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THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN – A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE’S "MOVING ON"

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande has many faces. At intellectual discussions, she champions the cause of English as an Indian language, and fights for the recognition of women as individuals. She speaks her truth gently but firmly, her words lingering, long after her exit. The present paper projects the plight of woman in Shashi Deshpande’s *Moving On*, who speaking for herself or for the whole of womankind is quite different from a man telling a woman’s tale. Also it brings out the idea of woman explicating herself and emerging out of the cocoon of self pity to spread her wings of self-confidence. Shashi Deshpande’s novels present a social world of many complex relationships. Women’s understanding becomes questionable as the old patterns of behavior no longer seem to be acceptable. These struggles become in tense of quests for self-definition, because it would not be possible to relate to others with any degree of conviction unless one is guided by clarity about one’s own image and role.

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INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande an eminent novelist has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focusing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the man-made patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them. Shashi Deshpande uses this point of view of present social reality as at is experienced by women. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives is also to present indirectly the fathers, sons and husbands the relation between men and women, and between women themselves. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. The words which we always associate with what we consider to be the concept of an ideal

woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion and silent suffering. *Moving On* is a story that begins, conventionally enough, with a woman’s discovery of her father’s diary. As Manjiri, Unlocks the past through its pages rescuing old memories and recasting events and responses, the present makes its own demands: a rebellious daughter, devious property sharks and a lover who threatens to throw her life out of fear again. The ensuing struggle to reconcile nostalgia with reality and the fire of the body with the desire for companionship races to an unexpected resolution, twisting and turning through complex emotional landscapes with her uncanny insight into the nature of human relationship and an equally unerring eye for detail. Deshpande ventures further than she ever has the terrain of the mind, teasing out the nuances and exploding the stereotypes of familial bonds.

Discussion

Shashi Deshpande's latest novel, *Moving On* was released in Hyderabad. *Moving On* is, in many ways, a departure from Deshpande's earlier novels. Here she ventures even deeper into the territory of the mind, dismantling our comfortable notions about the relationships within families. The two voices, distinct and separate, are those of Manjari, the narrator, and Baba, her father. The past is unraveled through Baba's diary that Manjari finds after his death. As Manjari grapples with a challenging present, she reviews the events of the past in the retrospective light of Baba's self-disclosures.

Baba and his sister Gayathri lead a normal life even after the death of their mother. But the striking contrast is that, when their beloved partners pass away, Baba gives up so completely while Gayathri manages to keep going. She is stronger and more resilient and her goodness never lets her connections to other humans die out, she keeps them intact and alive. She leads a meaningful life by helping others. She is blessed with a clarity of vision as Baba puts that she is the pillar of their family and without her their family would have lost its centre and its source of light.

The other representative of the same generation is Mai - the centre of their picture perfect family tightly bonded together. She is the sun around whom the three of them, Baba, Malu and Jiji revolve. Baba is always more articulate whereas Mai's words, her smiles and her laughter are measured out with care and precision. Even Mai's brief visit to her mother leaves the other three in a state of suspended living. Vasu Narayan - their amchi mai writes of women in women magazines. She writes of gracious old families, silent sacrificing women, of family togetherness. An independent woman who hates being questioned, Mai writes of women, who finds happiness in submission, not only to their husbands but to their families as well. In reality what she values most is "freedom, freedom to be by herself, to be on her own, freedom from our constant demands on her, from our claims, from the need to be Amchi Mai", (MO 125) observes Jiji.

She outsmarts others, when she deftly handles Malu's unwed pregnancy and childbirth,

without betraying the reputation of the family by open grumblings which proves her stoic and well-balanced nature. Mai never shares Baba's delight in the physical pleasures of life and in his belief in the perfection of the body. But without any verbal opposition, she gives vent to her suppressed emotion by writing to women's magazines. She is silently assertive in overcoming certain shortcomings without breaking the boundaries of a family.

Jiji, the main focus of the novel, is stern in her attitude in all matters. She asserts herself in marrying Shyam, which leads to the disintegration of the family. Even, when they struggle to eke out a living, Jiji hides away her hardships to her parents, never accepting her defeat. During Jiji's utter desperations after Shyam's untimely demise, it is Roshan her boss who makes Jiji get a degree, takes her out of her apathy and hopelessness. She is the "one who brings, grace and hope back into my life" (MO 223) acknowledges Jiji. This kind of a female bonding, the novelist feels, is essential to pull on. Jiji permits Raja, her childhood pal, play a protector amidst the threatening phone calls demanding the sale of the house. But she rejects his unerring marriage proposal saying "Never again, I'm never going to get into, that situation again, staking everything my life and my future, on one relationship, on one person" (MO 82).

While Deshpande confesses she worked hard to give Baba and Manjari their individual voices, she emphasizes the futility of segregating past and present. *Moving on* is a beautiful example of the wide encompassing of memory as it renders the real fluid, unstable and multiple. Projection into another's reality is an act of empathy and reaching across. If Meher Pestonji opens out the slums for Pervez, Rupa Bajwa walks across to a male protagonist from a lower urban class, through Ramchand, a sari salesman in the Sari Shop, a move which allows her to debate issues like education, class, capitalism and culture. The novel also reveals the secret lives of men and women who love, hate, plot and debate.

A father who delights in the human body, its mysteries, its passion, and the knowledge that it contains and conceals. A mother who wields the power of her love mercilessly. A sister separated in

childhood. An uncle who plays games of life and death as a member of the Bombay underworld. A passionate love affair that tears the family apart. And a young woman left to make sense of the world and of her own sexuality.

Deshpande's novels, featuring female protagonists, reconstruct aspects of women's experience and attempt to give voice to 'muted' ideologies, registering resistance and on her own admission, in her novels she charts, "the inner landscapes of women,"(6) where she provides her women characters a context to understand themselves. Deshpande consistently explores the nature of the female world and reconstructs the suppressed records of female experience. She constructs contexts, representing different facets of the trapped female psyche, and attempts to transcend its boundaries. These narratives function as modes of women's experience underlining its resistance and simultaneously subverting it, which opens up a space where the, "marginal comes into being and retains its difference" (7).

Shashi Deshpande's novel *Moving On* also projects the protagonist Manjari as a woman who resists the patriarchal ideology and tries to live her life on her own terms. She displays enormous courage and steadfastness in her decision to give up studying medicine to marry Shyam, and again during such trying moments when it is revealed that her sister Malu is made pregnant by her husband. When Malu dies after giving birth to Sachi, followed by Shyam's suicide, Manjari faces a painful period of struggle and strain. Estranged from family, she grapples with innumerable difficulties to support herself and to survive with her baby son. She turns down Raja's repeated proposals to marry him because she thinks that marriage without the foundation of love and only as a means of social security for a single woman is not acceptable to her.

Manjari shocks Raja, the upholder of patriarchal norms, by learning to drive her car and even trying to run it as a taxi, by installing and operating a computer at home and typing out manuscripts for others as a means of self-employment. When she is threatened by the mafia underworld and subject her to psychological pressure, and then, coerce her to sell out her

ancestral home, Manjari disapproves Raja's role of the protecting male in her life saying: "I want the brakes under my feet, and not someone else's. I don't want a dual control, the control should be mine, mine alone."(8) And later she dismisses the driver, telling him, "I'm quite capable of looking after myself."(9) Manjari's struggle for freedom and for being autonomous is theoretically a challenge to patriarchy, not confronting it headlong but in discovering one's own strength as a woman. Manjari's is the narrative voice as she journeys twice-over the same ground, first as traveler then as a distant recollector putting the pieces together bit by bit. It is here that the several folds of reality are unfolded as the narrative shifts through the different layers –the visible, the real, the hidden undercurrents of the real --which once they surface alter the perception of those events.

Moving On has all the elements of a detective story as clues from the past and voices from the inner consciousness come together. A married home comes into being not merely as a branching off but by disrupting the continuity of the parental family. There is resentment, homesickness, replacement. At one point in the novel, Manjari reflects that the difference between fission and fusion is immense; it is the difference between harmony and chaos.

During the survey of her novels various aspects and various dimensions of familial relationships emerge, there are mother daughter, father-daughter, brother-sister relationship with in-laws, but the much focused one is husband-wife relationship which is the foundation and base of family from where many new relations start taking shape and develop. The joint family of character is full of many more relationships unclean both paternal and maternal, their children and relation with them, the grand children's relation with their grandparents etc. But these relationships have been portrayed in a very realistic and transparent way, not always happy but full of sadness too. A family, has to live both with sorrow and happiness because it is inevitable, nobody can escape it and what kind of impact it leaves in the individual and his/her further life.

Shashi Deshpande's writings hold a universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India - a society in which we breathe and a culture to which we belong. At the Taj Krishna where her novel *Moving On* was launched, the writer shared her feelings and perceptions with astuteness and creativity. With her uncanny insights into the nature of human relationships and an equally unerring eye for detail, Deshpande in this novel, ventures further than she ever has into the terrain of the mind, teasing out the nuances and exploding the structure of familial bonds. "A novel in two voices, *Moving On* was like an unexpected pregnancy. And like a late child it is filled with surprise."

Deshpande's novels are specific, modernizing women even in their traditional milieu. Critics have said that *Moving On* will widen women's space. This is remarkable for this one time homemaker whose demeanor hardly betrays her strong convictions. This novel raise significant issues about the nature of reality, which is never of the same kind. Writers have been criticized for their preoccupation with the real, and the unstated assumption is that creativity has to take us into higher zones of imagination. But the fictional world takes in many realms. Even as it works with history, memory and the past, even as it shapes nostalgia into a narrative, or projects the world into future time, it works with 'reality' and uses it in different ways such as experiential narratives, detailed description of landscapes, recreating visual memories reflecting concern with environment, coalescing several events together and integrating them, psychological realism which works with human emotions and responses, and at some point it also shifts into fantasy and other imaginary constructs, which do not fall into magic realism. Recurring dreams, psychological fears, even memory, which by its nature is selective and differently perceived by different people, are real enough in themselves, but nevertheless they disrupt the realistic narrative.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels, we can find the variety of characters too. In Deshpande's literary world there are characters taken from almost all the sections of life. They are medical practitioners and

writers, educated housewives, uneducated ones and maidservants. Besides poverty, bereavement and such other common adversities, there are some causes of suffering exclusively for the female. Deshpande renders with sympathetic understanding the variety of suffering a woman has to undergo. Sometimes the suffering is attached to the social taboos, and sometimes the women are silenced in the name of family honor, and are compelled to digest torture.

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande has presented in her novels modern Indian women's search for these definition about the self and society and the relationship that are central to women. Shashi Deshpande's novel deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence. The Indian woman has for years been a silent sufferer. While she has played different roles-as a wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner. Through myth and modernity, Shashi Deshpande has held her own, proving an icon to younger writers. With tremendous feeling, she pleads: "You've got to read women's writing differently. If you're going to say this is only a story about a kitchen, and belittle it for that, that's stupid. It's about a human being trying to place herself within relationships, people, and ideas."

In her conversation with Gita Viswanath, Shashi Deshpande opines, "we are shaped by our childhood and our parents"(10). Deshpande bares the subtle processes of oppression and gender differentiation operative within the institution of the family and the male-centered Indian society at large. Deshpande's feminism does not uproot the woman from her background but tries to expose the different ideological elements that shape her. These include social and psychological factors such as, woman's subordinate position in the family and her restricted sexuality. The author seeks to expose the

ideology by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in society. Her novels eclectically imply the postmodern technique of deconstructing patriarchal culture and customs, and reveal these to be man-made constructs.

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