

# Indian Women Writing in English

## A Brief Look at Short Stories of the 1970s and Early 1980s

*“We are looking for a girl, simple yet sophisticated”, his mother had said. “My son is working in a foreign company. His wife must be able to entertain and mix with the foreigners.” She had made the word ‘foreigners’ sound like Martians. Simple and*



*sophisticated, I had wondered. Was I that? It had seemed that I was, for my mother joyfully told me that they had agreed to our proposal. No one had asked me if I had agreed. It had been taken for granted. I had taken it for granted myself, when, 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 had thought of a thousand answers, but none to the question, ‘What’s wrong with him?’ I had nothing to say either when my father said quietly, “I have two more daughters to be married.”*

*There was no talk, no word between us. Just this relentless pounding. His movements had the same rhythm, the same violence as the movements of the sea; but, I thought, I could have borne the battering of the sea better. For that would hurt, but not humiliate like this. And 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, for the violation of my right to myself. I drew the sheets over myself and lay quietly, afraid to move, thinking of nothing, my mind an absolute blank.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Shashi Deshpande, *The Legacy and Other Stories*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1978

THESE TWO SHORT PARAGRAPHS which were not chosen at random illustrate tellingly what the modern Indian English short story written by women is all about: it deals with young single or married women, housewives and mothers, or the relationship of husband and wife. The narrative action is concerned with a woman's psychological, emotional or intellectual needs, problems and conflicts as they arise out of her status and role in a comparatively conservative society. The experiences of the main character or characters in these short stories draw our attention to the modern Indian woman's predicament with regard to her establishing herself as an individual in her own right vis-à-vis a society which, by tradition, has reserved and continues to prescribe certain functions and roles to its women. The narrator's point of view chosen by the female author is almost always that of the protagonist, and there are numerous examples of stories told by the main character herself. Their language reflects the tensions between a well-established sociolect — or rather, sexolect — and the attempts of women to break linguistic barriers and create for themselves an idiom which is meaningful and conveys to others experiences of an awareness of self which cannot always be grasped cognitively. Let me illustrate these points by looking more closely at the two passages quoted.

The first one shows us a narrator who, initially, functions as an onlooker or commentator rather than the central character on the stage. The young woman who is being discussed here reports the comments passed upon her and only gradually includes herself in the deliberations of those who are deciding her fate. The sexolect of this passage and the narrator's attempt to break through the barriers it has constructed around her illustrates the shift of the narrator's point of view on the linguistic level. The person talked about and referred to is not "a woman" but "a girl"; she is to combine an appealing facade with passivity and obedience — "sophistication with simplicity" — and is expected to react chameleon-like to the needs of either her future social group or her tradition-oriented husband. "Mother", "they" and "father" are the institutions on whom the burden and the responsibility rests to see to it that "daughters [are] to be married", or that an unwritten social law is being executed. The momentous decision on the future life of an individual is reduced to an act of barter, a proposal. When the young woman steps into the action herself her words indicate the newness of the experience she is undergoing. At first she can only put her reactions into questions. "Was I simple and sophisticated?"; "What will I do?" Later on she becomes just speechless being unable to answer her own and her father's questions.

This short scene which, in the context of the story, is relived in the narrator's memory on the evening of her wedding night which she and her husband are going to spend in a lonely house by the sea, presents us with a young woman who is in the process of trying to grasp what is happening to her and what her relationship to her husband and herself really means. The point I want to make here is not to maintain that women writing from India till now had not been concerned with the individual woman's plight and her efforts to assert her dignity as a person but that, in the modern short story written by women — and, I should add, in the novel, too — a shift of emphasis has taken place. Woman now insists on her right to reject a life which is prescribed by a male-dominated, anti-individual society. What is more: She now has the courage to say so clearly.

This becomes quite obvious when we look at the second passage which we find at the end of "The Intrusion". To start with, the rather detailed description of the sexual act especially when composed by a woman and seen by her means breaking a very important taboo Indian society has imposed on its members, a taboo imposed, moreover, by a society which is well known for its sexual hypocrisy and prudishness. But to go even further and expose one's most intimate emotional and psychological experiences and reactions is almost an act of self-immolation, of wilfully relinquishing one's right to be accepted as a normal member of society. Shashi Deshpande's description of her narrator's sense of victimisation and isolation, of a dichotomy of body and soul, the outside world and her inner self, of the humiliation she feels at being treated like an object of gratification, and, finally, of her experience of emptiness, uselessness and fear takes us into realms of the female psyche which no writer of the previous generation had dared put into words as candidly. What at the beginning of the story appeared to be yet another cliché-ridden exposure of the oppression of women in India turns into an act of self-assertion, an assertion, however, which is still not in a position to go beyond rejecting traditional role conceptions and replace them by new ones. Shashi Deshpande's story ends on a note of almost deliberate detachment which does not indicate in the least how her young woman will develop in future:

When sensation and feeling came back with a surge, my first thought was that I could not hear even the sea now. And I wondered why till I realized that there was another sound drowning it. I looked at him. He was lying on his back, his legs flung apart, snoring loudly and steadily. (48)

The language, too, underlines the dichotomy experienced by the woman: The pounding of the sea is distinguished from that of her husband's bodily movements, her own sensations, temporarily numbed, come back in a surge — nature re-establishing itself — and her husband's snoring drowns the sound of the sea.

Much the same can be said about other women writers and their short stories with regard to theme, narrative episode, character constellation and message. Among the nine collections I have gone through which include about a hundred and fifty stories there are of course examples which do not offer any new insight, which repeat cliché situations and conflicts in a cliché manner. This is due mainly, I believe, to the fact that Indian magazines, weeklies or monthlies, and the big English newspapers have offered their pages to women's stories. A new middle-class readership has established itself for which all these journalistic publications are catering, and many of the readers are middle-class women whom the editors hope to reach. Nevertheless, many of the stories written by young women who are by now quite well-known through their contributions to Indo-English literature deserve the critic's attention, and it is these stories which share their essential characteristics with "The Intrusion". The man-woman relationship, the experiences of a young girl or a young woman, the assertion of the older woman, her loneliness and isolation and the ostracism woman is forced to accept in a caste- and class-ridden society, are the main themes to which Padma Hejmadi, Sunita Jain, Raji Narasimhan, Jai Nimbkar, Malathi Rao, Vasantha Ravindran, Vera Sharma or Indu Suryanarayan return again and again.

In Raji Narasimhan's "The Last Embrace" the narrator's wife has decided to leave him, to "retire from Life", as she told him. Similarly, their daughter has begun to live on her own, having turned her attention away from home towards a young man with whom she has fallen in love. Joshi, the narrator, feels his male supremacy being questioned which makes him ponder as to how he can once again reaffirm it by "a last embrace". Little is said about his wife's motives, just that he has lost his importance for her which, perhaps, he never had really possessed during their married life. In Narasimhan's "A Village Story" a woman leaves her husband and starts teaching in a village. When he visits her to take her back she coolly sends him off. Sunita Jain's "The Landing"<sup>3</sup> describes a woman and her

2 Raji Narasimhan, "The Last Embrace", *The Marriage of Bela*, 63-71

3 Ibid., 89-98

4 Sunita Jain, "The Landing", *A Woman is Dead*, 16-23

children's return to India from the United States leaving her husband and their father behind because they want to live a a more meaningful life without him. And finally, in Shashi Deshpande's "Rain"<sup>5</sup> a young doctor is shocked by his woman friend's apparent callousness. She is obviously not upset at all when the telephone rings in the midst of their love-making and the hospital informs her that her husband has just died. Having earlier closed a previous chapter in her life, she will not allow its past to intrude and upset her.

Stories such as these exemplify that their authors are neither concerned with an analysis of their heroines' past tribulations nor are they anxious to justify their decisions to be free by, for example, paying attention to possibly rewarding prospects of their new lives. Rather, they confine themselves to portraying a woman's deliberate step to liberate herself from the shackles of traditional roles. It is the act itself of a woman's decision to leave her husband or partner in order to start a new life that is the point the writers want to make. Besides, little attention is being paid to questions of motivation and consequence, or of morality and ethos; an astounding fact considering Indian social practice and the high regard placed on respectability.

Against stories setting out to define new and anti-traditional images of women and posing a challenge to their readers' conceptions or misconceptions of their roles, a second type of narration depicts women who have already established their own independence and consequently have to cope with a world around them that is not really amenable to their new roles. Narasimhan's "End of Probation" and "Their Woman Colleague"<sup>6</sup> depict professionally successful women whose careers rankle their male colleagues' minds. Yet again, this kind of 'new' woman confronting male role playing is not actually probed into. Does the author purposely shun it or perhaps prefer the open ending of her story — as modern writers are apt to do — in order to invite her readers' responses? A reason for her strategy may also be found in Indian society's notoriety for punishing women for their alleged 'failure' or their choice of the 'wrong path'. Their punishment would take the form of feeling isolated, frustrated, self-questioning and resigned, as in Malathi Rao's story "The Metaphor of Stone."<sup>7</sup> On her birthday fifty year old Anita remembers her past, her lost hopes, her loneliness and the meaninglessness of being a woman. In Indu

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5 Shashi Deshpande, "Rain", *The Legacy*, 58-66

6 Raji Narasimhan, "End of Probation", "Their Woman Colleague", *The Marriage of Bela*, 21-28, 29-33

7 Malathi Rao, "The Metaphor of Stone", *Come for Coffee, Please*, 18-26

Suryanarayan's "The Journey"<sup>8</sup> an elderly woman also reminisces on the past, when on a train journey she suddenly realizes that the man opposite her had ruined her father and thrown the burden of responsibility onto her; a weight that had affected her whole life, had in fact allowed her to live on her own, yet at the expense of permanently feeling the "stabbing pain" of a bad conscience. The victimization of the "failed" or "fallen" woman may make her face her self-negation because economic necessity forces her to end her rebellion and play those roles society has reserved for her, that of the mistress or the beggar. Vera Sharma's "The Unrepentant"<sup>9</sup> tells of a young widow and her illegitimate child who is eventually unable to bear the charity and righteousness of a Christian hostel and who escapes into the safety of a petty businessman's secure arms as his mistress. Indu Suryanarayan's "Drying Tears in the Sun"<sup>10</sup>, on the other hand, traces the fate of an orphan girl who after having been seduced and born a child sinks to the lowest level in society, becoming a beggar woman who depends on charity. Finally, the same predicament is faced by women whose rebellion is quickly smothered and whose future lives are made to conform to society's expectations, for instance in Malathi Rao's "The Blue Muffler"<sup>11</sup> and in several Deshpande stories like "A Liberated Woman", "An Antidote to Boredom", "The Dim Corridor", or "The Eternal Theme".<sup>12</sup>

The thematic and ideological preoccupations of the modern Indian short story by women, and even more so the way these stories are being told and given linguistic and formal contour, reflect upon present-day efforts of the women in India to redefine themselves in the context of the tremendous economic, social, and cultural changes that have occurred over the last twenty or so years. These changes have brought about the emergence of new social classes such as the petit bourgeoisie and the 'new' middle class. Almost without exception, the younger generation of Indian women writers introduced here belongs to the middle class, a social formation that has adapted to western education, anglicised views, has set their minds on job-security, on an occupation in the administrative, the professional, educational and managerial branches of either the public or the private sector. This generation, born between the late 1930s and the 1940s, has

8 Indu Suryanarayan, "The Journey", *Drying Tears in the Sun*, 96-100

9 Vera Sharma, "The Unrepentant", *The Unrepentant*, 9-14

10 Indu Suryanarayan, "Drying Tears in the Sun", *Drying Tears in the Sun*, 45-57

11 Malathi Rao, "The Blue Muffler", *Passion Fruit*, 41-52

12 Shashi Deshpande, "A Liberated Woman"; "An Antidote to Boredom"; "The Dim Corridor"; "The Eternal Theme"; *The Legacy*, 21-29, 67-76, 77-85, 96-103

not personally experienced the struggle for independence but has grown up in a country where erstwhile important literary themes like dealing with colonialism and the nationalist struggle against it, the cultural clash between East and West, or the confrontation of tradition and modernity have more or less lost relevance. The wide-spread national struggles of the pre-war and war periods have been replaced by economic and social tensions and contradictions amongst the social classes and castes of India. Middle class writers have turned to questions and problems besetting their own social and economic conditions and paying attention to the private sphere. The Indian women short story of the 1970s and early 1980s is to be placed in this very context, and the increasing number of women writers is directly related to the thematic shift in emphasis and, of course, to the specific effects the changes referred to have had on their status and new perceptions of their own roles.

Women writers' noticeable preference for the short literary genre is also related to improved conditions of literary production, the expansion of the publishing industry, the spread of magazines and journals and a corresponding growth of readership. Prospective women writers used these opportunities and were supported by for example a modern publisher like P. Lal and his Writers Workshop in Calcutta who introduced many new voices to the reading public, which, incidentally, explains the large number of titles referred to in this essay. Comparatively secure economic conditions of many well-educated middle-class women began to form a solid basis for those among them who wanted to turn to writing, usually in their spare time but also because of the particular appeal this literary genre may have had for the female Indian sensibility which has earlier found expression mainly through poetry. Yet the poem, the private voice, left little scope to represent the social dimension of life in India while the novel characterized by the realistic mode of narration often enough sacrificed the subjective and personal to the general. As a literary form which would achieve both, to depict the inner and outer world, woman's personal affectedness by social and cultural realities and their composition, the short story appears to have appeared especially suitable to combine the epic art of extension with the "poetic art of ellipsis,"<sup>13</sup> to achieve conveying their situation and their world. The story forms chosen corroborate this reading. Stories are told straightforwardly and realistically with little attention paid to experiment. It is the message that matters and not how it is presented.

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13 Thomas A. Gullason, "The Short Story: An Underrated Art", *Studies in Short Fiction* 2 (1964), 28

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