

INTRUSION INTO CONSENT: A CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of patriarchal ideology on women's individuality, focusing on the theme of consent in Shashi Deshpande's short story "The Intrusion". The study aims to analyze how societal norms and traditional gender roles shape the lived experiences of women, particularly in the context of marriage.

The paper explores the protagonist's emotional and psychological struggles, emphasizing the lack of decision-making power afforded to women in patriarchal structures. By analyzing the use of silence, alienation, and discomfort in the narrative, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways to how literature reflects and critiques gendered power dynamics, offering insights into the discourse on individual rights and equity.

Keywords

- Intrusion
- Consent
- Patriarchal system
- Shashi Deshpande
- Gender
- Individuality
- Marriage
- Decision making
- Alienation
- Silence.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande, one of the most eminent voices in Indian English literature, was born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka. She is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and distinguished Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangacharya. Deshpande completed her undergraduate degree in Economics from Elphinstone College, Mumbai, later earned a gold medal in Law from Bangalore. Later, in 1970, she further pursued her academic interest by obtaining an MA in English Literature, showcasing her diverse educational background.

After her marriage, Deshpande relocated to Mumbai and enrolled in a journalism course at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. She briefly worked as a journalist for *Onlooker* magazine and published her first short story in 1970. Her debut collection of short stories, "Legacy," was released in 1978.

Deshpande's literary career flourished with the publication of her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, in 1980. Her novels are deeply rooted in the Indian ethos, portraying characters, settings, and conflicts that resonate with the Indian experience. Her works often explore the struggles of women as they seek to understand themselves, their history, their societal roles, and their relationships. As Rasmi Yogi stated, "Her writings are essential for examining the opposing point of view in the predominately patriarchal system. She constructs an unusual narrative that visually depicts the female experience and questions its label in the traditional Indian household environment in her thoughtful writing." [1]

In her celebrated novel *That Long Silence*, Deshpande delves into the female psyche and universal predicaments, earning her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 and the Nanjangud Thirumalamba

Award. In 2009, she was honored with the Padma Shri. Her earlier novel, *Roots and Shadows*, won the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize for the Best Indian Novel of 1982-83.

Deshpande's works often explore the emotional deprivation and dilemmas faced by women in a patriarchal society. Reflecting this, Simone de Beauvoir remarked, "Marriage subjugates and enslaves women, and it leads her to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose." [2] Deshpande's narratives delve into such themes, portraying the struggles of women to reclaim their identity and purpose within restrictive societal frameworks. She remains an influential figure in Indian English literature, with her novels and short stories widely read and celebrated both in India and abroad.

Thematic and Analytical Insights

Women in patriarchal societies face systemic inequalities, even today. These inequalities affect their physical, emotional, and psychological freedoms, Patriarchy creates a culture that often ignores women's consent, limiting their ability to make decisions for themselves. This paper explores how patriarchal beliefs, continue to suppress women's independence and self-determination, particularly through societal expectations, familial norms, and literary representations.

In patriarchal societies, women are taught to follow roles of sacrifice, submission, and endurance. Figures like Sita, Savitri, and Sakuntala are upheld as ideal women because they exhibit patience and selflessness, often remaining silent about their struggles. These cultural icons, deeply embedded in the collective consciousness, become paradigms for societal expectations. They frame a woman's virtue as inseparable from her ability to endure hardships and remain loyal to her family. Consequently, women are socialized to see their worth through their capacity for self-sacrifice, obedience, and caregiving.

The social conditioning instills a belief that their value lies in fulfilling these traditional roles—as obedient daughters, caring wives, and nurturing mothers. Such ingrained expectations often take a heavy emotional and psychological toll, instilling a lifelong dependency on male authority figures such as fathers, husbands, and sons. As Beauvoir observes, "a woman is defined and distinguished with relation to man, not he with reference to her" [3] These representations serve not only to glorify women's subservience but also to justify their marginalization in societal, familial, and institutional spheres. By reducing women to symbols of virtue tied to self-effacement, patriarchal ideology confines them to domestic spaces, undermining their contributions and capabilities beyond their roles as caregivers and moral guardians.

Despite significant progress in gender equality, such as advancements in education, employment, and legal rights, many barriers persist. These include cultural norms, deeply entrenched stereotypes, and the continued prevalence of persistent discrimination. Feminist literature has emerged as a critical medium to articulate the lived experiences of women under these patriarchal systems. It critiques the ideological foundations of patriarchy while envisioning alternatives rooted in equity and respect. As Elaine Showalter aptly observes, "Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex." [4] This highlights the ongoing struggle of women writers to reclaim their voices and redefine their place in a patriarchal world.

Indian women writers, such as Shashi Deshpande, have played an instrumental role in this discourse. Their works explore into the psychological and emotional struggles women endure, particularly within familial settings, exposing societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Deshpande's short story "The Intrusion," from the collection "The Intrusion and Other Stories," illustrate this critique. The story offers a poignant exploration of how patriarchal beliefs intrude on consent in marriage, capturing the excruciating struggles of a newly married woman navigating the challenges of an arranged marriage.

In "The Intrusion," the opening lines describe the speaker's sense of discomfort and alienation in an unfamiliar environment:

We looked blatantly out of place there. Tiny houses, almost miniature ones, but spick and span. A little path, so narrow, that if we stretched our arms we could touch the houses on both sides. Why had we come here? I walked stiffly, self-consciously, trying hard to seem unaware of the stares, the curious eyes that followed us. I wished I could turn around and stare back with the same frank curiosity, but all I could do was to peep covertly through the corners of my eyes. [5]

The lines illustrate the narrator's sense of alienation in an unfamiliar environment reflecting her emotional disconnection in her arranged marriage. The "tiny houses" and "narrow path" symbolize the confined roles women are often forced into by patriarchal society. Her feeling of being "blatantly out of place" and walking "stiffly, self-consciously" mirrors her discomfort with her husband, whom she sees as a "stranger" due to the lack of personal connection. The "curious eyes" and her wish to "turn around and stare back with the same frank curiosity" highlight her internal rebellion, but her inability to do so reflects the societal pressure to remain passive and conforming. This passage critiques the lack of personal freedom and consent women experience in patriarchal systems, particularly in arranged marriages.

In "The Intrusion," Deshpande critiques how patriarchal constructs deny women their rights and individuality. The narrator feels that her marriage was imposed upon her rather than freely chosen. Her father's domineering attitude stands for the patriarchal authority that dismisses women's voices and prioritizes societal expectations over individual desires. His statement—"What's wrong with him? ... I have two more daughters to be married. Why are you so silent?" [6]—reveals the immense pressure placed on women to conform. The father's perspective points out a transactional view of marriage, where daughters are seen as burdens to be offloaded, rather than individuals with personal choices. The narrator's silence in the face of this pressure is symbolic of the inherent societal issue where women's objections are invalidated. This silence is not born out of agreement but out of conditioned helplessness and the normalization of patriarchal dominance. The suppression of her voice showcases how deeply these ideologies infiltrate women's lives, from their homes to their most intimate relationships.

A sudden sense of missing home struck her, even amidst the honeymoon period, a time when one would expect nothing but new beginnings and joy:

I wish I was back home. The tea arrived. It smelt of kerosene, so did the bread and butter. I was suddenly very hungry and had a sharp pang of longing for the sweets my mother had packed for me. 'I've put some sweets in your bag,' she had said, turning her tired face to mine. 'Ridiculous!' I would have snapped, even a day earlier. 'You can't go on a honeymoon with sweets in your suitcase.' But something forlorn in her face and eyes had restrained me and I had silently acquiesced. Now I knew that my hunger for her sweets had something to do with the look on her face as well. Yet I felt shy, unwilling to open my suitcase and devour the sweets before him like a greedy schoolgirl. [7]

In this passage, the narrator's longing for her mother's sweets while on her honeymoon reflects her emotional discomfort and alienation in her new environment. The "pang of longing for the sweets my mother had packed for me" symbolizes her sense of disconnection and homesickness, not just from her home, but from the unfamiliarity of her marriage. Her hesitation to "devour the sweets before him like a greedy schoolgirl" reveals that she is not comfortable even in the simplest acts, such as eating sweets, in front of her husband. This discomfort portrays the emotional distance between them, emphasizing that she feels like a stranger in the relationship. Her shyness to indulge in something so simple draws attention to the lack of intimacy and the internalized pressure to conform to societal expectations of restraint. This moment illustrates how the patriarchal system suppresses not only women's freedom and desires but also their ability to experience basic acts of intimacy and comfort in a relationship.

In the midst of the honeymoon, the narrator's thoughts take an unexpected turn as she reflects on the emotional distance she feels. "I had a great longing to go down, to scuff my bare toes in the sand, to pick up shells and sit on the rocks, letting the friendly waves climb up my bare legs. He would swim, I thought, and call out to me in a lazy and friendly way, and I would respond with a wave and a smile." [8] This daydream stands in sharp contrast to the reality of their situation. The narrator imagines a carefree, joyful connection, yet she realizes this is only a distant possibility, "But all this was in the future, possibly, if at all."

In her present reality, they are strangers to each other, despite their marriage: "And at present, we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but only a husband and wife." The emotional distance is palpable, highlighted by the husband's seemingly indifferent demeanor. "The slightly glazed look in his eyes as he hummed a popular tune told me how unaware he was of everything but of what was to happen between us, making us truly husband and wife." His focus is on fulfilling the marital role, oblivious to the emotional connection she longs for.

The narrator reflects on the unsettling truth about them, "When we were, I thought again, not even acquainted with each other. A month back we had not even heard of each other." Their union, based on parental arrangement, has not allowed for the development of personal connection, making their marriage feel more like an obligation than a union of understanding or intimacy. This emphasizes the emotional void the narrator feels, caught between societal expectations and personal desires.

When her husband addresses her, "calling out my name, using it so familiarly, with such a proprietorial air that I was startled. A little angry, too." [9] The tone of ownership in his speech emphasizes the societal perception of marriage as a transfer of individuality and freedom from one family to another. Her reluctance grows as the interaction progresses. His suggestion to change into a nightdress is perceived as laden with unspoken intentions: "It seemed to me that there was something insinuating in his tone, something eager and excited about him that put me off." [10] The narrator's choice of a modest nightdress and her unease highlight her discomfort with the physical intimacy expected in marriage, particularly when it is devoid of emotional connection. When he embraces her suddenly, the moment becomes fraught with tension: "His embrace was too sudden, too rough, and I wanted to scream, to cry out. But somehow I knew that this was just between the two of us." [11] Her silence in the face of distress reflects the ingrained societal norms that discourage women from expressing dissent in marital relationships.

The culmination of this encounter is a confrontation of emotions, where his anger surfaces, "What's this? Why are you behaving like this?" and "Avoiding me. Don't think I haven't noticed it. Ever since we came here you've been... been... avoiding me," he ended lamely." [12] His frustration reflects his inability to comprehend her resistance, rooted in the absence of mutual understanding and consent. Through this episode, the narrative critiques the patriarchal notion of marriage as a domain where consent and emotional readiness are often overlooked. The narrator's experience exposes the emotional strain and alienation endured by women in such constructs, revealing the disparity between societal expectations of marital intimacy and the individual's autonomy and comfort.

The narrator's independence is further diminished. Her husband's sense of entitlement to her body draws attention to the societal assumption that marriage nullifies the need for consent. This dynamic reflects a larger cultural norm where women's physical and emotional boundaries are often disregarded in marital relationships. The narrator yearns for companionship, understanding, and emotional intimacy, but her husband views intimacy as a transactional obligation.

The narrator's trauma of marital coercion, laying bare the emotional and physical violence she endures. It begins with a jarring transition from a dream-like solace to stark reality, "And then I woke up to realize that the sound of the sea was real, but I was on a bed, not on the beach. And it was not the sea that was pounding my body but he, my husband, who was forcing his body on mine." [13] The juxtaposition of the soothing sound of the sea with the violent act underscores the stark contrast between her inner longing for peace and the oppressive reality of her marriage.

Her resistance is vividly depicted through her futile attempts to push him away, "I put my hands on his chest to push him away, but it was like trying to move a rock; I could do nothing." [14] This imagery of immobility emphasizes her powerlessness, highlighting the physical dominance of her husband and the societal structures that leave her voiceless and trapped. The narrator's fear is palpable, "I was too frightened to speak, my voice was strangled in my throat," [15] delineating the psychological paralysis that accompanies such violations.

The absence of communication between the couple amplifies the dehumanizing nature of the act, "There was no talk, no word between us—just this relentless pounding." The silence speaks volumes about the lack of emotional connection and mutual respect in their relationship, reducing their interaction to an exercise of power rather than intimacy. The narrator's comparison of his movements to the sea furthers this theme: "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." [16] While the sea's violence is natural and impersonal, her husband's actions are deeply personal, carrying the weight of betrayal, humiliation, and the erasure of her agency.

This scene critiques the patriarchal ideology that normalizes the suppression of a woman's consent within marriage. By equating the husband's actions to the unrelenting violence of the sea, the narrative projects the physical and emotional toll of such violations. The narrator's pain and humiliation reveal the deep psychological scars inflicted by a relationship devoid of respect and mutual understanding, challenging societal norms that prioritize the husband's desires over the wife's feeling and well-being.

This dissonance is painfully evident: "At last, mercifully, it was over, my body having helped him by some strange instinct beyond and outside me. And the cry I gave was not for physical pain, but for the intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself" [17]. This moment captures the profound dehumanization embedded in patriarchal marriage, where women's bodies are treated as instruments for male gratification. The narrator's anguish stems not only from the physical act but also from the deeper betrayal of her individuality and selfhood.

Deshpande uses the narrator's internal conflict to critique the cultural glorification of women's subservience. By challenging narratives that romanticize self-sacrifice and endurance, Deshpande subverts traditional ideals, such as Sita's unwavering devotion, and advocates for relationships rooted in mutual respect and equality. The narrator's resistance and yearning for dignity serve as a powerful indictment of the systemic inequalities perpetuated by patriarchal ideologies.

Moreover, the story illustrates how patriarchal intrusion into consent begins long before marriage. It is ingrained in the upbringing of women, who are conditioned to suppress their desires and prioritize the needs of others. This conditioning reinforces a cycle of subjugation, as women internalize the belief that their worth lies in their ability to conform to these ideals.

"The Intrusion" serves as a microcosm of the larger issue of patriarchal intrusion into consent. It vividly depicts how deeply these ideologies shape women's lives, from familial expectations to marital dynamics. By centering the narrator's struggles, Deshpande dismantles cultural norms that normalize women's subjugation and erasure. The story calls for a reimagining of marital relationships as partnerships of equals, where consent, respect, and understanding are fundamental.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Shashi Deshpande's "The Intrusion" is a searing critique of patriarchal ideology and its impact on consent and agency. Through the narrator's experiences, Deshpande exposes the pervasive disregard for women's individuality within patriarchal structures. The story challenges cultural norms that perpetuate women's subordination and affirms the urgent need to dismantle oppressive systems. By upholding for relationships built on equality and mutual respect, Deshpande offers a vision of a more equitable humane society, where women's voices are heard, their choices respected, and their identities celebrated.

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