SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 9(September)2025**

Women as Objects of Desire, Utility and Routine

Rashi Tripathi[1]
UG student, Department of English, School of Liberal Education

Dr. Vivek Kumar[2]
Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Education

Article Received: 05/08/2025
Article Accepted: 09/09/2025
Published Online: 10/09/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.200

Abstract

This paper investigates how Shashi Deshpande's short stories depict women not as autonomous individuals, but as cultural artefacts—shaped, silenced, and consumed by patriarchal norms. Through the lens of Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic feminist theory of domination and submission, the analysis explores how women are objectified—sexually, emotionally, and domestically—in stories such as *The Stone Women, A Wall is Safer, Death of a Child, and An Antidote to Boredom*. These narratives reveal how women internalize submission and learn to derive self-worth from serving as objects of desire or utility. Despite glimpses of self-awareness and longing, the female protagonists remain bound to psychological and cultural roles that prioritize routine, sacrifice, and relational dependency over personal agency.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Jessica Benjamin, feminist psychoanalysis, emotional labor, objectification of women, domesticity, submission.

Women's bodies have been considered an object through ages, it has been the topic of debate and scrutiny, which we can witness through the portrayal of protagonists from the selected short stories of the collection.

In the Stone Women, Shashi Deshpande stages a haunting confrontation between a woman and the cultural fantasy of idealized femininity — represented through temple carvings that are both beautiful and disturbing. These carved figures do not simply depict women; they embody the historical and psychic processes through which female bodies are aestheticized, eroticized, and stripped of interiority. Jessica Benjamin's feminist-psychoanalytic reading of domination and submission offers a powerful framework for this

encounter, especially her argument that "focus on woman's lack of subjectivity... man expresses desire and woman is the object of it" (Benjamin 72).

The protagonist of Deshpande's story becomes painfully aware that the real terror lies not in the fantasy of beauty, but in becoming it — to be sculpted, desired, and admired, but never truly known. The protagonist is introduced to the temple carvings through her husband's gaze. "Obediently I look up and—what did he call them? Ladies? God, no! They're women, lush-bodied, high-breasted women carved on rectangular stone panels, leaning provocatively out of them, towards us, it seems" (Deshpande 142).

Her use of "obediently" immediately establishes the dynamic of power. She is not just looking; she is responding to an invitation that already positions her passively. The figures are eroticized beyond realism, and even the narrator questions their authenticity: "are they? I suppose they are. But they don't look real, a voice inside me protests. And yet… no, I don't know. Sometimes I think that's the truth. I don't know" (Deshpande 143). Her inability to determine their realness echoes Benjamin's description of the sexualized female figure: "The 'sexy' woman... is sexy, but as object, not as subject. She expresses not so much her desire as her pleasure in being desired" (Benjamin 75).

This unease deepens when her husband comments on her appearance: "'You're wearing something new. I don't like it. It hides you,' he says, his hands moving as if tracing the shape of my body" (Deshpande 145). His dissatisfaction stems not from how she looks but from what is concealed — from the disruption of the visual access he assumes is his. Benjamin warns that "ideal love—a love in which the woman submits to and adores another who is what she cannot be" (72), becomes a vehicle for domination masked as admiration. The husband's admiration, like the sculptor's, is not about recognition but about projection. He desires the form, not the interior.

The narrator senses this and confesses, "This is how they must have looked, I realize, the men who sculpted the women in stone, as they shaped them from their imaginations" (Deshpande 145). The carvings are not women. They are fantasies worked into permanence — forms into which living women are expected to mould themselves. For a brief moment, the protagonist sees herself merging with these forms: "For a moment, while he looks at me, I am overcome by a sudden fear, as if I am becoming one of them too, women frozen for all time into a pose they have been willed into" (Deshpande 146). This is not a metaphor. It is a psychological event — the realization that to be desired within this schema is to become immobilized, fixed, lifeless.

Benjamin's assertion that "woman's sexual agency is often inhibited... her desire is often expressed by choosing subordination" (75), is fully realized in this scene. The fear the narrator feels is not of her husband, but of disappearing into a pose — of becoming aesthetic

property. Benjamin addresses this kind of internalization: "Woman does not have the freedom to do as she wills; she is not the subject of her own desire" (74).

The protagonist has not lost her voice; she has adapted it to survive within a framework that discourages speech. Even in the final moments, after her self-conscious recoil, she still tries to reassure her husband: "Then I lean back and say, 'It's comfortable, I like it.' We go on talking but I can see a faint shadow on his face—he is puzzled and doesn't know what it is that is puzzling him" (Deshpande 146). Her assertion is small, but it reveals a fissure. He cannot name her discomfort because he cannot perceive it. Recognition, as Benjamin explains, is "the decisive aspect of differentiation" (105). Without it, the woman remains cast in stone — visible but mute, sensual but unreal.

The story offers no resolution, but it does offer a revelation. When the narrator earlier observed the carvings, she recalled a guide's comment: "'She danced for the gods,'" to which she internally responded with irony: "A galaxy of gods lolling before her, dressed... in plastic heads and tinsel crowns" (Deshpande 143-44). This moment collapses reverence into ridicule. The sacred becomes spectacle, and the dancer becomes the centrepiece — not because of power, but because of performance.

Benjamin notes, "Her power may include control over others, but not over her own destiny" (74). The temple dancer, like the narrator, performs not for self-expression but for the approval of a gaze. Ultimately, The Stone Women becomes a meditation on what happens when desire is sculpted not from within but imposed from without.

The woman who senses herself turning to stone is not delusional — she is experiencing the weight of cultural aestheticization that leaves no room for her own voice. Benjamin's insight returns with full force: "We should consider the intersubjective mode where two subjects meet, where not only man but also woman can be subject" (105). In Deshpande's world, this intersubjective mode is always out of reach.

Then, In Shashi Deshpande's "A Wall is Safer" is a story where the boundaries of identity and space collapse inward, trapping the protagonist, Hema, in a quietly devastating form of emotional enclosure. Through carefully observed domestic moments, Deshpande crafts a landscape where submission is not inflicted from outside but internalized — as a woman willingly folds herself into the duties, expectations, and elimination that accompany marital and maternal roles.

Benjamin asserts, "Power holds good not by denying our desire but by forming it, converting it into a willing retainer, its servant or representative" (2). Hema's desire, then, is not absent. It has been groomed to serve the very structures that displace her. The motif of the fence, culminating in Sitabai's remark, "Barbed wire? What's the use of barbed wire? They should build a wall. It's safer," (Deshpande 121) operates as the story's central metaphor. Hema, as she watches the workers complete the enclosure, reflects: "A wall is

safer. With a wall, you can't even see what's on the other side. But suppose the dangers are inside? What do you do then?" (Deshpande 121).

These lines reveal the central irony of Hema's condition — the threats to her autonomy are not external, but embedded in the intimacy of her home, her marriage, her routines. The psychological enclosure predates the physical one. Benjamin's formulation that "obedience, of course, does not exorcise aggression; it merely directs it against the self" (2), is crucial here. Hema's compliance is not a peace treaty, but a wound dressed in silence. Benjamin observes, "The mother is a profoundly desexualized figure... her power may include control over others, but not over her own destiny" (74).

Hema's daily life is filled with tasks — "I cook, I clean, I wash, I iron, I read, I listen to music, help the kids with their lessons" — but these do not offer agency. They only reinforce her function. She holds the structure together but disappears in the process. The protagonist's moment of awakening is subtle but profound. When Sushama jokes, "And here she is... the devoted, self-effacing wife," Hema smiles but internally recoils: "Suppose you go on effacing yourself until you're wholly blotted out?" (Deshpande 120).

This reflection echoes Benjamin's concern that, "woman's sexual agency is often inhibited and her desire is often expressed by choosing subordination" (75). The issue is not that Hema lacks ambition or capability — she was a lawyer — but that the conditions of her domestic role have trained her to feel grateful for the lack of her identity. Her self is not in opposition to her role; her role has become the self.

Deshpande highlights this tension again when Vasant asks her to get involved in Sushama's women's rights initiative. She declines, saying, "Oh, I'm all right as I am. After all, I'm a good housewife now." She means it — and yet the declaration silences the conversation. Hema isn't being ironic; she has become reconciled with her displacement. Benjamin critiques this psychic trade-off: "The 'sexy' woman... is sexy, but as object, not as subject. She expresses not so much her desire as her pleasure in being desired" (75).

Hema no longer exists through desire; she exists through utility — as provider, mother, caretaker. Benjamin insists that "recognition of the other is the decisive aspect of differentiation" (105–6), yet in this marriage, recognition is unilateral. Vasant's needs and professional fulfilment take precedence, while Hema learns to perform peace. When he later suggests she get involved in activism, she deflects with a practiced indifference. As Benjamin writes, "submission becomes the 'pure' form of recognition" (67). Hema is recognized when she agrees, when she supports, when she effaces. Any resistance, even in the form of potential self-expression, is met with confusion or silence.

Throughout the story, there are fragments of memory and longing that reveal what Hema has surrendered. "I am surprised by a fierce surge of longing to be one of those women who carry their work about with them—a writer, a painter, a musician…" (Deshpande 121). It is

not that she has forgotten her past self, but that she can no longer see a future where it is relevant. Benjamin underscores the cultural arrangement that facilitates this erasure: "The sexual difference was already interpreted in terms of complementary and unequal roles, subject and object" (74). Hema is positioned not as an equal participant in her marriage, but as the reliable background — the one who stays. The story closes as it begins: with a wall. But now the metaphor is full. "Five rows of barbed wire. And only then I understand Sitabai's words" (Deshpande 121). It is the slow understanding that security can be a disguise for containment.

In Shashi Deshpande's short story "Death of a Child," a woman's emotions are in direct conflict with social scripts of motherhood, desire, and morality. The decision to terminate a pregnancy appears overtly simple at first glance, but becomes a multifaceted psychological struggle against guilt, loss and socially-imposed submission. Jessica Benjamin's notion of submission as desire in The Bonds of Love offers an enlightening analytic framework for comprehending this story's tragic and unresolved feel. It is not just about a woman making a choice in regard to reproduction; it is about a struggle for subjectivity in a relationship schema that defines woman through sacrifice and motherhood.

Early in the story, the narrator articulates a bodily awareness that is met with dismissal: "'You can't be sure,' he says. 'Not so soon, anyway'" (Deshpande 43). The man's disbelief in her embodied knowledge reveals a deeper structure of disbelief that permeates relational power. Benjamin points out that "power holds good not by denying our desire but by forming it, converting it into a willing retainer, its servant or representative" (Benjamin 2).

The woman's insistence on her knowledge is not merely factual; it is a bid for recognition. Yet the man redirects the conversation toward his authority, his logic, and the neutral word "manage," a term which the narrator recoils from: "An angry exclamation is wrenched out of me at the word. Manage! Good God! What a weak, what an ineffectual word!" (Deshpande 44). This moment enacts what Benjamin observes as the psycho-social conditioning of feminine submission: "Obedience, of course, does not exorcise aggression; it merely directs it against the self" (Benjamin 2). The narrator's rage is palpable, but as her decision matures, the rage internalizes.

Her autonomy is strained by guilt, despite the rational and even legal justification for her action. She says, "Marriage, childbirth destroy something in a woman. A reserve. A secretiveness. An innocence" (Deshpande 46). The loss she articulates is not only physical, but symbolic—submission enacted over time undercuts the very notion of a self capable of independent desire.

As Benjamin notes, this is a culturally embedded form of submission: "The contemporary consciousness of women's subjugation has profoundly challenged the

acceptance of authority that permeates psychoanalytic thinking" (Benjamin 4). Deshpande's character challenges that authority not through rebellion, but through the painful awareness of her own conditioning. Her internal conflict emerges most poignantly after the abortion, when she experiences a phantom sensation: "Now, like a phantom limb, my child seems to cling on to me. Now, when he does not exist, he asserts himself" (Deshpande 50).

The guilt is not imposed solely from outside but from a culturally cultivated inner voice. Benjamin writes that "woman's sexual agency is often inhibited and her desire is often expressed by choosing subordination" (Benjamin 75). In Deshpande's protagonist, this inhibition takes the form of grief weaponized against the self. She writes, "I swing, like a monstrous pendulum, between grief, guilt and shame. Guilt conquers. I welcome it and shoulder the burden with a masochistic fervour" (Deshpande 50).

This "masochistic fervour" reflects Benjamin's concept of the feminine subject constructed through submission and sacrifice. "For Freud," she explains, "woman's renunciation of sexual agency and her acceptance of object status are the very hallmark of the feminine" (Benjamin 73). Although Deshpande's character actively chooses to terminate her pregnancy, her internalization of guilt—her very sense of failure—derives from having deviated from this prescribed role. She becomes subject to a psychic structure where love, morality, and guilt converge in the form of maternal duty.

Even her momentary empowerment is fleeting. She recalls the scene in the hospital: "I lie on the examination table, in that undignified, humiliating position, a wanton attitude almost, without a second thought" (Deshpande 46). Her passivity in this moment reflects Benjamin's theory that the feminine is "not the subject of her own desire. Her power may include control over others, but not over her own destiny" (Benjamin 74). The protagonist has acted on her will, yet she is framed as a body—visible, vulnerable, but not sovereign.

In Shashi Deshpande's "An Antidote to Boredom" the narrative opens with the wife in a symbolic act of servitude Her flight into imagination—walking on hands with coffee on her feet—is not merely whimsical, but a manifestation of her buried desire to be recognized, to be seen. As Benjamin articulates, the traditional female role is "not the subject of her own desire," for "her power may include control over others, but not over her own destiny" (Benjamin 74).

Indeed, her husband is defined by dullness and indifference. He "would do nothing, because he would notice nothing but that he had been served his coffee" (Deshpande 61). This absence of recognition becomes a form of erasure—an emotional non-being—which Benjamin identifies as central to the psychic domination of women. She writes that "the sexual difference was already interpreted in terms of complementary and unequal roles, subject and object" (Benjamin 74).

Here, the wife plays the object, the muted domestic figure whose existence is structured to support the subjectivity of her husband. But Deshpande's protagonist begins to reassert subjectivity through an affair—a relationship that introduces the very intersubjectivity that Benjamin calls essential for psychological liberation: "experience between and within individuals... where not only man but also woman can be subject" (Benjamin 105). In contrast to her husband, "no nuance of my expression ever escaped him," the other man who truly sees her, asks, "Why are you smiling?" and listens with laughter, amusement, and intimacy. (Deshpande 61)

This difference is radical: recognition becomes mutual, and desire is no longer unilateral. In this bond, she stores up stories "to tell him, the other," and finds emotional stimulation in even trivial interactions. Their world is not built on sexual consummation but emotional resonance—"we could talk of anything, nothing was too trivial or too intense for us" (Deshpande 62).

Benjamin urges a shift "from the object of desire... to the subject, she who desires" (Benjamin 73), and Deshpande's narrator exemplifies this transformation, not through rebellion but through rediscovered selfhood. Crucially, the protagonist's withdrawal from her marriage stems not from cruelty or abuse but from spiritual starvation. Her husband is "not a wicked man, not harsh nor cruel. Only unperceptive. And dull. And dullness is to me an unforgivable crime". (Deshpande 66)

This reflects Benjamin's assertion that "woman does not have the freedom to do as she wills; she is not the subject of her own desire" (Benjamin 74). What appears to be passivity is actually systemic negation of her erotic agency. The narrator reflects on this estrangement: "There was not one sari with associations... not one sari that was special to me because of something we had done together, something he had said to me". In contrast, the other man's remark— "I love you in blue"—transforms her shopping, her self-perception, even her reflection in the mirror. (Deshpande 64)

Benjamin recognizes this as critical: "woman's sexual subjectivity is expressed through her body… we are talking about representation" (Benjamin 104). Her sari becomes a vehicle of subjectivity—not through commodification but through meaningful attachment. Deshpande also implicates motherhood in this emotional entrapment. The protagonist confesses, "It was because of our boys that we had met at all" (Deshpande 62). Yet the surviving son, Rahul, remains peripheral, passive, unable to bridge the emotional gulf in the family. Benjamin observes that "mothers are more likely to be found quieting, soothing, nursing, stabilizing, containing, and holding" (Benjamin 86).

This nurturing becomes invisible labour, unacknowledged and de-eroticized. Despite this emotional bond, the protagonist hesitates to take the relationship forward. She fears the aftermath: "I would never be the same again... I would sit in my own home feeling an

interloper... making me feel a criminal" (Deshpande 65). Benjamin notes, "woman's sexual agency is often inhibited and her desire... expressed by choosing subordination" (Benjamin 75). Internalized guilt, social surveillance, and maternal responsibility combine to thwart her emergence as a desiring subject.

Even at the story's climax, when escape becomes possible, she retreats. Her husband's sudden perceptiveness— "'If I were you, I would make it this time.'... I saw a dull, red light flicker in his eyes" (Deshpande 68)—forces her reckoning. The weight of his recognition—too late, too controlling—collapses her constructed world. She mourns what is lost: "I realized, when it was too late, the most piercing thought of all—that it had been no mere antidote to boredom, but the best part of my life" (Deshpande 69).

In Benjamin's terms, the protagonist experiences what mutual recognition could be—where "different minds and bodies attune" (Benjamin 106)—but ultimately defaults to the familiar silence of domination. Deshpande does not vilify her; rather, she reveals the violence of social scripts where even emotional liberation becomes too costly. The wife returns to her home, her child, and her husband—not as a subject, but once more, an object in a house filled with "dull barren silences".

Conclusion

Deshpande's short stories reveal a consistent pattern of female objectification across different roles—mother, wife, sexual partner. Each protagonist faces moments of realization about her object status, yet most retreat from transformation due to internalized guilt, cultural expectations, and relational dependency. Jessica Benjamin's theory provides a powerful lens to understand this inner submission, where women's desires are shaped to serve male needs or family roles. Recognition—of themselves, by others, and as subjects—is a longing that rarely finds fulfilment. Emotional labour, sexual passivity, and routine utility become not only expected behaviours but markers of feminine worth. In these narratives, Deshpande reveals that liberation is not merely about rebellion, but about the psychological violence of being reduced to an object—visible, necessary, but voiceless.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Jessica. The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination. Pantheon Books, 1988.

Deshpande, Shashi. The Intrusion and Other Stories. Penguin Books, 1993.