

# CAREER WOMEN OF ANITA DESAI AND SHASHI DESHPANDE

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## Abstract

*The modern woman, though educated, has to face many odds in her adventure of achieving identity, realizing her ambitions and desire to explore herself as independent and self-sustaining individual ready to take up any challenges in this male dominated society. This paper deals with two stories that bring forth the new woman's quest for her own identity. Anita Desai's "The Rooftop Dwellers" from The Diamond Dust is a simple story that highlights the problems of an unmarried, independent living, and working woman in the contemporary society. Shashi Deshpande conducts a relentless search to discover the feminine and individual 'self' in the title story "It was the Nightingale".*

**Keywords:** employees, challenges, marriage, ambitions, self-respect

## Introduction

What is important to a woman – her life with her husband or her career? If a woman chooses to develop her career she has to sacrifice her life to certain extent. But if a woman wishes to have a blissful family life, she has to forgo her career. Many Indian women writers in English, in their works, have highlighted the opportunities, barriers and the challenges the women employees face to maintain balance between their personal and professional lives. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are among the foremost Indian women writers of fiction in English who have shown a marked interest in short story and novel as forms of artistic expression and exploration. Their stories deal with behavioural patterns, and express the hopes and aspirations, disappointments and frustrations, joys and sorrows in human life.

Though educated, woman in this country has to face many odds in her adventure of achieving her identity. Anita Desai's "The Rooftop Dwellers" portrays a modern young woman's desire for independent living and the problems she faces while living so in Delhi. Moyna is a young lady who completes her MA in English and joins as a sub-editor of a literary magazine, *Books* in Delhi. She leaves behind the comforts of her parents' home and stays in a working women's hostel putting up with the inconveniences there. Later she leaves the hostel and hires a barsati or roof top dwelling, at high price where she suffers from minimalism, lack of social life, and sense of insecurity. The owners of the house are choosy and haughty and disapprove of the life style of Moyna. They suspect her character when she brings male friends to her room. One evening she is shocked and surprised to find her things stolen by somebody. In course of time the founder of the magazine for which she works, decides to wind it up. Finally, Moyna is called by her mother to meet an America-returned bridegroom.

Moyna belongs to "a home where the accommodation of objects, their comfortable clutter and convenience, could be taken for granted". She determines to make her new life as a working woman in the metropolis a success. But the minimalism of the living arrangements at the hostel becomes "no longer a

privation and a challenge but simply a way of life." When it becomes impossible for her to stay there she leaves the hostel and finds the rooftop of the Bhallas with great difficulty. In the process she is "scrutinized with such suspicion, questioned with such hostility" by the landlords that she realizes that they have nothing but fear and loathing for a single, working woman.

The story carries a subtle hint at the gender element that the female world, how so ever hard the women may try, cannot become self-sufficient and self-sustaining. Moyna and her senior, Tara are presented as ambitious, hard-working, sincere, and intellectual with a zeal to succeed in the career market and they carve out a niche for themselves. The career - situation in which they are placed is involved with struggle for which the two ladies have to take the help of male superiority. Tara gets her job through her husband, Ritwick. The words of Raj Kumar, a handyman doing small office jobs, spoken somewhat inappropriately to Tara and Moyna when Tara worries about the circulation of the magazine, are out of character with his status as peon: "What is going on . . . I am here running everything for you. Why do you need Bose Sahib?" Mohan, an employee to push up the circulation of the magazine, coming to the rescue of Tara and Moyna in a crisis situation is again a significant pointer. The crisis erupts on account of a pugnacious and angry outburst of a short story writer, whose collection has been damningly reviewed by a free-lance writer. Tara's composure and authoritativeness in tackling the situation fails to withstand the writer's rage that goes on rising. At this moment, Mohan strides in and announces with enviable poise: "The editor is not responsible for the reviewer's views", and catching the writer by the elbow, he leads him out of the office. Tara wonders why she could not think of this appropriate response.

Moyna also is protectively treated by Ritwick, in the matter of her dealings with the landlords. It is he, who talks to them on equal terms, questions them about the water tank and booster pump etc. whereas Moyna, who "came from a family so competent that she had never needed to be competent herself" feels too diffident even to raise these issues. On another occasion she does not feel like kicking up a row and recover her goods stolen by the boy servant of the Bhallas. When she eventually brings this to their notice, the Bhallas quickly lose their temper and Moyna loses the argument and retreats from the scene quietly, indicating that women are vulnerable and weak. The two options left for them are either to lean on male support or to continue to be victimized. Moyna tilts for the latter situation. Her victimization includes not only the loss of her things but also the servant-boy's humiliating behaviour going to the extent of his teasing her; Moyna's decision to punish the boy remains far from realized.

When Tara brings her friend, Adrian, a foreigner to Moyna's rooftop to enjoy wine, Moyna suddenly feels her spirits break free and lift: "Here she was, entertaining friends on 'her terrace' on a starry evening, just as she had imagined an adult working woman in the metropolis might do, just as she had imagined *she* would do – and now it was happening". This is Moyna's first social gathering. But this evokes suspicion in the minds of the Bhallas and they suspect her character. So she requests Tara not to bring Adrian any more to her rooftop. Her "way of life changed completely. It had to be adjusted to that of the Bhallas".

The next male to create problem for her is her own cat – the tomcat, Mao. She pays a heavy price for it by her expulsion from the hostel for violating its rule of not keeping pets. At her new abode at the Bhallas, Mao becomes a companion of her life. Her attempt to hide him from the landlords remains unsuccessful. There is a plenty of physicality between Mao and Moyna, as the former keeps moving in and out of her lap. On her moments of depression, Mao appears almost like a lover to console her:

“Mao reappeared, wrapping himself around and around her legs, finally leaping onto her lap and kneading it with his paws, loudly purring. She held him, sure he was telling something, saying comforting, consoling things.”

Moyna's living alone and her trying to face the world alone reflect a feminist position. But this position is undercut by Mao who acts as a surrogate, sympathetic, supportive male companion.

Moyna feels homesick. She tries “to suppress the most childish urge to run and hide her head in her mother's lap, feel her mother stroking her hair”. She is exploited by the social conditions and beliefs - thus becoming a victim of socio-cultural constructions one way or the other. To be at norm with the society she has to sacrifice something or the other. Due to her patriarchal mind-set ingrained from her childhood via socialization she fails to walk out of the traditional norm. At least she has to undergo a psychological reaffirmation and accept what is ordained to her as the thing of her choice. Otherwise she has to bear the pang of guilt and the questioning of inner conscience. The failure of the magazine is symbolic of Moyna's own failure and of course Tara's too. Having made an attempt at self-actualization and becoming independent, they retreat into the area of 'feminine mystique' which reserves for them traditional feminine roles. Tara goes back to the domestic sphere and Moyna's joyous response at receiving the letter from her parents clearly indicates that she has made up her mind and she is happy. Though there are indignities in Moyna's provisional life, Desai grants her heroine comforts in compensation. As Simone De Beauvoir states "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society."

The thematic thrust of Desai's story lies in her focusing on the inevitable unhappiness which is the lot of human beings. The story is concrete and vivid with realistic descriptions of the manners and modes, both social and psychic, of middle class. It also captures the most exquisite and unspeakable moments of human life which get transmuted into testaments of universal human condition or predicament. According to Sylvia Brownrigg, the story shows "Desai at her lively best, attuned to the nuances of squabbles everywhere."

Since ages woman's life has been chartered and dictated by man. Woman is looked down upon as 'the other sex', 'the essential other'. But now the modern woman wants to live her life on her own terms and for her own sake by providing some space for her own 'self'. From the oppressed and depressed 'self' she is trying to rise like a phoenix to assert herself. Equipped with emotion and intellect, her efforts are to construct a meaningful life within the ambit of chaos and confusion. Shoma Shukla gives a beautiful picture of the importance of woman in man's life and says that man survives only because of woman:

“Through her mere existence woman built a world around her where she makes a man realize and understand about himself. Her body, mind and spirit augments on this man and helps in transforming him into a part of this vast universe, thus making him realize that he too has been born out of this woman, a mother, a lover”.

But unfortunately, woman who has been paving the way for the progress of man has failed to notice that her own position in the society has been deteriorating since ages. In fact, woman has forgotten the once honorable position she held in the life of man, in the society.

Shashi Deshpande conducts, through Jayu, a relentless search to discover this feminine and individual 'self' in “It was the Nightingale”. Jayu is a married woman and an ambitious careerist who opts for a two years' estrangement from her husband and decides to leave on some foreign assignment. Though she knows very well that her husband is not happy about her going abroad, she puts on an “understanding but not – caring” attitude the husband never knew:



“How I have longed to give ambition and success the go-by and stay with him, throttled by his love. No, not throttled, that’s not fair. It’s a soporific, his love and mine, which makes me long to lie down in lethargic bliss.”

She longs for his company – not a physical one, but for one of emotional intimacy and effortless communing.

Though the lives of the wife and the husband are like two lights that shine more brightly together, Jayu feels: “. . . to keep my light burning is my responsibility and mine alone” for the sake of which she wants to begin her quest. She is conscious that her trip abroad is not going to make much difference to her work, but now there is no turning back. She has begun to feel her own way and she is not prepared to lose this opportunity to establish her own identity. Even her plan to have a child is postponed: “Now the child will have to wait. We will not let it be born yet. Can you feel a traitor to someone who does not exist?” But Jayu is afraid of herself. She never wants to succumb: “If I give in once, if I give way once, I will walk that road of self-abnegation forever.” She never wants to end up like her mother who stripped herself of everything and cried out for the sake of the family. Instead of being just “a wife and mother” as her mother-in-law, she wants to prove herself. She prefers her career to anything else. According to her husband she is “rational and intelligent”. For the women of her mother’s and her mother-in-law’s generation “life held nothing, literally nothing, apart from husband and children.” They cannot see beyond those limitations, hence made their “own hell and glorified in it”.

So, for Jayu “each step out of home had been a battle, each success a treachery towards her.” Though she is free now, the fear remains: “Will I shackle myself? Or others? And often there’s an abashed feeling that I’m making gestures of defiance at a person who doesn’t exist”. As they leave for airport, the next morning, she resents: “. . . each parting is a little dying. And so it is for him and me. And this is my doing and all my life I will carry the burden of this guilt.” For the husband everything at the flat reminds him of her memories. But Jayu is going to a place where there is nothing of him: “I will be starting on a blank sheet, a clean page.” She feels glad of it. But is it really true? “No. I’m fooling myself. The memories of hurt are bottled inside me. I will carry them wherever I go.” At the time of parting she wants to explain to him: “. . . how little I really want to go. How much I want to be with him. Now I will explain that my going does not mean I care for him less.” But the finality of the moment carries away her words and she says none of these things. With a hope that her husband can feel the guilt in her, she walks away from him with her “eyes tearless and dry and burning”.

In her portrayal of Jayu, Deshpande shows that women can accommodate their other roles as human beings within their traditional roles and that the new, educated Indian woman has the capacity to determine her priorities for self-discovery without disturbing the familial harmony. In the name of the conventional image of a woman “totally selfless, totally loving,” her personal ambitions have long since been sidetracked. Living only through one’s husband and children makes a woman feel shattered. Jayu establishes a new concept that in a family set up not just the wife but the husband also is expected to sacrifice. Self-respect to woman is as essential as it is for man. The new woman is determined to overcome her problems in her own way. In many families, the loss of self-identity of a woman is the root cause of many conflicts. In this story Deshpande makes her intention clear that all-round happiness can be arrived at through a determined quest for self-hood.

A number of studies have documented positive progress for women in the Indian management space as well as in their personal lives. Research shows that the economic development of India has been positively influenced by the involvement of women in entrepreneurial sectors. A study in 2005 on senior women in public and private sector firms, titled ‘Women in Management in the New Economic Environment: The Case of India’ says that women look for work from economic necessity and for personal goals. Women in lower to

middle socioeconomic status seek income opportunities, and those in the upper middle class pursue a career for professional ambitions. Women with higher education have more interest in independence, are career-oriented and interested in quickly moving up the organizational ladder. A 2006 study on Women Managers in India examines the management skills and leadership styles followed in the corporate sector and says that most men are not comfortable working for a woman manager. Overall, women prefer an interactive style, and men prefer a command and control style.

Marriage is realized and endorsed as the most important and significant institution of human relationships. Nicholas Abercrombie says that it is a “cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring”. In India it is not simply a social institution but by determining the code of conduct in marital relationships it has become a potent force. Moyna, after facing the hardships in Delhi, finally inclines towards the alliance put forward to her by her mother. Her friend, Tara, also prefers to remain in the domestic sphere. But life after marriage is not always free of hardships. In fact, in many cases, the woman is deprived of personal fulfillment for the sake of domesticity. Jayu also tries to assert herself; the revolution that takes place in her, though radical, endeavors to adopt softer measures – understanding, and compromising in order to achieve the objective. It is a process that takes place entirely within the emotional domain. Though it appears to be a provocation against the other members of the family, it is actually a challenge that she meets within herself.

The key challenge for women employees is managing both their traditional role as housewives and their career. In spite of social and attitudinal barriers, Indian women have gained equality, and their work is being recognized equal to that of men, to a certain extent. Women experience great pressure, and work hard to prove themselves in the workplace; still, one of the greatest obstacles is how women are treated by men. They often receive differential treatment, reinforcing the stereotypical view of being inferior and less important than men, resulting in not being offered challenging jobs and not being part of important organizational issues.

Work – life balance always has been the biggest challenge for the working people. A working woman’s experience is more miserable when compared to that of a working man. Despite all the challenges, the modern woman has been expanding her horizons, eventually recreating herself to accomplish those that she was denied earlier. In this process she is throwing a challenge to the society to redefine gender roles, by not only utilizing the opportunities that come in her way, but also creating them.

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