Shashi Deshpande

Women in Transition

“The fact that we are human is much more important than our being men and women”

(Interview by Geetha Gangadharan 254)
Shashi Deshapande, an Indian Woman writer writing in English, was born in a small town of Dharwad in 1938. Her father, late “Adya Rangachar Sriranga” the famous Kannada playwright, was described as ‘the Bernard Shaw of the Kannada theatre’. Educated in Bombay and Bangalore, she acquired an M.A. in English from Mysore University. She married Dr. Deshpande, a neuro-pathologist in 1962 and visited England in 1969. Inspired by this visit, she published an account of her experiences as short stories. Since then, her short stories started appearing regularly in popular magazines. Recounting the influences in her life, she says,

There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female. (Of Concerns 107)

She read the works of English writers like Jane Austen, the Brontes, Dickens, George Eliot and Hardy. She also read the works of regional writers like Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Shivaram Karanth and Masti Venkatesh Iyengar. But when she took up writing, there was no conflict regarding the language. She wrote in English because “it is the only language she can express herself in”. (Of Concerns, Of Anxieties). Her early stories were published in Indian magazines like Femina, Eve’s Weekly The Illustrated Weekly of India, Deccan Herald and J.S. Mirror. Her first novel The Dark Holds No Terrors was published in 1980. It was followed by If I die Today in 1982, Roots and Shadows in 1983, Come Up and Be Dead in 1983, That Long Silence in 1988, The Binding Vine in 1992 and Moving On in 1996. Come Up and Be Dead and If I die Today were detective serials that were expanded and published as novels. Roots and Shadows won the ‘Thirumathi Rangammal Prize’ for ‘The Best Indian Novel’ of 1982-83 and That Long Silence won her the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990. Her short stories had been collected in five volumes: The Legacy and Other Stories (1978), It Was Dark and Other Stories (1986), It Was the Nightingale and Other Stories (1986), The Miracle and Other Stories (1986) and The Intrusion and Other Stories (1993). They had been regrouped into two collections: Collected Short Stories I (2003) and Collected Short Stories II (2004). Besides novels and short stories, she also published several children’s books in English and wrote the screen play for the Hindi feature film “Drishti”. The children’s books, A Sum Adventure, The Only Witness and The Hidden Treasure were written on the lines of
the Western writer Enid Blyton. The Narayanpur Incident was written based on ‘Quit India Movement’. Her short story “The Legacy” was prescribed for the graduate students in Columbia University. Her novel The Dark Holds No Terrors was translated into German and Russian languages. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar compared The Legacy and Other Stories to Raji Narasimhan’s The Marriage of Bela (1978) and Juliette Banerjea’s The Boyfriend (1978) and commented as,

It talks about the tears in things, the little upsets in life, the price one has to pay for one’s acute self-awareness, and the loneliness that becomes more pronounced as one gets older and older. (76)

Of all the literary devices used by an author, metaphors speak of the author’s mental attitude and concentration of vision. It helps the author to conceive images and to crystallize the moods. It captures the intensity of the author’s creative vision. Aristotle has remarked, “But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and is also a sign of genius.” (qtd. Bywater 78)

Deshpande in her short stories has used ‘the dark’, ‘the sun light’, ‘death’ and ‘life’ and ‘silence’ as metaphors. The metaphor of ‘silence’ is used in the short story, “Can You Hear Silence?” In the short story “Rain” the protagonist symbolizes ‘rain’ as ‘death’, ‘desolation’ as ‘sorrow’. Similarly the metaphor of death is used in the story “Death of a Child”. In all these stories, metaphors are continuously discussed and in some way or the other, they are very closely interlinked to the main theme. Thus they emphasize the theme in their own way. As Amarnath Dwivedi points out, “The search for self-discovery or the quest for identity forms a recurrent motif in Deshpande’s fiction and the dominant metaphor used in it strengthens the motif.” (226)

The beauty of a story and the effect it has on the readers depends not only on the figures of speech used by the writer but also on the narrative technique employed. In most of the stories, Deshpande employs the flash back technique with the narrative going back and forth in time. As a result, the narrator describes events with hindsight. Though some of the stories are of the feministic perspective, they are narrated either from a child’s point of view (“The Cruelty Game”) or through some other male character (“A Man and a Woman”) present in the story. But most often, the story is narrated by the
protagonist herself. This type of narration makes the mental agony and psychic condition of the protagonist clear to the reader.

With all these strengths as a writer, she could win the admiration of the readers, but her use of anonymous characters in most of the short stories confuses the readers about her characters and whom she is referring to. In some stories such as “A Day Like Any Other”, Deshpande uses third person narrative with anonymous characters. It results in a slight confusion such as, “And for the first time, anger pierced her like a steel splinter……” (“A Day like Any Other” 183) Here the reader gets confused as whom ‘her’ refers to whether the protagonist of the story or her friend since the words ‘she’ and ‘her’ are simultaneously used for the protagonist and her friend.

In most of the stories, Shashi Deshpande uses for the characters pronouns instead of the proper nouns. This causes difficulty in getting immediately to the person referred to and his/her role in the interaction. As many characters feature in one story, the use of merely a ‘he’ or ‘she’ is generally not enough. It causes confusion. The reader cannot identify the characters, which appear at times as algebraic figures without names. (Samtani 190)

Shashi Deshpande writes neither about the politics nor about the grinding poverty of the Indian masses. Like Chudamani Raghavan, she writes about the people around her. Her characters are so real that we feel as if they are the people in our own family or the people living next door. Hence the stories talk about the realities present in the lives of people. “Her major concerns emerge from our own environment, from our immediate world, holding up mirrors to our own lives.” (Chandra Holm)

Her stories are filled with compassion and understanding for the characters, especially the women. Her stories explore the search of a woman to remain as a human being in spite of playing her role as a daughter, wife and mother. Her stories show the anguish and conflict of the woman caught between patriarchy and tradition on one hand and her self-expression, individuality and independence on the other hand and the transition she undergoes.

Woman’s struggles in the context of Contemporary Indian Society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande’s major concern as a creative writer and this appears in all her important stories. (Amur, 10)
Another characteristic feature of her stories is that they depict the oppression of women at different levels, including sexual oppression, within and outside the home. “In the short stories, Deshpande explores the different levels of oppression and their overt and covert manifestations.” (Muthu Atray, 97) They explore women’s issues like childbirth, infidelity, widowhood, rape, marital rape, gender discrimination, so on. At the same time some of her stories also focus on the problems faced by men. But they are not many. The reason is Deshpande is highly sensitive to women’s problems.

A close study of Deshpande’s short stories and novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. (Sunitha Reddy, 21)

The male characters in her stories are not as strong and forceful as her women characters. When compared to her women characters, they are ‘weak’ and ‘ineffective’. She has openly accepted her inability to create a rounded character of the opposite sex like the character of ‘Anna’ of Tolstoy. The reason is she is not as comfortable with her male characters as she is with her women. In the year 1987, in an interview with Vanamala Vishwanathan, when she was asked why the male characters created by women writers are ‘thin’ and ‘typed’ and why it is not possible for women writers to create a ‘rounded’ character of the opposite sex as Tolstoy’s Anna, she replies:

I’m not Tolstoy in the first place. Tolstoy has so many years of male writing behind him. The female Tolstoy is yet to come. As Virginia Wolf said, Shakespeare’s sister is yet to come. (14)

She shows through her stories that even in modern times, women are regarded as inferior to men in spite of their economic independence and high educational standards. Her stories portray how society allows the woman to get education and get into job without allowing her to go out of the traditional framework ordained for her as a wife and a mother. Apart from this aspect, she proves through her stories that women’s education and aspirations do not allow them to fit in the socially ordained groove which results in their loneliness and alienation. As a result the women readers of the present age can identify themselves with the characters and feel comfortable with her stories.
Deshpande not only writes about the common woman but also attempts to refigure and reinterpret some major strands in mythology like the nexus between Amba and Bhima, the inner-conflict of Dhraupadi and Kunti in *The Mahabharata*, the psychological turmoil of Sita in *The Ramayana. The Epics* and *The Vedas* have been written by men and as a result the feelings and emotions of the women present in them are depicted from men’s point of view. But only a woman can understand the feelings of a woman in such a situation. Deshpande has made this attempt and has questioned many paradigms present in mythology and has also shown the psychological turmoil of the mythological women through in her stories. On the whole, “the central message which runs as an undercurrent in most of the stories seeks to question the paradigms of patriarchy both in our myths and actual life.” (Gopal Reddy 46)

Her stories can be categorized as those which mirror the reality examining the subjugated position of woman in Indian society and the stories that mend the situation depicting the woman’s positive reaffirmation of herself. But in all these stories she hardly allows her women to move away from the traditional norms of the society. Her stories generally centre on family relationships – the relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter. The conflicts faced by a woman as a wife, a mother and a daughter are given importance. Talking about the importance of human relationships, she says that being a wife or a mother is not an imposition. According to her it becomes an imposition only when the woman is laid rigid rules of how she should behave. She says,

- It’s necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or a mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writing. What I don’t agree with is the idealization of motherhood – the false and sentimental notes that accompany it. (Interview with Vanamala 13)

In another interview with Geetha Gangadharan, she acknowledges that interpersonal relationships and human emotions are of importance to her. She says,

- Human relationship is what a writer is involved with. Person to person and person to society relationships – these are the two primary concerns of a creative writer and, to me, the former is of immense importance. My preoccupation is with interpersonal relationships and human emotions. (Interview with Geethagangadharan, 252)
Though her stories and novels talk about the sufferings of women in a male dominated society and her writings are of the feminist perspective, she does not like to be called a ‘feminist writer’ in the narrow sense of the word. As discussed earlier, her concern is for the human relationship. She does not try to portray men as mere culprits or women as the mere sufferers. She thinks that she is ‘feminist’ in her thoughts. But she hates her works being categorized as a woman’s works and she being called a ‘woman writer’. She wants her to be acknowledged as a mainstream writer like any male writer. In an interview with Geetha Gandharam, she said that she is a feminist, but did not want to be called a feminist writer.

Yes, I would. I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simon de Beauvoir that ‘the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women’. I think that’s my idea of feminism. ……..My objection was to being called a feminist writer. Yes, I am very much against such categorization. It is just good writing and bad writing and not men’s writing women’s writing. …..When you deal with just my work then take me as an individual writer and deal accordingly. Don’t call it women’s writing or feminist writing. Today we have women writing about women, for women. These works are being published by women, criticized by women, read by women and studied in the Women’s Studies Departments and so on. I hate this women’s lib separating women’s writing. It is just self-defeating. (254-255)

In another interview with Riti she says that unintentionally her writings have been reflecting feminist ideas from the start. When asked why she mostly writes of sexually or professionally frustrated women she says that right from childhood, women undergo problems and they face discrimination and struggle at every point of their life. Hence her stories that are centered on women mirror the problems they face. Talking about it, she replies, “Yes, I do feel that women in this country are frustrated in many ways, and that’s why my characters turn out that way too. It is not intentional.” (240)

According to Shashi Deshpande Western feminism is entirely different from Indian feminism. She feels that the Western Feminist theories cannot be applied to the real life situation in India. It may be because the way of life, the societal set up and the traditions and culture of the Western countries are very different from ours. She feels that Indians have a wrong notion of feminism. She clearly argues that walking away from tradition, and
throwing tantrums do not constitute feminism. She says that many women have feminism in their lives without knowing that they actually possess it. Hence they should have a clear idea of what feminism is in their lives and what it is not. For her, feminism is using the stamina used to endure the torments for the betterment of life. This is what she tries to bring out through her stories.

Feminism is not a matter of theory. It is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is no, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of people in India are feminists without realizing it. ….. For me feminism is translating what is used up in endurance into something positive: a real strength. (Interview by Lakshmi Holmstorm 248)

Like any other woman writer, Shashi Deshpande’s focus is on women. But the difference lies in the way she looks at them as human beings and not as mere women and also writes about the various problems they face, both at personal and societal level. Deshpande’s gallery of women consists of mothers, daughters, sister-in-laws, mother-in-laws, co-sisters, wives, single women, widows, women deserted by husbands and so on. Dealing with women of different age groups ranging from a fourteen year old girl to a sixty year old lady; and different types of women like single, married, divorcée, widows and spinsters her stories explain the problems and dilemmas in their lives. Her women characters have strength of their own; in spite of their challenges and hostilities they remain uncrushed. She does not portray all the women characters in the same mould. Just as two people do not react in the same way to the same situation in real life, no two of her women characters react in the same way to the same situation. If some are revolting, some are placid. Some seem to be mature and some are in transition. Mostly, she presents her women characters as persons in the journey of self-realization. There might be several cross roads which make her characters real which we don’t find in Volga, but to some extent in Chudamani Raghavan. Thus “she writes about women not as their champion but as their articulator.” (Futehally 24)

A careful study of her stories reveals her accomplishment as a writer. Twelve of her short stories with different themes have been taken up for study. The problem of
widowhood is discussed in the stories “A Man and a Woman” and “The Cruelty Game”. “And Then” focuses on the problem of a divorcee. Infidelity of the husbands is the problem of the protagonists in “Travel Plans” and “A Day Like Any Other”. “I Want” deals with the problem of marriage. Abortion is centered on in “Death of a Child”. If rape is the issue in “It Was Dark” marital rape is the issue of “The Intrusion”. “It Was a Nightingale” and “A Wall is Safer” concentrate on the dilemma between one’s career and marital life. “A Liberated Woman” talks about the atrocities of a husband and the traditional mindset of the wife that makes her endure them. The common thread that runs in all these stories is the problems faced by the women and their response.

In a patriarchal country like India, women are brought up as dependents on men. They try to live in accordance with the Manu Smrithi which demands that women in their childhood must be nurtured by their parents, in the teenage they must be protected by their brothers, after marriage guarded by their husband and in old age taken care of by their children. They have imbibed the traditional values so much that they can not live all by themselves. It needs courage and will power to come out of this situation and live all alone. The traditional mind-set has not allowed people to look at a separated woman with sympathy. If a woman deserts her husband or vice-versa, the society blames the woman alone. For such women, everything including finding a house for rent becomes a big ordeal. The society (especially men) does not look at them with compassion. The treatment meted out to them by men sometimes arouses the feelings of sisterhood in women. This is clearly depicted in the story “And then..?”

It is the story of an old woman who feels lonely and emptied after her husband’s death. She has two children, a son and a daughter. Her son Vishwa is married and is living with his wife and daughter. Her daughter, Anju has been living with her when the old woman’s husband died. One day her daughter declares her plan of going to the States. The old woman pleads her daughter not to go. The old woman asks her daughter to get married before going abroad to which the daughter doesn’t pay any attention. She says that the plan has been decided when her father was alive and her father is well aware of her plans. The old woman as she doesn’t have any other alternate reluctantly helps her daughter in packing her things. After Anju’s departure to the States, she is unable to tolerate the emptiness and hence goes with her son to Bombay to live with him. But she
feels alienated in her son’s house and could not adjust herself. Her son and daughter-in-law try their best to make her feel at ease. One day Vishwa organizes a party at home. On his compulsion, she joins the party. In the party, a woman called Shaku, Anju’s friend meets her. She has left her husband and hence finds it difficult to get a house for her. She proposes to be a paying guest in the old woman’s house in case the old woman goes back to Bangalore. Shaku further informs that the old woman’s daughter has asked her to meet her. The old woman is reluctant to accept the proposal and hence doesn’t give any answer. That night when the old woman remembers Shaku, she realizes her daughter’s concern for her. She thinks that Anju is trying to make amends this way. But the old woman falls in a dilemma whether to accept Shaku’s proposal or not and decides to leave the decision to her son and goes to sleep. The next morning when her daughter-in-law is unwell, she tries to do some cooking and realizes her alienated position there and thinks that she can’t continue to stay there forever. That evening she informs her son Vishwa of Shaku’s proposal. Vishwa tells her not to agree to Shaku’s proposal because Shaku is a separated woman and hence he doubts her character. Though the words of Vishwa were her own thoughts, they induce the feelings of sisterhood in her. She thinks that her son is “narrow, smug and self righteous.” (180) When Viswa offers to say no to Shaku on behalf of the old woman, she immediately denies saying that whatever be her decision she will tell it herself. This self-assertive behaviour of hers shocks Vishwa. Thus Deshpande ends the story with an optimistic note that she may give favourable answer to Shaku. “Whatever” leaves a note that she may accept Shaku’s proposal. That night while talking with her grand child, the old woman laughs whole heartedly for the first time, much to the astonishment of Vishwa.

The condition of the old woman who can not live by herself reminds one of Brown’s words,

A woman’s place as mother/ sister/ daughter or daughter-in-law/ wife is completely at the disposal of her male relative, first by virtue of birth and second by marriage. The woman’s role is rigidly defined by male authority. (129-131)

Through the story the author tries to portray the feeling of sisterhood that gets induced in a woman for another suffering woman. The author shows the opinion of men
on separated women through the character of Vishwa who thinks that Shaku does not deserve any help since she has offended by deserting her husband.

Sometimes it so happens that solutions to one’s problems are found while trying to find a solution for the problems of others. The old woman in “And then…?” finds a solution for her long standing problem only while thinking of Shaku’s problem.

In the beginning of the story “And Then…?” the old woman is portrayed as a highly sensitive woman who takes to heart even a reproach meant for the child as if directed to herself. When her daughter-in-law scolds the child for not sleeping, when the servant maid makes a comment saying that Dipali will not sleep if she has a person to talk to, she is upset. She is filled with self pity and sees negative connotation in ordinary things. She takes even her daughter-in-law’s “Amma is busy” (171) as a sarcastic remark. When she comes to stay with her son she is moody and withdrawn and does not like to move freely in front of strangers. The reason is that she is filled with self-pity and feels herself entangled in her sorrow. She alienates herself from others with the shield of her sorrow. “Does sorrow put barriers round a person? Do I carry my grief with me like a shield keeping people away?” (176)

She tries to see her identity in others. Initially she tries to hold on to someone or the other at every part of life and feels hurt when they walk away from her.

My husband I had said and he went away leaving me alone. My Vishwa, I had thought and now I am just a burden and a responsibility to him. My Anju, I had cried out and she walked away from me without compunction or pity. (173)

She is feeble minded and so feels lonely and fearful after Anju’s departure to abroad and feels that sorrow is better than emptiness. “At that moment, I longed even for the extremity of my grief of those early days. That sorrow had been a companion keeping loneliness at bay. It had filled me leaving no room for emptiness.” (176) But towards the end she turns to be bold and assertive capable of taking decisions and announcing them all by herself. Hence when her son Vishwa offers to help her in saying no to Shaku’s proposal, she denies,

“No, Vishwa, don’t. I’ll do that myself.”
“Sure?” He looks doubtfully at me.
“Yes, I’m sure. Whatever it is, I’d rather tell her myself.” (180)
She is traditional and feels that marriage is all important for a woman. When her daughter wants to go abroad she demands her that she should get married before going abroad. If her daughter gets married and goes away leaving her alone, she does not call it a treachery. But when the same daughter goes abroad leaving her alone she calls it a treachery. So she feels marriage is more important when compared to career. She is squeamish and gets angry over her dead husband for not informing her of her daughter’s plans. She ponders over it. “The treachery of the dead is worse than the treachery of the living; it is unalterably final.” (174) She wants to live in a closed circle of her family members and herself. When she is compelled to come out of this circle, she feels humiliated. “What an ordeal meeting strangers has become for me? It’s as if the fort I was so safely living in has suddenly fallen and I’ve been left vulnerable and defenseless.” (172) As a woman she cannot tolerate to hear her son talking ill of Sharu for having deserted her husband. Though what Vishwa has said are her own thoughts, she can’t tolerate to hear them from his mouth.

It’s like hearing my thought spoken aloud. I should be pleased, but I’m not. I am looking in a mirror and seeing a face I don’t like at all. Smug, narrow and self-righteous. (180)

Only when she thinks of Shaku she undergoes a change and becomes assertive regaining her confidence without depending on others. She becomes bold to take a decision of her own and to speak of it. On the whole she is one of Deshpande’s women who are in the process of transition. Being a feeble minded, dependent woman in the beginning, she gradually becomes self-assertive and bold like her daughter Anju.

Her daughter Anju is a woman who has clarity of vision and is not ready to sacrifice her future for the sake of anyone (even her mother). She represents the present day modern woman who prefers career to marriage. With all her persistence she also has affection on her mother which bursts out on the day of her departure. But she controls herself and sees that her emotions do not take an upper hand.

Yet at the moment of leaving she suddenly clung to me, crying out, ‘Amma.’ And I thought of that child I had taken to school all those years back. She recovered herself immediately and saying, ‘Look after yourself, Amma,’ left. (175)
She is guilty of her act of walking her own way without caring for her old mother. Hence she tries to make amends by asking her friend Shaku to stay with her mother. Her feeling of guilt can also be sensed by her mother. When Shaku informs that Anju has asked her to meet the old woman, the old woman senses the reality. The old woman ponders, “Guilt. It breathes through every word of the letters she writes so often, in every word she speaks to me on the phone.” (177)

Asha, Vishwa’s wife is a good daughter-in-law who does not want to trouble her mother-in-law with domestic chores. She does not want to hurt her mother-in-law. She is also a loving wife and caring mother.

Shaku is an unconventional woman who leaves her husband as she could not get on with him. She doesn’t even feel sorry for what has happened to her. She says, “I’m not. Not sorry I left him, I mean. I’m sorry I married him though.” (177) She is a present day educated woman, who can easily communicate with every one. She can ask what she wants without any hesitation. She casually asks the old lady that she will be her paying guest. Thus we have a gallery of women in the short story “And Then” like a widow, a housewife, a career oriented woman and a separated woman each one different from the other.

Shaku is assertive and knows how to set right the problems she comes across in her life. But there are several women caught up in the traditional more of patriarchy and are in a dilemma about their future. Even their education and economic independence can not help them to come out of the emotional trap in which they are caged. Their liberation (wrought by economical and educational development) can not give them courage to have a life of their own unbound by traditions. The protagonist of the story “A Liberated Woman” a lady doctor belongs to this category. In spite of being a promising doctor, she bears the tortures of her husband, closes all her escape routes, and gets herself trapped in the bond of marriage. The narrator of the story is a lecturer past middle age, working in a college. He is also the colleague and teacher of the lady doctor’s husband. The lady doctor is a promising middle aged doctor with two children. Her husband is a lecturer in a second rate college. Theirs is a “romantic run away marriage as the Shelley’s.”(36-37). It has been twelve years since they got married. The narrator meets the lady doctor after twelve years in his college function where she has come to give a speech on “Medicine as
a career for women.” After a week she rings up the narrator and invites herself over to his home. She starts giving him the details of her married life.

She informs him that her husband has started beating her savagely since the day he was pointed out by an interviewer that his wife was providing him bread and butter. When the narrator suggests divorce as a solution for her problem she denies it saying that she doesn’t want to “exhibit her sores in public.”(43) She even refuses the narrator’s suggestion of taking her husband to a psychiatrist on grounds that he is not aware of his actions that he does at nights. Hearing all this, the narrator gives up his idea of discussing that issue with her husband. After a few days of her meeting him, he comes across an article in a magazine in which she has been interviewed. The title of the article is, “A Liberated woman” much to the amusement of the narrator. The narrator thinks that the title has nothing to do with her real nature.

Through the story Deshpande tries to bring to light the real life situation of working women who are torn between emotions and their intellect. Though the lady doctor’s intellect gives her the different ways of escape from the trauma she is facing, her emotions bind her to her husband.

The lady is modern in her attire and appearance. She “dresses the part” (38) to be in tune with the modern culture. She is “smart and chic” with “composed elegance” (37). The narrator could see the fragility in her personality which seems carefully cultivated. It also makes one to wonder if she is a drug addict. In the beginning of the story, she is emotional and cares neither for traditions nor for her parents. She wishes to elope with the man of her choice which later astonds her after some years following her marriage. Her experiences of married life and her status turn her down to mere “terrified animal”. (42) Like Lalitha of “A Man and a Woman” who loses her stamina in the course of her life, she too loses her courage and gets herself caged. Hence she finds the narrator as the only source to vent her feelings and is very keen on meeting the narrator.

“Can I come and see you?”
“……
“Sure, but my wife has just gone …..”
“Are you alone?”
“Yes”
“Can I come then? Right away?”
No mistaking the urgency now. (36)
Without considering his gender, she reveals to him even her love-making experiences with her husband. After becoming a renowned doctor with some status, she is frightened of the social stigma attached to a divorcee or a separated woman and hence can’t part with ease from her married life. But she expresses a different reason for her endurance. She says that she doesn’t want to exhibit “her sores in public.” (43) She is even guilty of her name and fame which she feels has kindled his ego. So she justifies her husband’s savage act as “the only way, perhaps, of taking revenge on her for what she has done to his ego.” (42) As a result she endures all the tortures of her husband and “plug(s) all her escape routes herself and act(s) like a rat in a trap.” (44) She has similarities with Prema of Chudamani Raghavan’s “Sisterhood” who in spite of her intelligence allows her husband to boss her.

She considers her name and fame as the reasons for her husband’s hysterical behaviour and feels guilty for no fault of hers. So, she justifies her husband’s act of beating her and feels that she deserves the punishment for having kindled his ego. At the same time she even knows that her advancement in career is the actual reason for their comfortable life. The back drop for such a narrow thinking is the traditional paradigm where a woman must always be inferior to her husband – in age, height, caliber, job, salary, social recognition and reputation. All Indian women prefer to abide by the paradigm and be less than their husbands. Similarly the lady doctor feels that it is her mistake to have excelled her husband.

She has similarities with Saritha of The Dark Holds No Terrors. In fact Deshpande has mentioned in the “Preface” to Collected Stories I that she is not satisfied with “A Liberated Woman” and hence wrote The Dark Holds No Terrors. In her words, “There is ‘A Liberated Woman’, dissatisfaction which drove me into writing a novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors.” (xv)

Guilt is the trait that always overcomes women for some reason or the other for all their acts. If the lady doctor in “A Liberated Woman” is guilty of having hurt her husband’s ego, Jaya in “It Was the Nightingale” is guilty of giving importance to her career and for neglecting her husband. The reason for her guilty consciousness is very clear: her pull between traditions and modernity like the lady doctor of “A Liberated Woman”. The dilemma between career and family is a situation that most of the working women face at one point of their career or the other. In this tug of war, it is the family that
mostly wins. Right from the childhood, women have been brought up by nurturing the values of womanhood and motherhood in them. As a result, women always give importance to family and let their career go astray. Even if they do otherwise, they can’t escape the pang of guilt that overshadows them. This is what has happened with Jaya who decides to go abroad for the advancement of her career.

“It Was The Nightingale” is the story of an educated working woman, going abroad for two years on an assignment. She is going abroad not for a ‘foreign returned’ tag but for “getting a bigger salary on her return”. (65) But she really struggles hard to put away her longing to stay back and to go abroad. She even postpones her pregnancy for the sake of this foreign tour. She knows pretty well that things would not be the same on her return as she would be living away from her husband for two years and that each and every unshared experience puts “a brick that can ultimately become a wall”(64) between them. The evening before her going abroad, her husband comes home early and waits for her arrival whereas she comes home late as usual due to her hectic schedule and feels guilty of her act. By the time she comes home, the husband has cooked food which they eat together and get lost in each other. The whole night they keep on talking about different things. Jaya chides him saying that he should not have given his consent for her proposal of going abroad. Then her husband tells her that if she had shown him the least doubt, he would have done so. He then asks her the real reason for going abroad. When Jaya gives him the real reason, he denies it and says that she is doing it because of her obstinacy. Jaya tells him of her mother who sacrificed her whole life for the sake of her family and cried against her family members as ‘denuders’. (65) Jaya, further, tells her husband that she does not want to become like her mother who tried to live through her family and finally suffered a kind of vacuum in her life. Thus they spend the whole night in romance and talking about several other things. Just before dawn, when her husband hurries her to get ready, she unwillingly gets ready to go to the airport. At the airport, she feels sorry for her husband who has to walk back home all alone. She recalls how she had prevented all her relatives from coming to see her off. She says she did so in order to have privacy with her husband before her departure. But now she repents for her act. She pities her husband who will have her memories at home whereas she is going to a place
where she will have no memories left. Then thinking that she carries the guilt in her, she walks away with her eyes “tearless, dry and burning.” (69)

The story manages to deal with both a social situation (the woman’s need to leave the security of her domestic prison, dreams and all) and a metaphysical one. (the inevitability of pain and change, the daunting reality that life is bittersweet at best). (Van Ikin 164)

Right from their childhood, women are brought up with a sense of nurturing the importance of family in them. They are taught that family is of primary concern for them. But the present economic requirements and globalization demand that women should take up a job. They take up a job for the sake of the family and try to strike a balance between family and job. They get crushed in the process and feel hurt for everything they do. Through the story, the author wants to portray the mind-set of career-oriented women and their real inner conflict in bringing equilibrium between their family and job. She depicts how Jaya, in spite of her successful career and achievements, has some emptiness in her life and how she carries the pang of guilt with her. Her husband is considerate unlike the lady doctor’s husband in “A Liberated Woman” and she enjoys absolute freedom. But she is not free from her inner conflicts which make her feel, “This is my doing and all my life, I will carry the burden of this guilt.”(68)

The protagonist Jaya is an educated and ambitious working woman full of self-respect who wants to soar high in her career. Though she has chosen to go abroad, she can not escape her pull between emotions and intellect. Though she is ambitious, she also wants to stay back with her husband. But she fights her inner desires and regains her stamina. In spite of knowing that things would not be the same after her return, she goes ahead with her foreign tour since she feels, “If I give in once, if I give way once, I will walk that road of self-abnegation forever.”(65) Her ambitious nature makes her husband call her an obstinate woman and according to him it is her weakness. He tells her, “You know, Jayu, I believe it is not pride or ambition but obstinacy that is your real vice, after all.” (67)

She does not want to exaggerate anything (even her emotions). Initially she feels guilty of her postponement of her plans of not having the child for two more years. Then she realizes that she has not harmed the child because of her postponement. “Can you feel
a traitor to someone who does not exist?” (65) Similarly she does not want her love towards her husband prevent her from advancement in her career. She feels that it is her responsibility to protect her career.

To me, our lives are intertwined, yet they are two distinct strands. They are like two lights that shine more brightly together, but to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone. (66)

Like the lady doctor in “A Liberated Woman” she is a woman in transition who is torn between emotions and intellect. Her emotions try to force her to give up her foreign assignment and stay back choked in her husband’s love while her intellect does not allow her to do so. Unlike the lady doctor, for her it is always the intellect that takes the upper hand. She has a lot of affection for her husband and feels hurt on her parting with him. “And the memory will pierce me like a knife, leaving me limp with longing.” (64) She feels choked by her husband’s anger. “His resentment and anger come across to me, nebulous like a rising mist, but tangible enough to choke me.”(62) But she has violence which “she has nurtured, which kills all such self destroying thoughts.” (65)

She feels guilty for no fault of hers. Then she tries to justify her act. Finally when she is not successful with it also, she tries to blame her husband. All this is the result of her guilt due to her traditional mind-set.

But I know that each parting is a little dying. And so it is for him and for me. And this is my doing and all my life I will carry the burden of this guilt. (68)
“I wish” I (Jaya) say angrily, “You had refused to let me go. (65)

She has learnt a valid lesson from her mother who “lived through her husband and daughters.” (67) and “stripped herself of everything and cried out against her family members as denuders.” (65) She can also sense her husband’s reproach. “Even as he holds me close, I feel the reproach in him. And perhaps he can feel the guilt in me.” (69) She is frank and blunt which are sensed by her husband. When Jaya tries to hold back her husband for some more time from getting ready for the airport by quoting Juliet’s words “Believe me love, it was the nightingale” (68) in Romeo and Juliet, he retorts, “You wouldn’t ever say that, would you? If it’s the lark, you’d say it is the lark. You wouldn’t ever fool yourself, or others, and say it’s the nightingale, would you?” (68) On the whole Jaya is the only woman present in the story “It Was a Nightingale”. She is depicted as a
woman torn between intellect and emotions. Though she appears to have taken the upper hand over the emotions, it is her emotions which have made her feel guilty.

The conscious of guilt will not spare women in whatever they do. If they go against traditions they feel guilty. Even if they go by traditions, they feel guilty for what they have lost. If Jaya of “It Was the Nightingale” is guilty of going ahead with her career neglecting her family life, Hema of “A Wall Is Safer” is guilty of giving importance to family by sacrificing her career. It is the story of a self-effacing wife who has sacrificed her career for the sake of her husband. Hema, the protagonist is a lawyer by profession. When the husband is transferred to a village to do research in agriculture, she accompanies him to that remote village and hence forgoes her career as a lawyer. She becomes a typical housewife, cooking food, washing, cleaning, ironing, helping the kids with their lessons. She tries to feel satisfied with her way of life but has a trace of dissatisfaction for her condition. She even envies her husband when he comes home “tired, satisfied and full of what he has been doing.” (101)

She tries to deceive herself thinking that she is quite happy, though she is really not. She knows pretty well that if her friend Sushama questions her further more she’ll give in and accept the truth - the truth of dissatisfaction and hence stops her cross-examination by saying, “For God’s sake, Sushama,” I finally say, “Don’t make me out to be one of your exploited women. I know all my legal rights.” (101) In spite of her declaration that she is happy and contended, she has a longing for her career.

I go to bed in a good mood, but I am surprised by a fierce surge of longing to be one of those women who carry their work about with them - writer, a painter, a musician. (101)

Her failure in controlling her feelings is expressed through the words, “A wall is safer. With a wall you can’t even see what is on the other side. But suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then?” (102)

The image of the confining “wall” illustrates her plight; the wall not only conceals the outer horizon from her sight but also traps her within itself, thus doubly annihilating her identity. (Mukta Atrey 106)

Through the story Deshpande tries to project the sacrifices women need to make for the sake of family and their psychological turmoil in the process. Hema is a loving wife who cannot bear the separation of her husband. When she has to choose between her
family and her career she chooses family forgoing her career. Considering the other factors, she gets ready to relinquish her career. She does not want to stay away from her husband and suffer. But it makes her undergo an inner conflict. Her inner conflict is between her accepted role of a wife and her longing to go ahead with her career. Her inner trauma is exposed in her asking, “But suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then?” (102) According to her self-pity, depression and the inner turmoil are the inside dangers. She tries to avoid the introspection of her friend but is unable to escape self-introspection.

She suffers from a kind of dissatisfaction which she herself is not clear about. But she does not blame others (especially her husband) for her condition. Like the lady doctor in “A Liberated Woman” she tries to blame herself for everything. She even wants to assure her husband not to feel guilty. “You don’t have to feel guilty; I want to say to Vasant. It’s my doing, this coming here. Nobody pushed me into it.” (100)

She is a supportive and indirectly helps her husband to carry out his research successfully. As Sushama tells Vasanth, “And here she is, the woman behind the successful man, the one to whose support you owe everything, the devoted, self-effacing wife….“ (100)

She doesn’t like gossip and hence discourages her servant-maid from questioning about Sushama. She suffers of agoraphobia and is frightened of open spaces. She wants to have a fence around her house. Her traditional mind does not allow her to accept the house without a wall. It is suggestive of the traditional wall built around a woman which is supposed to protect her from outside dangers. When she says “But suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then?” (102) she means that even within a traditional circle of a family, women are prone to dangers. Hence she feels it is foolish to sit inside the house in order to avoid dangers. On the whole she is presented as a woman in a conflict regarding the justification of her act of forgoing her career for a happy, married life.

Sushama, Hema’s friend, is a lawyer working for creating awareness among women on constitutional and social issues. Like Shashi Deshpande she considers “feminist” a vague term and resents being called so. She feels that she is doing a concrete
job. “But Sushama is irritated by the very word. “I’m not a feminist”, she says firmly. “That’s too vague. What we’re trying to do is very concrete.”” (99)

She is courageous and frank and does not give up anything easily or take anything for granted. She is far-sighted and fights for the cause of another woman - her friend. According to Sushama there is no gender discrimination with regard to career. She feels that a career is equally important for both men and women. Hence she chides Vasant when he proposes that Hema can change her profession from that of a lawyer to a teacher, “For God’s sake, man, she’s a lawyer, not a teacher. Would you change your profession that way over night?” (99) As Sunitha Reddy puts it, “She makes a valid point here challenging most men’s attitude towards their wives.” (28)

She feels that an educated and professional woman like Hema cannot be happy confining herself to the four walls of a kitchen. She considers that anyone should do some justice to their education by putting it to practice. So she interrogates Hema if she is happy.

At night, after the children and Vasant have gone to bed, Sushama puts me through cross-examination. Am I happy here? What do I do with myself? Can I go on this way? (101)

Sitabai the protagonist’s servant-maid is a loyal lady who does not miss her work at any cost. She tells Hema “You know I will always come. Unless I’m dead or dying.” (96) She is a courageous woman of self-respect. Though she knows that her husband has an affair she is not discouraged. She keeps her life going without caring for him. “He?” She spat out the pronoun. “He hasn’t come home for three days. Good riddance. I say. Who wants to see his face? She can have him.” (97) Like any other ordinary woman, she wants to learn more about others. Thus this story has three different women: an educated working woman, a professional turned housewife and an uneducated servant maid. Out of the three except Hema the other two are assertive and have a clear idea of life. Hema is a woman in conflict.

Women, who sacrifice their career and become housewives like Hema, forget their stamina in their course of life. After playing the role of housewife for several years, they become incapable of living on their own. They lack the courage and try to be mere dependents. This is the problem for Lalitha of “A Man and a Woman” who stands at
cross roads and is not clear about her future. It is the story of a young widow who is torn between her bodily desires and her conventional ideas. Like Gayathri of Chudamani Raghavan’s “Sriram’s Mother” she is a young widow with a son. But she is not confident like Gayathri. She is torn between her needs and her traditional mindset. The psychological struggle a young widow faces when she is sexually exploited by her own family members and her dilemma when a physically challenged person proposes to marry her is portrayed in the story “A Man and a Woman”.

Lalitha is the young widow of Jayanth and is thirty years old. Her son Ramesh is only four years of age. Her husband Jayanth dies in an accident when Ramesh is a four months baby. In the same accident his close friend Manu loses his legs and becomes bed ridden. Jayanth’s father asks him to stay in their house to make amends for his loss. When Jayanth dies, Lalitha does not feel a big difference in her life as she has not enjoyed with her husband the emotional binding that exists between a husband and wife. Initially she is unaware of the stigma attached to widowhood and pities Jayanth who has died at such a young age. She understands her real situation only when she is criticized by her mother-in-law for buying a colourful sari and for laughing aloud. With her affable behaviour she has unknowingly aroused the feelings of Ajit, her younger brother-in-law who is seventeen years of age. When he makes some advances to her, she does not scold him like a tradition bound woman. Nor does she try to bring him to senses but fully cooperates with him and succumbs to him. She uses Ajit as a vehicle to quench her sexual thirst. She doesn’t feel either guilty or embarrassed and tries to be normal with him as if nothing has happened. Only after the second consummation, she realizes her mistake and feels guilty of her act and cries bitterly. Not knowing what to do, she approaches Manu for moral support. She tries hard to overcome her sense of guilt but can not. Manu informs her that desires are quite natural and advises her to remarry. At first Lalitha is shocked. She immediately raises a doubt as who will marry her. When Manu proposes to marry her, she asks him how he could marry her when he is a crippled. Only then Manu realizes that it is his “D-Day” and he must try to remove the apprehensions of Lalitha and in the process must remove the bitterness in his life. The story ends with optimistic thoughts of Manu that he will succeed in removing the guilt of Lalitha and that they will start a happy life together. Unable to grasp his thoughts Lalitha stares at him.
Through the story, Deshpande shows the plight of widows in traditional India. A widow in traditional India is expected to consider her life a waste. She is not allowed to be active. She is not allowed to wear saris and go for a job. She is allowed neither to go for a job nor to remarry as it is considered to bring dishonour to the family. She is made to stay either with her in-laws or her parents. Lalitha is also exposed to such cruel treatment. In the initial days of her widowhood Lalitha was active, happy and did not think that her life had come to an end. She had a lot of hopes for her future. All these are deflated when she is criticized for wearing a colourful sari, for laughing loudly and objected when she wanted to take up a job. Now she has become caged “like a restive colt in an enclosure struggling to get out.” (213) She doesn’t even have the freedom Gayathri of Chudamani Raghavan’s “Sriram’s mother” has.

As some of Deshpande’s women, she too has physical contact with a person other than her husband. But unlike them she doesn’t take it in a lighter vein and considers it a sin. She even thinks of ending her life, but doesn’t do so for the sake of her son. She doesn’t want to walk out of the house. When Manu offers to marry her, she is reluctant to accept it for two reasons. One is that he is physically handicapped the other is her fear of the society. Dwivedi has rightly suggested that the reason for her resistance to Manu’s proposal is “the dread of a tabooed society and false sense of prestige for the members of the Jayant’s family.”(179) Like some of Deshpande’s women, Hema in “A Wall Is Safer” and the doctor in “A Liberated Woman”, she doesn’t want to revolt against the traditional norms of the society and hence gives in for the traditions. But unable to cope with her accepted social role she undergoes an inner conflict. “And now it’s too late, …. Now what can I do?” (213)

Lalitha’s mother-in-law is a typical traditional Indian mother-in-law who forces her daughter-in-law to follow certain codes of behaviour meant for a widow. According to her, widow’s laughing, roaming actively outside (doing job), keeping flowers, bindi and wearing colourful saris are strictly forbidden. She doesn’t want her daughter-in-law to work. Because she feels that it may bring dishonour to the family. She has a false notion that a woman’s life is nothing apart from husband and children. For her becoming a member of the Mahila Mandal is better than taking up a job. She suggests her daughter-in-law, “And if you need something, there is the Mahila Mandal,” (213)
Deshpande depicts Lalitha’s act of adultery without pronouncing any moral judgments. But she has not made clear two things – Should Lalitha marry Manu, a handicap due to her widowhood and how Manu a dependent could give life to Lalitha?

“The Cruelty Game” seems to be a continuation of “A Man and a Woman” but with some changes. The themes of both the stories are the same: The cruel attitude of the society towards a widow and widow’s remarriage. But the difference in both the stories is that in “A Man and a Woman” Lalitha has been crippled by the society and is not aware of what to do and how to come out of her sorry state. But Pramila in “The Cruelty Game” is clear about her needs and chalks out her future in a lucid way. Lalitha allows the traditional mind-set to hold her back from remarrying. But Pramila does not have such inhibitions and goes ahead with her decision. Nothing, not even her daughter can prevent her from doing what she wants.

Pramila is a young widow with a little daughter called Sharu. After her husband’s death she comes to stay in her in-law’s house which is a joint family. Due to the inhibitions imposed on widows, the kids of the house develop hatred towards her daughter and humiliate her a lot. Even the women of the house, who have been quarrelling till then seem to get united and criticize Pramila for all her acts. When Pramila tries to go for a job they criticize it as “a way to escape domestic chores” and as “a chance to deck herself in new saris.”(220) When the children humiliate Sharu, Pramila does nothing but stare at them. Maya, Pramila’s niece, Sharu gets frightened at that look and tries to crawl away. Pramila is criticized for wearing the bindi, wearing coloured saris and for working in an office. When she celebrates Sharu’s birthday, she is severely criticized and humiliated by her mother-in-law and thus is forced to pay a heavy price for her act. When she decides to marry her husband’s friend, Jagadish, the children tease and humiliate Sharu which results in her aversion for Pramila’s marriage. So, Sharu refuses to go with her mother and to talk to her. But Pramila doesn’t give up. She leaves her in-law’s house to go to Bombay and takes Sharu with her. Maya and her mother who were initially against Pramila and Sharu become close to them and even cry on their departure.

Pramila is a woman of equanimity who never allows her sorrow to take the upper hand. Initially she succumbs to the traditions of the family by staying in her in-law’s house and by remaining a housewife for sometime. But gradually she goes out to work
and finally she leaves the house with her daughter to marry her husband’s friend, Jagadish. Towards the end, she emerges as a strong character who takes a challenging decision to break away the chains that bind women. As Joshi suggests,

In choosing a protagonist who is some what feeble at the beginning but emerges in the end as a stronger woman with a transformed consciousness, Shashi Deshpande follows a liberal feminist ideal where growth in consciousness is the objective. (173)

She has shown courage and patience in bearing all the humiliation but has not allowed them to pull her back into the dingy world. Her strong composure is revealed when Sharu does not understand her and refuses to talk to her. With optimism she has not only broken the traditional patriarchal mores, but has also taken her daughter along with her. As Murali Manohar says,

Above all what Pramila is trying to prove is that she is not going to be a widow throughout her life. She has a lot of her life to live. She does not directly say so in the story, but the implication is that she is not going to be ruined by this traditional notion of widowhood. She does believe in widow remarriage. Thus she is raising her “voice” very loudly against the Indian traditional notion of widowhood. (84)

She is not bothered when the other women of the family do not speak to her. Maya observes, “Pramila auntie didn’t seem to mind that they rarely spoke to her. Her work done, she went to her room and stayed there.” (219)

The misfortune in her life doesn’t drain her motherly love for her only daughter. Like Lalitha she strongly feels that is it is for the child that she lives. She, as a capable woman proves herself an able mother on whom the circumstances cannot have any say. She showers her love for her daughter through the words, “You are all I have now” (217) and through her action of accepting “Sharu’s flinging herself at her mother, hugging her, clinging to her as if they had been parted for days.” (218) But all through the story, she remains “a silent sufferer and listener – hardly speaking a sentence in her defense – a passive participant in the general drama of pain.” (Samtani 189)

Maya’s mother and Pramila’s co-sister is an ordinary woman with her own strengths and weaknesses. In the beginning she is jealous of Pramila for the special attention she gets from her father-in-law. She doesn’t have the etiquette to refrain from criticizing others in front of children and criticizes Pramila in the presence of her
daughter thus poisoning her. But gradually her approach towards Pramila changes and she becomes close to Pramila and even helps her in all possible ways.

I was surprised, when I came back from school one day, to find my mother in Pramila auntie’s room. She came out at my call.
‘What were you doing there?’ I asked suspiciously, looking at her face which looked somehow different. Softer.
‘Helping Pramila to pack. They’re going today.’ (224)

Pramila’s mother-in-law is a typical mother-in-law who blames her daughter-in-law for her son’s death and ill-treats her widowed daughter-in-law. She too like Lalitha’s mother-in-law feels that a woman’s life ends with the death of her husband and a widow should not be happy. Hence she treats Pramila cruelly and blames her for the death of her son. Thus through the story Deshpande tries to portray the ill-treatment meted to widows and the beliefs regarding widowhood handed over from generation to generation. The story also deciphers how children learn certain misconceptions from their parents and try to imitate them. The often quoted words, ‘a woman is the enemy of another woman’ seems to be justified in this story.

The problems in widowhood are apparent. But the problems of women facing the infidelity of the husbands go unnoticed. Unless the woman who faces the problem expresses it no one can realize it. Since it goes ill-informed, the victims endure it all by themselves. This is the problem of Deepa in “Travel Plans” who represents the woman who take the infidelity of her husband with strong composure and chalk out her future without throwing tantrums. The story deals with the problem of Indian women married off to people working abroad. In many cases, for a variety of reasons like looking after the ailing in-law, or not getting a visa, the wives stay back either in their maternal home or with their in-laws. In such a situation if they learn anything about their husband’s treachery their condition becomes pathetic. They can neither grill their husband nor share it with their parents who are living at peace considering that their daughter has a bright future. Deepa in “Travel Plans” faces a similar situation and undergoes the suffering all alone.

Deepa is married to Shriram who is working in U.S. Shriram’s mother is an SLE (Systemic Lupus Erythematosus) patient and hence Deepa is left with her in-laws to take care of them. Deepa has been working in a travel agency that arranges foreign tours.
Even after marriage she continues her job. The two partners who run the travel agency have some misunderstanding and hence are on the point of dissolving their partnership. If it happens the travel agency will get closed down. Hence before her marriage Deepa had planned to start a travel agency of her own in partnership with her friend, Helen. But after marriage, she drops that idea and wishes to lead a normal married life and to join her husband in the States. Shortly, they are married and the marriage is conducted in a hurry. She becomes familiar with her husband’s home and her relationship with her in-laws turns cordial shedding off the initial inhibitions. One day her cousin Raja working abroad visits Deepa. On seeing her marriage photographs he says that he knew Shriram. He tells her the name of the firm Shriram is working for, the place he lives in and that he is married to another woman. Looking at the turmoil of Deepa, he eats his words and says that Shriram may be living together with the other woman without marrying her. But Deepa thinks that in both the cases, there is no room for her in his heart and is upset at the news. She writes to Shriram seeking clarification on the matter. Shriram writes back confessing his marriage with the foreigner and asks Deepa to forgive him. On reading his letter Deepa feels devastated and takes half a day leave from her office. She doesn’t feel like going back to her in-law’s home and hence goes to her natal home. There she finds everyone “deeply engrossed in their discussion’ and ‘they scarcely look up at Deepa.” (45) Trying to “reach her old self” she strolls into her old bed room and “wander(s) about touching things” (46) but in vain. When she tries to read a book, she recalls her wedding night. She retraces that her husband had drawn back in emptiness when he happened to touch her during the course of the marriage rituals and had gone through the process of nuptial night as if keyed but not with love. Now she understands the reason for his behaviour. Towards the evening, realizing that “the gap is filled” in her maternal home and that she has no place there, she returns to her in-law’s home.

On her arrival at her in-law’s house, she is informed by her father-in-law that her mother-in-law had a high blood pressure and has lost her eyes as a part of her SLE disease. She feels sorry for her mother-in-law and goes to her. Her mother-in-law tells her that she is glad that her end is almost near and that Deepa can join her husband in U.S. But Deepa does not reply. That night she plans her future – “the charting of a route through an unknown continent.” (50) She decides what she has to do after the death of
her mother-in-law. As a first step she puts her wedding photograph on the table face down. It is symbolic that she is going to free herself from the marriage bonds. She also mutters the names “Tabriz and Asuncion, Samarkand and Santa Rosalia as a prayer” (50) which mean that she is reconsidering her plan of starting a Travel Agency.

Deepa is portrayed as a woman of strong composure. On hearing the infidelity of Shriram, she neither throws tantrums nor informs any one at home. Instead, she writes to Shriram seeking clarification. She is emotionally attached to Shriram and hence is frightened to hear anything from Shriram in the negative. Though she feels that she wants to know the facts she is relaxed when she learns that she hasn’t got any letter. “I know I’m not looking forward to getting his letter. Each evening, when I come home and find no letter for me, it’s like getting a reprieve.” (42-43)

She is frank and does not want to show any unreal feeling to anyone. Immediately after marriage she calls her in-laws “Appa”[father] and “Amma”[mother]. But after learning the treachery of her husband, she feels that her relations with them is also unreal and does not want to call them so. “I find it hard to call them ‘Amma’ and ‘Appa’ these days. My tongue stumbles, it seems dishonest somehow.” (42) She is considerate and looks after her mother-in-law with the same love and care even after learning her husband’s treachery. Though she is economically independent, she does not cut off her relationship with his family. She continues to feel a kind of binding with them.

Like any other married woman she also has her own conceptions and dreams of marriage and considers it a very important occasion in the life of a woman. On her nuptial night she eagerly waits for her husband with much expectations thinking of different scenes from the movies. “The high point of a woman’s life - her wedding night her first night of love, her deflowering. I think of all the phrases of the movies and the images from them.” (46)

Like any normal girl, she wants to be free and relaxed. Hence she feels trapped in her in-law’s house with the two old people and the smell of medicines. She wants to roam around with friends stay out till midnight. She even rides her vehicle with speed. She can not tolerate any other motorcycle overtaking her and races them. “It seems important not to let him overtake me and the blood pounding in my ears, I find myself speeding wildly.” (43)
Our Indian culture makes the girls alien to their own maternal home after their marriage. Right from the beginning they are brought up imbibing such thoughts in their mind. As a result they naturally feel themselves alien in their maternal home – a place where they have been born and brought up. Like any other girl Deepa too feels a stranger in her maternal home after marriage. She sees everything new and strange there and finds it difficult to make her fit there. But in her in-law’s house, she feels a kind of familiarity. She feels in her maternal home, “The life of the house flows on, not touching me. There’s no gap, I realize. The hole is filled, the earth leveled and there’s nothing to show there ever was one.” (47)

She is reticent to share her problem even with her family members. It may be because she does not want to disturb their peace. Or may be due to her traditional mindset she might have considered her family members as outsiders after her marriage. Or she might have been hurt by their unmindful behaviour.

How do I speak? What do I say? That my marriage is over? That the man I thought is my husband is married to, or living with another woman? And whom do I say this to? ….. The drama of a burglary has a place here, but the melodrama of a deserted wife, of a possible bigamist husband? (45-46)

Separated women, divorced ladies and widows suffer a lot in the Indian society in spite of their innocence. They are usually looked down as culprits. They are considered to have brought dishonour to the family. Most of the Indian women try hard to avoid this kind of treatment from the society. Hence, whatever the situation might be try to live with their husbands. Mothers encourage the girls to follow the convention and mothers-in-law try to exploit the belief. But Deepa is not afraid of the situation. Initially she struggles, she feels sad over her dreams getting shattered but soon she recollects herself. When she comes to know her husband’s marriage, she tries to share her problem with her parents, and tries to maintain a distance with her in-laws. When she realizes that the people in her maternal home are not in a position to give an ear to her problems, and they are not the cause of her problem, she takes up the responsibility of solving her own problem. She doesn’t cry or make a big issue of the injustice meted out to her. For her, separation from husband is not the end of life. She has a life of her own and is capable of
designing it. She doesn’t want to leave her future at the mercy of her parents or her in-laws. Hence she goes ahead with her plans.

   It’s waiting for me, I know, something I’ve always wanted to do for myself, something I will have to do now - the charting of a route through an unknown continent. It’s no longer an enjoyable thought, yet it has to be done. One step at a time, I tell myself, …. (50).

   On the whole she is one of Deshpande’s women in transition. Being a normal girl in the beginning she emerges out as a strong personality towards the end.

   Deepa’s mother-in-law Satya is portrayed as a typical mother-in-law who feels that she has a right over her daughter-in-law. For her it is very easy to accept Deepa as her daughter-in-law and to exert her demands. She demands Deepa to come home early and so on.

   She never thinks of me as a stranger. I’m the person she has had in her mind since Shriram grew out of adolescence, the one she has known will be part of their family the day her son gets married. I’m Shriram’s wife. Her daughter-in-law. (41)

   Like Lalitha’s mother-in-law in “A Man and a Woman” or Pramila’s mother-in-law in “The Cruelty Game” she is not harsh towards her daughter-in-law and has cordial relation with her. For her even her death is a welcome to enable her daughter-in-law join her husband. She tells Deepa,

   “I’m glad for you. You’ll be free. To go to Shriram.”
   I say nothing.
   “We’ve tied you down here for too long. Too long.” (49)

   Deepa’s mother, who is a retired teacher, performs her responsibilities as any devoted mother. A mother of five children, she has brought up all of them, positioned them well and loved them. After her husband’s death she has become indifferent to the responsibilities. She is unable to notice the agony of her daughter. She has a taste for literature. Deepa thinks of her, “My mother, wispy-haired and incurious, who has borne five children, loved them, looked after them, lost her husband and mourned him.” (47) Her contentment with her life is visible in her eyes. Deepa observes, “And even today I can see the girl she was in her eyes.”(47) After retirement she has handed over the entire responsibility of the house to her son and daughter-in-law and has become a silent
observer without active participation. But she has become a stranger for her daughter and hence her daughter does not feel free to share her agonies with her. “To my mother, who, since father died and she retired from teaching, seems to be gazing at us from a distance and never questions me about anything?” (45)

Deepa’s sister-in-law is a dedicated housewife who is much concerned about her domestic chores. For her nothing else is important. From Deepa’s observation, “...my sister-in-law, eager to finish coffee time and get on with her next chore?” (45) Like Annapurna of “A Bunch of Keys” she is weighed down by her domestic chores. She tells Deepa, “Taste this, Deepa, and tell me if it’s all right. I’m so sick of complaints…” (46)

On the whole, through the story Deshpande shows how women suffer due to the ruthless behaviour of men who marry them for the sake of their parents without considering the plight of women. Such men usually abandon their wives. It is not only bigamy that affects women but also their illicit affairs. Even the husband’s illicit affair with another woman can weigh down the wife. If bigamy is the cause for Deepa’s plight in “Travel Plans”, the husband’s illicit affair is the reason for the agony of the protagonist of “A Day Like Any Other”. In both the stories the women take the news imperturbably and do not throw tantrums. The difference in these two stories is that Deepa has decided to cut off her relationship with her husband whereas the protagonist of “A Day Like Any Other” decides to be emotionally independent without cutting off her relationship with her husband.

“A Day Like Any Other” reveals the psychological turmoil of a wife whose husband has turned unfaithful to her. One fine morning, the protagonist’s friend informs her that she has seen the woman’s husband along with a tall, slim, young woman. The protagonist receives this information with equanimity which shocks her friend. After her friend leaves, she weighs the pros and cons of her life and feels that she has not done any sacrifice. On her husband’s return, she tries to behave normal with no difference. She questions him of his affair because she feels “It would be like deceiving him, making him believe that it was indeed, for her, a day like any another.”(187) She does it with stolidity, with no trace of anger and thinks, “It was her silence which frightened him.” Her silence makes her husband give explanations, justifications and accusations of himself. He promises her a lifetime of fidelity and loyalty but not love. She understands that there has been no place for love in his heart either in the past or in the future. “For if
he had ever loved her before, he loved her still.” (188) When he says that the girl means
nothing to him and she (his wife) is everything to him, she pities the girl who has been
abandoned so easily. That night when her husband approaches her for love making, she
willingly surrenders herself to him without any illusions. In spite of all these things, she
has some conflict in her mind as she continuously reminds herself, “My life is my
own…” (187) When she thinks that this is the only fact which makes her life bearable she
laughs in excitement, which terrifies her husband. Hearing her laugh, he calls her and
when she does not respond, he gropes for tears in her cheeks. He is shocked to find her
cheeks dry. He expects her to cry and show off her grief, but is shocked at her indifferent
behaviour.

The protagonist of the story is a complacent woman. She feels happy with her
present state and does not want to hear anything against it. When her friend informs her
about the infidelity of the protagonist’s husband, she is not happy to hear it. She is filled
with animosity for her friend who is trying to tell her about her husband’s flirts with
another girl. “And suddenly she was ashamed of herself for the rancour she bore her
guest. And it’s not her I hate, really. It’s myself. I shouldn’t listen to her. I should tell her
to go away.” (182) It is not her husband she is angry with but her friend who has
conveyed the news. She tries to put a stop to her friend’s criticism of her husband by
saying, “You don’t know”, she said stonily. “You don’t understand. You have done your
duty in telling me. Now, please go.” (185) She like Hema of “A Wall Is Safer” doesn’t
like the person who induces self-introspection in her life.

Like an ordinary wife she is eager to learn more about her husband’s lady love.
Though she doesn’t want to entertain her friend, she unknowingly asks her about the
looks of her husband’s lady love. “How does she look?” The question slipped out of her
mouth and the next minute she regretted it.’ (182)

She even calls her husband’s office purposefully and informs the secretary whom
she suspects to be her husband’s lady love and informs her that she (the Protagonist) is
her wife and imagines that the girl on the other side of the phone is shocked. Maybe she
would have thought that her husband had hidden his marital status from the secretary and
hence indirectly warns her.
“Will you please tell him his wife called? And ask him to call back when he’s free.”
“Oh..!” The voice faltered. She imagined the smile, the efficiency being wiped off it, leaving behind only a young and confused girl. (186)

Even after hearing about her husband’s infidelity, she is confident of her position as a wife. She firmly believes that nothing could destroy the bond she and her husband have built between themselves. When her friend says that her husband was smiling at the other woman, she thinks, “And what do you know about how he looks at me and smiles at me? And what do you know about him and me anyway?” (183) On her husband’s return she feels the whole day since her awareness of his affair as a delusion. “And the morning became a fantasy. This was the only reality, this home they had made together, the life they lived together. Girl? She laughed. What girl?” (186) In fact she is under the delusion that hers is a happy life and for her too ‘A wall is safer.’ She could not cheat herself anymore. When she starts analyzing her thoughts and her life she comes to a conclusion that it is her life and she can have it as she likes. She will not allow either feminism or traditions to mar her life.

She is a traditional wife who defends her husband in front of strangers. She even justifies his flirts with another woman. Hiding her feelings she justifies his act as, “Oh, I don’t believe it’s anything serious,” she says making a great effort to speak lightly. “After all, a man needs some fun, some entertainment. And he can’t go alone. You know I don’t go out much. I’m really tied down to the house since Asha’s birth. No reason for him to stay in all the time with me.” (184) Without creating fuss or throwing tantrums she weighs the pros and cons of the situation. For her getting married and having children are the essentials for a woman. She doesn’t consider them as sacrifice.

Sacrifice? What have I sacrificed? I always wanted to marry, to have children. I have what I want. A life without all this makes no sense. I enjoy this. What then have I sacrificed? (184)

The reason may be she might not want to come out of her comfort zone and risk her security. That’s why when the other woman questions, “You will let a man deceive you, cheat you, and you will keep quiet because you don’t want to risk your security,
your comfortable life”, she feels hurt. “The voice was truly like a knife.” She realizes that the truth was “always sharp-edged”. (184)

She is a dutiful and responsible mother. Even after learning the treachery of her husband, instead of feeling for it, she goes on with her duties. She thinks, “The other two would be back from the nursery. She had to set their lunch on the table. She could not weigh up her life now. She had to just go on living it.” (185) She does not want to cheat her husband by hiding the fact that she knows his flirts with another woman. Hence she conveys the facts as a piece of information without making any enquiries. Her stoicism makes her husband confess the truth to her. “It was her silence that frightened him, she thought. He felt her withdrawal from him. And, as if that terrified him, words poured out of him.” (187)

She has her own concept of life. She thinks that she has her life which can not be shattered by anyone or anything. Hence unlike ordinary woman she does not think of ways to win back her husband.

“You have no pride,” she remembered the words. On the contrary, I have too much of it. It’s no use. I cannot change. I will always be like this careless, a little untidy, incapable of socializing, of dissembling. And It’s not only “I cannot”, I will not change, either. He will have to take me as I am. (186)

She is completely withdrawn and has become neutral. She is not worried of her husband’s love or infidelity. She thinks that her life is important to her. This feeling gives her the strength and stamina to accept the situation.

She had not been shattered by what she had heard that day. My life is my own; she had said the words in the morning. Now the words, the thought, grew in her, filling her with a rare and fearful happiness, a feeling of being suspended in space and time all by herself. My life is my own…..she said the words to herself again, knowing how true they were, knowing she had discovered the only thing that would make life bearable. (189).

The protagonist’s friend is an ardent feminist. She has her own philosophy of husbands. “No man smiles at his wife like that!”(183). Though she tries to show of her sympathies with the protagonist, her malice becomes quite visible. “So that the face changed, malice breaking through the Vencor of sympathetic concern, and became one
with the voice.” (181) She considers looking after children a sacrifice. “You stay at home and sacrifice yourself to the kids. And he goes out and has a gay time.” (184)

Deshpande tries to present a woman who cannot be moved by anything through the protagonist of the story. Unlike a tradition bound woman she doesn’t consider that there is no life apart from husband and children. For her, her life is her own. So, even her husband’s affair with another girl has no effect on her. She takes life in a concept of give and take. Hence she doesn’t even feel that she has sacrificed her life for the sake of her family.

Deshpande in many of her stories emphasizes the statement ‘Life is nothing but a compromise.’ She allows most of her women to compromise as they do in real life. The situation and reason for compromise may differ from person to person. But the core reason for all women to compromise is ‘security’. Like the protagonist in “A Day Like Any Other” Alka in “I Want…” too gives up her illusions and compromises only for security. It is the story of a young woman Alka who is past twenty-seven and whose marriage has been fixed. Alka’s parents feel happy on hearing the consent from the groom’s party. They feel as if their life has been blessed. Alka too feels relieved on hearing the news. Now Alka recalls the whole process of bride viewing. It has been the tenth bride viewing. By then because of the continuous refusals from the grooms’ parties, the relationship between Alka and her parents has become delicate. Just before the arrival of the groom’s party, Alka’s father informs her about it. Alka does not like the humiliation she undergoes every time in the name of bride viewing. Hence she tries to dress plainly. But on her mother’s compulsion, she wears a silk sari and has very light make-up. In the bride viewing process when the groom declares his wish to talk with Alka in seclusion, Alka’s father gives his consent without consulting Alka. Alka feels hurt at this. The first thing the groom asks Alka is to leave her job. He also gives her a list of things he expects from his wife. What he wants is not a wife to share his feelings and life, but a wife who can manage every thing, who can “get on with everyone……not gadding about the place, leaving every thing to servants” but “do most of it (the domestic chores) personally.”(147) He has come with a lot of expectations of his wife. Hearing his demands Alka feels that “he has the mould all ready and all she has to do was to fit in.” (147) Now on hearing the groom’s consent; Alka declares her refusal to the alliance. Her
father asks her for a valid reason. But Alka is unable to give a reason. When Alka questions her father why he hasn’t asked for her acceptance, he asks her in turn what more does she want. What Alka wants is a man who will listen to her and understand her. But she knows that nobody will understand her if she says all this. She finally understands that it’s “time to forget dreams and compromise for security.”(150) So she casts off her dream of a good companion and gets ready to become the wife of the man who has made a mould ready for his wife.

Deshpande depicts the humiliation a girl’s parents undergo in the name of “bride viewing” ceremony - a custom in the Indian Society where the groom’s family visits the bride’s family with an air of importance, as if they are going to change the entire fate of the girl. She depicts how they humiliate the girl asking several questions, relish the snacks served and leave the house announcing that they’ll inform later without understanding the anxiety, the eagerness of the bride’s family. She portrays how the girl is made to stand in front of strangers while the father starts explaining her greatness, just as a salesman exhibits his products to the customers and how the self respect of the girl is trampled to pieces. “The woman in me was outraged and protested. I crushed her. She had no place there. None at all.” (145) The same situation has been beautifully portrayed by Chudamani Raghavan in her “Counting the Flowers”.

Alka the protagonist of the story is a woman of self-respect, who wants to prove her own existence. She feels hurt when her opinion is not considered. She demands her father, “You went and met them? You talked to them? You settled things without asking me?” (149) She complains, “No one ever asked me what I wanted.” (148) She doesn’t like the way in which she is inspected. When she is asked to decorate according to the tastes of the groom and his parents she feels hurt. “I suddenly felt fluid, as if I had no shape of my own. As if I was capable of taking any shape and form I had to preserve.” (145)

Like a normal Indian girl, she considers marriage an essential thing in life. Hence she feels relieved on hearing that the groom’s party has given their consent. Like any other average girl, she too has her own dreams about her husband – “who hears her voice when she speaks and who understands her even when she doesn’t.” (149) But she is
practical, understands her father’s worries and accepts the situation. “I surrendered my illusions and embraced reality.” (150) As Bonnie Zare states,

Deshpande critiques the way marriage is the organizing principle for a woman’s life, and the way the decision to marry often occurs with a context of family pressure. The reader is made keen aware that woman makes decisions to marry in a state of ignorance. (90)

Thus Alka is also a woman in transition – but in the negative phase. She who is full of self-respect and assertive in the beginning, gets transformed to girl who surrenders the illusions and makes herself fit to the traditional frame of wife made ready for her to fit in.

Alka’s mother is a traditional woman and feels that marriage occupies the most important place in the life of a woman. Hence she feels ashamed when none of the alliances are finalized for her daughter. She feels that she has failed as a mother. She informs Alka, “What a relief! Thank god! ……… Now I can look the world in the face again. I used to be so ashamed. A daughter of twenty-seven and not married.” (143) She feels that a girl should look attractive and fit herself to the tastes of the groom’s party to fix up the alliance and so advises her daughter to wear as per the tastes of the groom and his parents.

“Wear a silk. The blue one. And your choli - let me see sleeveless? Hmmm……I suppose it will do. He is supposed to be quite up-to-date.” She said the words in English. “But cover yourself properly with your sari. His parents may not approve.” (145)

On the whole, she is one of Deshpande’s gallery of mothers who feel that marriage is the sole purpose of a woman’s existence.

Compromise and sacrifice in the life of a woman do not end with marriage. In fact they start from marriage. At every stage of her married life, a woman is expected to make some sacrifice. She has to sacrifice her personality for the sake of her motherhood and have as many as children as her husband wishes to have. If she refuses to do so, she is looked at as an adamant woman. The looks are so fierce that after some time she on her own starts feeling guilty of her act. The trauma of the protagonist of “Death of a Child” is the same. “Death of a Child” is the story of a mother who does not want to give birth to a third child. In less than four years, she has become a mother for the third time. On
learning about her pregnancy, her husband thinks that it’s no wrong in having a third child, “if you can manage”(61). But the protagonist is bent on getting the child aborted. Strangely, unlike Devaki’s husband in “Daktaramma’s Room”, her husband doesn’t compel her to have a child and allows her to go ahead with her plans. The protagonist fixes up an appointment with a competent lady doctor, first gets her pregnancy confirmed and then fixes a date for abortion. Even on the day prior to the abortion, the husband asks her, if she is determined to go ahead. She replies that nothing has changed and decides to go ahead with it. In the operation theatre she is irritated about her awkward position and suddenly a sense of unknown love for the unborn child surges in her heart. But she controls it and gets aborted. In her sleep, she gets a dream as if she has delivered a baby. On opening her eyes she informs this to her husband, but he does not react. The next morning when she walks out of the hospital with her husband, she feels as if the ghost of her dead child is walking with her. It suggests that she is guilty of having killed her unborn child.

Deshpande doesn’t like considering women as a mere breeding machine. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan, Deshpande says,

I have a very strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been looked upon just as “breeding animals.” They had no other role in life. I have a strong objection to treating any human being in that manner. ...The whole chronology of their life centers around childbirth. ... The stress laid upon the feminine functions, at the cost of all your potentials as an individual, enraged me. (252)

She shows how the traditional mindset has taken an upper hand over modernity and how the modern woman is unable to escape the pang of guilt despite her walking away from tradition. Through the story “Shashi Deshpande points out that woman alone bear the brunt of violence physically and psychologically while men tread on the female bodies at will.” (Gopal Reddy 50)

The protagonist of the story is a “personality conscious lady” (Samtani 187) who does not want to forgo her personality for the sake of her children. She feels if she is going to have the third child, there would not be any difference between her and the breeding animal.

“I cannot imagine that the main purpose of my life is to breed.”
“Simple? Yes, any cow, any bitch can breed.” (62)

She is unconventional and doesn’t feel that marriage and child birth are essential for any woman. She has her own philosophy about children and feels that they spoil the personality of the mother and child birth destroys something in a woman. She has no feeling for the unborn child. She thinks, “As long as it isn’t born, it doesn’t exist for me.” (62) She does not compromise with her beauty for the sake of her children. Hence though she loves her children, she has never breast-fed them. She doesn’t believe in the overwhelming affection towards the children the moment they are born. Strangely she has got love for her children only “after experiencing a feeling of awe and fear.” (62) In spite of her unconventional ideas she cannot escape the clutches of motherhood. So she tries to protect her baby from the kicks of her second child and has an unknown feeling for the child. “Unwilling tentacles of feeling reach out from me to the thing I’m carrying so reluctantly.” (66) Once the abortion is over, she is overcome by a pang of guilt. She enjoys the pain of guilt fervently. She feels that the dead child asserts himself over her.

Now, when he does not exist, he asserts himself. I am conscious of a piercing pain in the place he had filled. Grief becomes real. I swing, like a monstrous pendulum, between grief, guilt and shame. Guilt conquers. I welcome it and shoulder the burden with a masochistic fervour. (68).

She undergoes the conflict between her motherhood and her determination in undergoing abortion. There is a clash between her knowledge and her conscience. It is finally the emotions that have succeeded. She is like Alka of “I Want” who has lost her assertive nature in the process of transition.

The doctor is competent with mixed blend of motherhood and professionalism. As a woman she asks the protagonist to reconsider her act of getting aborted. But as a doctor she justifies the protagonist’s act. Unintentionally she asks the protagonist to reconsider her idea of abortion and corrects her statement, “It’s quite straight forward. You’ve come early. And now the law is on your side.” (64) Though she feels impersonal towards her patients, she cajoles them in an assuring tone. “One small prick and you feel nothing”, a soft voice assures me. The eyes are impersonal, but the voice talks to me as if I’m a child.” (66) By and large she is a duty conscious doctor who does justice to her
profession. Thus the two women depicted in the story are entangled by the roles they play as a mother or a doctor and are unable to think beyond that.

If unwanted pregnancy is the problem for the protagonist of “Death of a Child”, the rape of her daughter and its consequence—pregnancy—is the problem of the protagonist of “It Was Dark”. The protagonist’s daughter has been kidnapped by a scooterist, has been taken to a “dingy house” (128) kept there for three days and raped. The police have found her out in a dingy house where they have gone in response to an anonymous call. The girl has been found there lying on a bed with her dress changed to a sari. She is in a state of shock and is unable to interact with anyone. Her father has tried to interact with her once in the police station. Since he couldn’t, he doesn’t try for the second time. The girl is taken home. She lies on the bed and stares at a spot on the ceiling. To all the mother’s enquiries the girl gives the same answer, “It was dark.”(131) The mother is also in a kind of shock and is unwilling to speak to anyone. The police come and inform them that the man who has kidnapped their daughter is arrested. They ask the father to come to the station for some formalities to be completed. The father informs his wife about the doctor’s doubts. The doctor doubts that the girl might be pregnant. In that case they want her to undergo M.T.P. The father is furious with his wife for not having warned the daughter against the possible dangers. Then the mother recalls how in her childhood she was taught “to build a wall around herself with negatives” and then suddenly when she got married she was asked “to break the wall down and behave as if it had never been”. She recalls how she had felt on her wedding night: “totally vulnerable, wholly defenceless.”(130) So she had decided that she will not “let her daughter live behind walls.” (130) It has become the cause of all the miseries. Initially the mother does not want to believe that her daughter has been raped. Hence she doesn’t consider the rapist as the enemy but the dark. Gradually she realizes the reality and understands that the rapist is the real enemy and not the dark. With all these thoughts she once again goes into her daughter’s room and tries to bring her daughter to senses. So she moves the curtains of the windows and allows light to flow into the room. Now the girl’s gaze moves from “her spot to glimmering, moving circle of light on another part of the ceiling.”(130) From there her gaze moves to her mother and finally she recognizes her mother. It means that she is out of her shocked state and now has become normal. It is a
symbolic representation of the bright future which will erase off her dark past. The
daughter continuously telling that, “It was dark.”(124) might suggest her state of
ignorance or the darkness which has befallen on her future. The mother’s act of allowing
light to enter the room might suggest that she is not going to allow the traditional values
spoil her daughter’s future and that she is going to fight them. As Mukta Atrey puts it,

The raped girl’s mother is protesting against the conventional idea that the girl’s
rape has dishonoured the girl/her family or that the future for them is “dark”. Her
act of throwing the curtains open to let the light in is an act of rebellion against
traditionally ingrained ideas of patriarchal honour. (110)

In the story Deshpande highlights the issue of rape and its consequences. She
clearly pictures the agony of the parents of a raped girl and their reaction towards the
child. It is the mother who tries to understand the girl and tries to bring her back to
normalcy whereas the father behaves as if he were stranger to the girl. The author even
tries to bring to light the vulnerable feelings of women after marriage when they are
asked to submit themselves to their husband thus breaking the wall they have built around
themselves. Like a normal mother she doesn’t want to put barriers across her daughter
like, “Don’t-Don’t-Don’t-You’re female.” (129) She feels that her daughter should not
face the humiliation and vulnerability, which she has felt on the day of her marriage.
Hence she doesn’t warn her daughter much. She doesn’t want her daughter to be
overshadowed by the traditions like her. Hence she has allowed her to grow up as a
modern girl without any inhibitions. But her daughter’s pitiable condition makes her
reconsider her act of not warning her daughter as a traditional mother. The story presents
the condition of women who are at crossroads between tradition and modernity.

The protagonist patiently tries to get the girl back to her senses instead of creating
scenes and scolding her. She doesn’t want view rape as something that destroys one’s
future or some fatal misfortune that has befallen her daughter. Hence she refuses to meet
her neighbours who visit them to show their compassion. She compares it to the
condolence visits she had when her father died and hates them. She considers the visitors
and their visit as the enemy because it kindles the healing wound and makes their agony
afresh. She too is in a state of shock. So, she initially refuses to accept the fact that her
daughter has been raped. Hence she considers the dark as the enemy and not the man. But
when her mind starts admitting the fact that her daughter has been raped, reality daunts upon her and she starts realizing the rapist as the enemy.

There was no enemy but the dark, no fear but the fear of being alone. What had the man to do with it? (129)

All at once he was real. The enemy was not the dark, it was not being alone, it was the man. (131)

A very traditional concept infused in the Indian system is that right from the childhood women have been taught to be submissive. This pacifies the male ego and many problems can easily be solved. The same thing happened with the protagonist of “It Was Dark”. These values had been imbibed in her blood and hence she strongly believed that submission was the solution for several problems that come up in life. After her marriage, though there were several questions in her mind, she submitted herself to her husband to make her life run smooth. She has changed herself as per the situations. She recaps, “I had submitted, and miraculously, it had made things easier. Submission – I had thought then – is the answer.” (131) As a mother she thinks that her daughter should not be submissive like her. But after the rape incident, she blames herself. That feeling of guilt cannot hold her for too long. She finally doesn’t want to submit herself to the traditions and spoil her daughter’s life as a rape victim. She forcefully tries to get her daughter out of the shocked state and thus hints that she will not allow traditions to have any say over her daughter. Thus she paves way to a new woman who could not be bound by traditions.

The protagonist’s daughter is an innocent girl who is utterly shocked due to rape. She turns insane and gazes at a spot in the ceiling. To her mother’s constant enquiries the only answer she gives is, “It was dark.” (130) Even when her mother enquires about the man who has raped her, she gives the same answer. She finds no difference between the two. For her may it be the man who has forced himself on her or may it be the darkness in which the incident has taken place, both are not different and are one and the same. As Samtani puts it, “the man” is identified with “the dark” or “the evil”, though the girl thinks that both of them are the engines of tyranny and forced submission.” (178) Finally when her mother allows the light to fall into the room, she comes out of her mental shock
and starts recognizing the surroundings. May be she may slowly come out of the shocked state completely and start leading a normal life.

Rape is a kind of trespass into one’s privacy. It affects the victim in its own way. May be it is a kind of injury like any other injury it also can be healed. But it takes a longer time to get healed since the psychological trauma and the stigma attached to it by the society are involved and it makes the wound more painful. Marital rape is also a kind of rape which happens with a license. Here the pain of the victim is more traumatic since there is no sympathy for the victim and it goes unquestioned. If rape is the problem of the protagonist’s daughter in “It Was Dark”, marital rape is the problem of the protagonist in “The Intrusion”.

“The Intrusion” talks about the husband’s intrusion into the wife’s physical and psychological privacy. The story depicts the expectations of a newly married husband and the fears of a new wife. It is the honey moon trip of a newly married couple to an isolated house on a hillock near a sleepy fishing village. It is the place where couples come to celebrate their honey moon or men come with the other women to enjoy. The protagonist has a feeling of homesickness and wants to go back to her parents as she doesn’t like the atmosphere of the house, the food served there and her husband’s advances. The husband yearns a different experience altogether and expects his wife to co-operate with him. But to his surprise, his wife reacts differently. On being pinioned, she replies that she wants them to know each other well before undergoing any type of experience. In the night, the protagonist wakes up to see herself being forced by her husband and cries “not for the physical pain but for the intrusion into her privacy”.(209) The man responsible for it goes to sleep peacefully as if nothing has happened. On the whole, the foundation for a happy married life is shattered even before it is properly built. Mukta Atrey rightly says, “The intercourse in “The Intrusion” amounts to rape but it goes unpublicized since it occurs within marriage.” (102)

It is a typically Indian story as it talks about one of the important problems of arranged marriages in Indian society where the partners are neither friends nor acquaintances but only a husband and wife. As Sharada Bhanu says, “It’s the classic picture of the start of an Indian marriage and crossly insensitive Indian male.” (36)
The protagonist of the story is a modern educated woman who expects that husband and wife should know each other pretty well and be good friends before they start a normal married life. She is not “a frigid woman incapable of love” (208) She is only “shy and frightened about exposing the mysteries of her body to him.” (207) She has her own dreams of how husband and wife should be. She is ready to talk to him the whole night to make friendship with him. “While I wished to talk now, sitting up the whole night, so that in the morning we could smile at each other like old friends.” (207) She is startled when her husband calls out her name “familiarly, with such a proprietorial air.” (205) Like ‘Alka’ in “I Want” she is hurt when the alliance is fixed up without her willingness. “No one had asked me if I had agreed; it had been taken for granted.” (203) When her father asks her the reason for her rejection of her marriage and what she is going to do after that she had no answer. And so she agrees finding no fault with the groom.

Suddenly a few days before the wedding, I had gone to my father stricken by doubts. “Why?” he had asked me, again and again. And, “What will you do then?” In a panic I had asked myself, “What will I do?” And I thought of a thousand answers, but not to the question, “What’s wrong with him?” (203)

She feels humiliated when her husband forces himself on her. It is not the physical pain she feels, but the emotional pain.

His movements had the same rhythm, the same violence as the movements of the sea; yet I could have borne the battering of the sea better for that would hurt but not humiliate like this. (208)

She is very practical and wants to know more about anything before getting involved in it. Hence before her wedding she reads a book on sex. Unlike the other girls who have their own dreams of their husband, she thinks of the realities of her would be husband.

And there were all those fears crouching in me – would his breath smell, and were his feet huge and dirty with uncut toe nails, and did he chew his food noisily and belch after meals? (207)

Like the protagonist of “A Day Like Any Other” she feels humiliated and vulnerable when she is asked to shatter the wall she has built around her all these years
and behave as if there is no wall. She is shocked at the tradition which demands that a woman should try to protect her chastity from other men and which asks her to submit to a man called husband. She wants her husband to become her friend and understand her before they undergo any of the experiences a husband and a wife undergo. But finding him keyed for a different experience, she is unable to communicate none of these things to him and as a result feels humiliated when her husband forces himself on to her. On the whole she finally becomes submissive and compromises with life as any other Indian wife does. Thus Deshpande shows that “A proper co-ordination, a reasonable mutual understanding between husband and wife is essential for a happy married life.” (Dwivedi The Shorter Fiction of Shashi Deshpande 182)

A detailed study of her stories reveals that her protagonists are modern, educated, Indian women torn between traditional ideas and their intellect. Though they never cross the threshold of their family and walk away from the accepted roles of a wife and a mother, they are revolting in their own way. They have their own concept of life. Ramamoorthy is right when he says, “Her heroines speak of Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own and Betty Friedon and it becomes obvious that the women she has created are feminists if she is not one.” (115) In almost all the stories the protagonists have broken the stereotyped and traditional image of women, may it be in the case of the wife who is not ready to submit in “The Intrusion”, the mother who is not willing to warn her child in “It Was Dark”, the mother not willing to have the third child in “Death Of a Child”, the working woman going abroad in pursuit of her career in “It Was The Nightingale”, Shaku in divorcing her husband and the old woman in favour of the divorcee in “And Then?”, widow getting ready for remarriage in “The Cruelty Game” and so on. Sharma has rightly said, “Deshpande tries to demolish the tradition bound image of a woman as a passive, pliant and submissive creature ready to be moulded by man.” (245) But they hardly go out of the traditional mould and the institution of marriage. Thus we can see that in all her stories she talks about the problems of women and also gives the solutions for these problems. The solutions do not come from outside but from within. The protagonists undergo a transition and accept the unchanged situation with self-realization that they cannot change the situation but have to change their outlook and attitude to make their life durable. As Gopal Reddy puts it,
Shashi Deshpande demonstrates successfully and convincingly the sources of traps and violence awaiting women at various stages of their existence and also suggests some ways and means of how they can possibly overcome the same through courage and confidence. (51)

It can be observed that most of her women build harmonious relationship in a spirit of give-and-take and in a mood of compromise and understanding. They undergo the process of transformation and change their perspective to cope with life that remains the same. They do not change the situation but change their outlook. This is the common thread found in many of her short stories.