had filled. Grief becomes real.....
I feel that the ghost of my dead child walks with me."
Her desire to have an identity of her own creates a never ending pain within her and she cannot escape from this.

Along with the 'interlopers' disguised as paternal love or duty, the institution of marriage itself an area which is not without the interlopers. The short stories present maladjusted marriages, failed marriages, though the severe economic deprivation or physical brutalization is largely absent. The protagonists are not ruined by physical or mental cruelty; they are not beaten, burnt or tortured.

The interior monologue of the protagonist in Deshpande's *An Antidote to Boredom* reveals the interior monologue of the bored housewife who is longing for the husband's concern, attachment, colour, meaning in her drab, uneventful, predictable, routine existence.

"I felt no guilt towards my husband, because I would be depriving him of nothing, nothing he wanted. How often had I felt in myself a boundless capacity for loving, for giving! But I had felt in him at times... he was not a wicked man, not harsh, nor cruel. Only unperceptive, and dull. And dullness to me is an unforgivable crime."¹⁵

The wife in her story *Why a Robin?* has a similar, bitter experience. The story reveals the alienation felt by the
protagonist, the alienation caused by her own husband and her daughter. Her isolation leads her to feel herself an outsider in her own house. The story throws light on the status of woman within the family framework. The zeal with which she plunges herself into the making of a happy home for her family is totally destroyed. Being a wife and a mother when her love meets with failure, she sadly interprets in this way:

"I don't have the key to open up this beautiful child, though she is mine. I don't have the key to her father, either. It is as if I am, in my own house, confronted with two closed rooms."\(^16\)

Her daughter withdraws from the world of her mother and actively attempts to gain entry into the patriarchal realm which symbolizes power and knowledge. The mother feels bad for herself.

She would rather be a tree trunk, a broken statue, than remain a voiceless being, which clearly indicates that hers is a life of personal waste and disappointment. The story highlights the imperfect life of wives who depend on their husbands.
The protagonist's agony is like the plight of Monisha in Anita Desai's novel *Voices in the City*. Monisha finds life meaningless after getting married. She also finds herself totally alienated from the members of the family.

“I am alone here.”¹⁷

Later she finds a happy turn in her life. Her daughter's puberty, symbolizing her entrance into adulthood, turns her towards her mother. The mother feels her lost paradise is regained – when a better understanding of the mother brings her daughter closer towards her.

Still the wife experiences the vacuity in her life. That is her selfhood, her individuality. She feels she is lost somewhere among the household duties. She is a wife and a mother, still she is searching for something which alone can satisfy her inner urge. She wants her husband and daughter to feel her presence. On the contrary, she feels her presence is ignored by them.

“Sometimes I think we are all chameleons. We change colour, become different beings with different people. With my servants I am authoritative, with my parents, irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, but with my husband and child I am foolish, stupid, inarticulate. When I am
with them, I become dull and brown—no, not even that. I lose colour completely. And with his family too. They can never forget that he married 'beneath him'. Neither can I. Before they visit us, I take endless trouble to tidy the house. But it remains dull, dead. Till he, or the child, does something. A small touch and the house looks different. I slog in the kitchen for his family; I must impress them, show them he's well looked after. They sit at the table, carelessly eating the food I have prepared, and talk of many things, ignoring me. The talk flows above and around me, leaving me untouched. An outsider in my own home. Have they locked me out or have I locked myself in?" 

She feels totally blank. Her presence is made absent. She finds an emptiness in her life. She has a family of her own, still she feels herself alone. Her loneliness tortures her a lot.

"I am full of guilt these days. I am a failure—as a wife, as a companion, as a mother. Between my husband and myself, there is a blankness" 

"......At first, I wanted to sit with him, to try and share his enjoyment, to ask him to open my ears to the
sounds so that they would become a melody. But I was afraid. Now I know I will never do it. It is his special place, his retreat, the place where he can be most alone. I will not intrude. And the worst, most frightening thought is that he may ask me—what do you want?...”

“...What do I want? What a large, what a cosmic question that is! What do I want? I will have to live the whole of my life to know what I want. And even then I will have no words to frame my wants. And now I realize I have no wants. I have whittled them down out of fear. I have hoped to give myself a stature I think I do not have by self-abnegation. Instead, I have dwindled. Without wants, there is no 'I'. That is why they so often look at me without seeing me.”

The interior monologues “What do I want” and “there is no 'I'” are an exploration of the inner self by the protagonist. Deshpande, through her protagonists, asks questions which had never been asked before. Her protagonists demand to have their own identity.

The wife in her story Intrusion has a different, bitter experience within the ambience of marriage. The story projects the picture of a helpless, trapped wife. Her interior
monologue explores the male interloper in the private area of the female world. The newly wed wife is unable to accept sex so soon after marriage with a man and refuses to expose the mysteries of her body to him, who is a stranger, though a husband. She wishes to know him better but he cannot understand why that is important. "Know each Other? What has that to do with it? Aren't we married now?" To her it seemed as if sex, even when it is with her husband against her wishes, was 'an intrusion of her privacy, the violation of her right by a male interloper, her husband.

The story *Intrusion* rejects the premise that through the institution of marriage, the husband obtains the right to have sexual intercourse with his wife irrespective of whether she consents to such intercourse or not. In other words, the wife's consent is either taken for granted or is not considered at all. Shashi feels that almost everywhere, a married woman is taken to be the property of her husband - to use, to abuse, to make love, even against her will. The story raises the problem of spousal rape, that is rape within marriage, and also questions the husband's legal right to have intercourse with his wife, never mind her consent, her health, her
emotional state. It is also true that wife rape was an unthinkable concept for patriarchy.

Shashi Deshpande lays stress on love and affection as the most needed relationship in the life of a woman and also presents the experiences of frustration, alienation, bitterness as a second face of the same coin. The story The Inner Rooms is similar to this. It is the pathetic story of Amba, even though a voiced monologue stands as a paradigm of the never changing condition of women in India. Shashi blends the present condition of women by bringing the characters of Kunti, Amba and women of today and tries to show that the fates of the women are similar, even though there is a gap of many centuries. With her life and tragic death, Amba the legendary character of the Mahabharata (the princess of Kashi, an ancient Hindu Kingdom) becomes the symbol of a woman who is powerless, helpless and also the victim of punishment for a crime which is not committed by her. It is Bhishma who has carried away her along with her sisters after defeating the king of Kashi. This is the first insult she receives. It is he who destined them as the brides of his brothers. It is the second insult. Ultimately, she wins the freedom to choose her destiny by declaring boldly her love for
king Salva in an open assembly. But she receives the severest blow at the hands of her chosen lover who rejects her. At last Bhishma too rejects her because of the promise given to his father that he would remain unmarried forever. She is thus treated most inhumanly by all the three - Bhishma, Vichitravirya and Salva. She stands as a symbol of total rejection, humiliation and complete frustration. She feels as if trapped in the male's game of life.

Shashi shows that patriarchy stands firmly rooted, insensitive and passive to even the tears shed by women. The title *The Inner Rooms* suggests the inner suffering, suppression, insult which find a totally negative response from the members of the patriarchy, (Her sighs and tears are confined to her room only). The writer seems to drive home that in *The Inner Rooms* of a woman one can find only tears and endless tears.

Mrs. Deshpande's story *The Inner Rooms* tells a woman's search for her own identity. There is a voice raised for rejecting the tradition of Indian Society and also a voice in favour of a woman's own choice. The interior monologue of Amba, mythological character from *The Mahabharata*, is as follows,
"How foolish I was, she thought, to let my happiness depend on other people! My nurse at first, then my mother, my father, my sisters and finally Salva. What a burden to put on others, the burden of your own happiness." 

She feels pity for the destiny of her sisters, which represents every woman's destiny and that is their married life. She mocks at them who wait for their husband to visit them at night, live in the constant hope of bearing him sons. She savours the satisfaction of not being one among them and to have escaped that degradation by rejecting that same husband in an open assembly.

Deshpande is intent on showing the ugly faces of patriarchy. Rape is one among them. It is an act of male power, domination and aggression against women, wrongly perceived as sex objects. The title story *It was dark* shows the adultery in metropolitan cities like Bombay where contemporary society stands blindfolded to it. It also shows the sharp edge given to the feminine sensibility of a school going teenaged girl and her mother. The story portrays the agony of the girl who gets kidnapped, raped and is finally discovered in a state of horror and shock. The Mother's
agonies is not less than hers, and she suffers silently throughout the story.

Shashi succeeds in showing the plenitude of a father’s worries who gets angry with the wife when he hears the doctor’s suspension of the girl’s pregnancy. He asked his wife whether she had warned her daughter. She uncomprehensively asks “to warn against what?”

But she rather feels sad for the daughter who sits staring at the ceiling “with blank and unseeing eyes.”

The mother in the story records her own mother’s advice to the daughter before her marriage, of submitting herself to the husband on her wedding night. They had taught her to build a wall around herself with negatives from childhood “don’t, don’t, don’t. You’re female” were their usual words.

“They taught me to build a wall around myself with negatives from childhood. And then suddenly, when I got married, they told me to break the walls down. To behave as if it had never been. And my husband too - how completely his disregard of that wall had been; I had felt totally vulnerable, wholly defenseless. I won’t let my daughter live behind walls, I had thought.” 23
Later she decides that she will not let her daughter live behind walls.

Shashi succeeds in catching the tremors of mental tumult of her protagonists. She understands perfectly the emotions of human beings. Mother fills courage into the girl who has become voiceless and motionless. It is said with the action of the mother when she pulls back the curtain and lets sunlight pour into the room, she symbolizes her determination not to feel defeated in the battle of life.

Shashi declares through the protagonist that women are not baby producing factories for the men who demand babies.

However, as believed everywhere else, a wage-earning wife is supposed to attack the masculinity of her man. This is because the concept of masculinity has been very closely related to the man’s ability to earn enough for the whole family which means that the wife need not go out to earn. Though today, it is the wife who is increasingly asserting her right to work for pay and her economic independence, for most people the old assumption that mother means ‘mummy’ and father means ‘bread-winner’ still holds good. Just as the husband feels a bit less ‘masculine’ with a wife who is
working, so also it is assumed that when a wife begins to work, she loses some of her femininity.

The members of patriarchy cannot understand that the drudgery of household work leads to monotony in the life of a woman until it is said to be so by a woman. Shahshi has not valourised the image of woman as goddess; instead she has assigned more human qualities to her. An editorial in The Indian Express dated October 17, 1985 on the girl child, said:

“Discrimination against women in India begins before birth. Parents have agreed that it is less expensive for them to abort the female foetus than to bear the expenses of rearing a child and paying for her dowry. Thus for the criminally discriminating practices of society, the girl child is condemned even before she is born.”

The themes of Deshpande’s short stories seek to capture the nuances of the practice of discrimination against women in modern life, which is a vastly complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. Historically, women have suffered from oppression and discrimination simply because of their sex. Men posted in a hegemonic position are allotted work with differential values, which earn better salary, better chance of
promotion. Women are prevented from being assigned such work of responsibility on some pretext or other. Besides, their marital and familial responsibility also plays a negative role. It is generally assumed that women who are married and have children do not accept any such assignments which carry heavy responsibility and are complicated in nature. Women are perceived as less mobile, less productive, less competent and less committed to their work.

Balarama Gupta writes;

“Shashi’s stories are primarily woman-centred. Her thematic concerns are guilt, failure, loneliness – in brief, woman in her different roles, as wife, mother, daughter and as a human being in a society whose mores and conventions are rigidly conditioned by man. Shashi’s women consciously suffer. They are “strong, full-bodied individuals with a mind of their own, with courage to face facts even about themselves and yet conforming to set patterns of life etched out for Indian women as identifiable as the wife next door”. In other words, women in Shashi’s fictional world are no doubt aware that they are victims of iniquity but they prefer suffering to rebellion and sacrifice to revolt in the interest of
familial harmony. Shashi’s stories reflect social reality as it is. She does not suggest how it ought to be. She gives no facile solutions".24

Lenin’s definition of housework, given so many years ago, is as pertinent today as it was in his time. Lenin said that housework is the most unproductive, the most barbarous and the most arduous work a woman can do. It is exceptionally petty and does not include anything that would in any way promote the development of the woman.

The male ideology accepts that housework is the primary occupation of women and the job outside the home, whether it is salaried or not, is secondary and unimportant for the women, because that is what the men have decided.

Housework is the most arduous, and unproductive work and does not have any chance to promote the development of woman. Women should collectively organize themselves to do the work that includes not only cooking, cleaning, marketing, serving the food but also taking care of children.

Being a woman Dina Mehta understands the never-halting process of housework and shows through Shanti, the protagonist of the story The Fastidious Housewife, how a woman feels totally isolated and bored,
being a housewife. She faces every morning with a sense of resentment because of;

"the fact that nibbling tasks would eat up this sprouting young day, that she would have to busy herself with meals and bills and vitamin pills, with school work, buttons, hems and socks, with milk bottles and perambulators.." 25

This was her world...a world of steady flames and golden brown hues, of pots and pans and ladles, of fats and sizzles and commingling odors. What had she to do with the written word, the texture of the English language or with literary ambitions? Here she was, all scattered in pieces, all undone, it seemed to her, giving herself in driblets to her family and her work, increasingly restless at this partitioning of women who identify themselves mainly as wives and mothers in spite of the fact that many of them have the ability to prove themselves outside the home. Like Shanti who has literary ambitions, yet consents to act as the silent receptacle of the male ego.

The inner turmoil which is felt by Shanti is different from that of Sita’s in Absolution.
Absolution is a pronouncedly feminist creation. Not satisfied with his continual acts of infidelity towards his "docile, chaste and devoted" wife Sita, Ram celebrates his lapses with triumphant glee by presenting her with varieties of flowers to mark them. When she is shocked into a recognition of her husband's perfidy, Sita returns the compliment. She yields to the temptations posed by Ram's friend Dilip and bursts out of the cocoon of her "womanly faithfulness and days of long-suffering patience, all that disarming passivity" and presents her husband with a glowing bouquet of red carnations in "glad and chaotic abundance." The story emphatically questions the validity of conventional womanly virtues such as duty, chastity and submission in the context of man's violation of these values.

The rest of Dina Mehta's stories offer variations of the same theme of man-woman relationships.

Dina Mehta is more pronounced in her feminist stance than Shashi Deshpande. Her style is normally simple and spontaneous. And she can vary her narrative strategy according to the thematic need of the story. Dina Mehta is sure to become a force to reckon with if she comes out with a
few more volumes of stories/particularly stories like *Absolution*.

With education and economic independence of girls in urban India, and exposure to Westernisation with its plus and minus points, divorce is gradually becoming acceptable as a means to smooth out the rough edges of married life. But our women are still trying to reach a solution to all their marital problems within the framework of marriage in keeping with our cultural conditioning and our social upbringing. They prefer to live with the male gulping their unhappiness as it were, only because divorce brings the story of unhappiness out in the open and they do not like to wash the family dirty linen in public. The female protagonist Sita in Mehta's story *Absolution* was responding with silence to male adultery. Any protest on the part of the wife on that account would only drive the husband and wife apart, and might even result in divorce.

Most of the adultery was being committed by men and if this was so, the worse conditioned wives accept this as a part and parcel of their normal married life. In common parlance, adultery connotes marital infidelity and it is committed
whenever a married man or woman has sexual relationship with a person who is not his or her spouse.

Sita’s is not a hostile response to her husband’s infidelity. She is in an alienated frame of mind when she meets her husband next morning.

Dina Mehta, with her great powers of insight and penetration, has treated her female protagonists’ memories, anxiety, confusion and anguish in a wholly psychological manner. She is able to represent the ‘Modernist’ consciousness of 20th Century woman. She presents the bold responses of her female characters to their domestic world, a world of web-like associations with parents, husband, siblings and children. The responses are against the age-old feminine stereotypes of Indian culture.

Woman is the central figure in Dina Mehta’s works and she presents the image of women as cross-bearers, as sufferers in the hands of their husbands. Sometimes they speak angrily, some reveal their helpless and painful experiences, some question the excessive interference of males in their life. The males are the interlopers in women’s life.
If some stories of Deshpande and Mehta narrate the tales of daughters, wives and mothers, some of the stories explore the condition of widows within the framework of family and society.

Deshpande has perfected herself by uncovering the psychological hang-ups in the sensibility of a widow. The protagonist Radha in her story, *The Rain*, who is a middle-aged widow, finds herself in a situation where she has to face both her personal desire and the society. She meets a young man who is a student of medicine, after thirteen years since her husband was hospitalized. He has developed vague dreams and erotic fancies for her who is his cousin. But she is married to another man. When she has become a widow, the young man recollects his earlier feelings and thinks it is not the end of their affair. He proposes to marry her but she says.

"One doesn't marry a widow......
A Hindu Marriage is a sacrament......
It never ends. One belongs for
All time and eternity to the same man."
Though she is resolved to remain a widow, with such thoughts jostling in her mind, she knows her loneliness is haunting her very much. Ultimately she agrees and marries.

The widow in Deshpande's story *A Man and a Woman* has an illicit physical relationship with her younger brother-in-law of seventeen years. She feels guilty. Her inferior monologue reveals this guilt.

"A slave to my body, I am disgusted with myself, I am dirty, abnormal"

She thinks about herself as

"...not qualified for anything except to look after a man, his home and children." 27

She shares her agony with her husband's friend who is a cripple. He proposes to her but she fears because she feels scared of people's comments. Later she marries him.

Dina Mehta, in her *The Voice of authority*, shows the protagonist Uma’s struggles to find an identity for her daughter. Her daughter Jyoti is studying to become a doctor. Uma wants her to be "a good doctor, an excellent doctor, for India needed doctors."
Uma wants her daughter to study science. She wants to fill her with a silent, forbearing strength, because women needed such strength. But all her desires are made mincemeat of by the intrusion of Muni Bhabhi.

"Cutting up dead bodies is not a woman's proper work," went on Muni bhabhi. "We already have two doctors in the family: Vinoo's third son, and my husband's nephew. Jyoti is past twenty. Why do you keep her without a husband so long?" 28

Uma is not without a perception of the misery of a woman's life. But she dreams for her daughter to escape from such a destiny.

"She now settled down more comfortably among her pillows. Her Jyoti would lead a useful, purposeful life. She would retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self, and not become a nameless, biological robot in a docile mass. Above all, she would not immolate herself in the kitchen, engage in work that was endless, trivial and deadening. Yes, yes, she at least must refuse to be clipped, caged, have her gifts destroyed or locked up forever within herself, just because she was born a woman . . ." 29
The protagonist Uma's voice echoes every housewife's secret longing to escape the drudgery of their lives and their dreams for their daughters. Being a housewife Uma experiences how the meaningless household work spoils the meaning of her life. She cannot be recognized or can find an identity of her own. She is caged in the kitchen, does not know how to come out from cage. She has to spend the whole of her life in that same cage willy-nilly.

Uma feels that she was born a woman, that is why she has lost the value of her selfhood. Now she decides that her daughter's life must not be like her own. Her daughter Jyoti must have all the rights to lead her own life. Uma dreams that her life must be a meaningful one. She must have an identity of her own.

With different and ultra-modernistic views Dina Mehta presents the reactions of her female protagonists to marital infidelity. They emerge empowered by a sense of their selfhood.

From the 1960s onwards a good number of women writers have appeared on the literary scenario, exhibiting a greater consciousness of their status in society and self-identity. Lakshmi Kannan observes in this context:
"For a woman, her works are no less a process of self actualization as her life is. In both, she wrestles with a host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes." 30

O.Henry-Festival-Prize-recipient short-story writer, Anjana Appachana, has given her voice mainly to those who are trapped in a helpless predicament. Though she has chosen other themes like career oriented women, mother-daughter relationship, regional prejudices, she is intent on portraying woman in her several roles. There is a clash between the traditional bonds and modernity in her stories. Her stories centre around the family and woman’s status in her family, and questions regarding the self-identity of women.

A woman leaves everything behind and lives in somebody else’s house after getting married. Soon she realizes that there is no private space for her in the home of her in-laws. She must be obedient to what is being dictated, dutiful towards her family, but not to further her career. She must be liked but must not have her own likes and dislikes. She must be a mere listener, and is not allowed to ask a question, has no right to voice dissatisfaction.
Anjana portrays the woman who has a voice to raise against these traditional norms. She can think and act on her own. She is not even hesitant to kick the institution of marriage when it becomes a fetter binding her. She is a young woman, in Anjana’s story Bahu, who loves her husband Siddharth like Jayu in It was the Nightingale and the housewife in A Day like any other and also has lots of expectations of love. On the contrary she receives a hostile attitude from her mother-in-law.

At last she refuses to be tied down in the patriarchal paradigm of society. She decides to forsake her family and walks out. She becomes an example to other traditional women who think that marriage is the only option left for them. The action of the young woman explains her inner urge to preserve her identity and not to lose that. She has brought the fire of a revolution into her manners and tries to restore to herself her lost identity.

The female protagonist Mala Mousi in Anjana’s Incantations has similar ideas like the bahu. She is brisk, sharp and cutting though married, she chooses to be alone. She is a gynaecologist and proud of being independent. The narrator of the story Geeti always appreciates Mala Mousi’s
attitude, her optimism, objectivity independence and her love of reading.

She feels her love for life is “serious, contemplative, silent.” She has not used her education to cook. She never believes in God, Heaven and Hell. Her suggestion on Sangeeta’s predicament is different from that of others. Sangeeta, the unfortunate girl whose life is full of thorns, is raped everyday during the day by Abhinay, her brother-in-law. She meets with a tragic end, by killing Abhinay and putting an end to her untold misery. Later she commits suicide, which is drastically opposed by the other female characters of the story. Sangeeta’s mother thinks that the predicament of Sangeeta is her fate. Mala Mousi feels differently, she calls it was a stupid act on Sangeeta’s part to tell about her plight to Geeti, her teenage sister. She suggests that she should have spoken about the inhuman treatment to her parents to get out of the situation. Geeti admires her attitude. She says:

“How did Mala Mousi Cope ? where did
She get her optimism from, how could
She be so cheerful about her future,
All alone, always alone?” 31
Mala Mousi dares to raise her voice against the worst conditions of women. She feels women have all rights to live on their own. They have the right to object if they are badly treated by patriarchy. She knows a woman must have a voice to raise against inhuman treatment, whereas Sangeeta’s mother, who is a typical, traditional middle-class woman, suggests silence as a remedy if a woman is treated badly by any one. That is why she has become an escapist and has raised no voice against Abhinay. She believes marriage is most essential for a woman. The attitude of Mala Mousi shows her inner urge to have her own identity which she does not want to lose, at any cost.

Anjana portrays the individual thinking of her women characters, who have given much importance to their career, profession etc. Now they take decisions, speak and act accordingly and desire to leave their footprints by being individuals. The reader can find such features in Miss Dass, the personnel officer of the story *Sharmaji*, who knows how to manage her profession. She takes decisions by judging the situation. She is the well wisher of the company as well as of the employees. She never brings her emotional attitude or her family affairs into the office.
Like Mala Mousi, Namita in the story *When Anklets Tinkle* also rejects patriarchy’s decision of making marriage compulsory for girls. She also suggests that a girl should not marry a boy just because the boy loves her:

“Yes, Rao wanted to marry her, he wanted to marry her? Did none of them care how she felt? what about her wanting to marry him? what about that?”

Her thoughts are really indigestible for the tradition-bounded people. She thinks that one need not necessarily get married to a person with whom one is having a physical relationship. Her conception of marriage and the relationship between man and woman may make others raise their brows. But she is trying to come out of the image of a woman who is trapped in a cage.

The story *Her Mother* deals with the mother-daughter relationship. It is in the form of a mother’s letter to her daughter, who is well educated in Delhi University and has won a scholarship for the Ph.D. programme in comparative literature in a US university. She develops a deep emotional
entanglement with her brother-in-law. She is fascinated by
his charm. She is a girl who never gives up her true identity
under any circumstances. Her cutting off of her beautiful,
long hair is an act of questioning the traditionally expected
attitudes by a young girl. Her father, described as a dull,
resigned person, is distant, and too unconcerned to
understand the reason for his daughter’s defiance, but
experiences it “as if a limb has been cut off from him” and he
sits in his chair and broods. Her mother takes it seriously,
calls it a ‘revenge’ “you have perfected the art of hurting us”.
The daughter’s act affects the brother-in-law too. “It wiped off
the lazy grin on her brother-in-law’s face”.

Her ‘escape’ to the US is a similar act of defiance. There
is an Indian girl in her who has become silent towards her
brother-in-law’s uncaring and selfish deeds that hurt her
emotions deeply. She is the new woman who throws away the
orthodox values and boundaries by rejecting any idea of
marriage. She is in search of a new life and her own identity.

The stories may differ from one another. But they have
this one common motif - that is the protagonists’ quest for an
identity. Independent existence is essential to have an
identity of one’s own. Woman has no independent existence.
So she has no identity. She has no rights to the property of father or husband. The son becomes an inheritor of the family. She cannot own a property because she herself is a subordinate. A communist philosopher, Frederick Engels, observes that it was when the concept of private property originated that woman came to be subordinated to man. Yes, that was an arsenal that fortified the male beyond question against the female.

Her life is chained by cultural norms. Her life is like a living martyrdom.
References:


7. Ibid, p.81

8. Ibid, p.82.

10. Ibid, p.83
11. Ibid, p.86
14. Ibid. pp.94-95
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20. Ibid, p.50
21. Ibid, p.207
22. Ibid, p.88


27. Ibid, p.38


29. Ibid, pp.24-25


32. Ibid. p.84.