Mother and Daughter Relationship in Shashi Deshpande’s Selected Short Stories

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Abstract: Shashi Deshpande's short stories present a sensitive portrayal of Indian Womanhood without ever seeming to be defensive about it. Her work passionately concentrates on the predicament of women. Men are pushed towards the periphery. Her plots and subplots provide a pointer to the catatonic status of women in the tradition bound male dominated middle class society of contemporary India in which they are struggling to overcome the constricting dilemmas of prefixed definitions and pre-set norms, and thus attempting to redefine their status. The Study examines the mother and daughter relationship and the influence of the mothers and the bond that exists between mother and daughter.

Key words: anguish, cordial relationship, patriarchy, oppression, feminine destiny

The word "Woman" carries a pejorative connotation; it is loaded with the weight of insignificance. And therefore, even the honest articulation of painful, joyous or meaningful experience by a woman becomes just a "Woman's experience". Therefore, stories that transform experiences into excellent art never get beyond being women's stories. Woman's writing has become a category which is separated from the rest of literature, and women writers are always spoken of in the context of other women writers, never writers in general.

The self — realization of women characters occurs from within the domestic sphere. Everything connected with the home and family is domestic and hence considered trivial. They come into the category of insignificant things. In fact everything connected with women gets downsized. This is because of the very deeply ingrained belief, that women have their separate place. Sometimes we are told that it is a special place, nevertheless the fact remains that it is different.

The main focus is the modern Indian woman, struggling desperately and yet fortitudiously, for freedom and recognition, and suffering the pangs of shame, guilt and remorse in the struggle.

The anguish of the mother for the daughter is quite clear in Shashi Deshpande's stories. Shashi Deshpande's writings are concerned with the conditions prevailing in the present society and share the feelings with those conditions naturally.

Shashi Deshpande's work originates from women's encounter with self. The loneliness, the emptiness, the determinism of woman's life are poignantly revealed through different stories like The Liberated Woman, The Rain, My Beloved Charioteer and Why a Robin.

The negation of the self does not lead to happiness, in Shashi Deshpande's stories.

Mothers and Mother figures are not the matriarchs to reckon with, but suffocating 'shadows' to be shunned, "The mother is the first pedagogue of the do's and don'ts" ¹ is viewed by the new women. All the protagonists move towards 'autonomy'. The present chapter deals with the study of the parents especially mother — daughter — & granddaughter relations to see how the three generations react to each other and with what results. The women are middle class, educated, career conscious and proud of their independent views. As against their rebellious non — conformist consciousness, the traditional mother appears stereotype, oppressed and weak. The gap between the mother — daughter relationship is not allowed to be paved, nor does it ever narrow down in all her stories. The author, in order to elevate mothers, consciously lets her heroines ponder over the "Power" their mothers or grandmothers "Wield over their families", ² but these authorial intrusions don't help redeem the picture. The mothers are isolated figures, working within their limited preview. They are dominated by their men — folk, harassed by their in — laws and misunderstood by their daughters. This is the first and second generation tussle.

¹ The mother is the first pedagogue of the do's and don'ts
² The mother is the first pedagogue of the do's and don'ts
Indeed, Shashi Deshpande's chief thematic concern is with "woman's struggle, in the contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother, and most of all as human being," and 'the operative sensibility in her stories is distinctly female and modern." ³

*Why a Robin* is the story of a mother who is isolated from her husband and her only daughter, because of her innocence and ignorance, she is "foolish", "stupid", "inarticulate", and "dull and brown" in their presence and feels that she has "lost, misplaced so many things" in her life. She longs for a better and close relationship with her daughter. When her daughter wants to write an essay on a Robin, she is not able to help her. But she volunteers to help her to write one on Peacock, which the daughter does not want. The mother thinks,

"I am a failure .................. as a wife. .......................... mother." ⁴

At the same time, there is a perfect understanding between the father and the daughter, and the mother feels estranged from this. However, the situation changes dramatically bringing mother and the daughter close to each other when the daughter, on reaching the brink of womanhood, seeks comfort in mother's company. The mother allays her fears:

"I talk to her gently, trying to make her feel it is natural, a part of growing up, something to be welcomed, accepted. " ⁵

It is the daughter's attainment of puberty that ends her unnatural estrangement from her mother, who has had to suppress her maternal instincts. The mutual comfort lies in mutual understanding and help. The girl's father caters to her intellectual needs but her mother to her psychological needs. Thus it is a family which overcomes the feelings of loneliness and boredom through mutual cooperation.

*Why a Robin* ends on a positive note of reconciliation between mother and daughter. The woman strives to overcome her feelings of inadequacy and failure in front of her brilliant and willful daughter and gains confidence after ridding herself of her fragile obsessions. With the realization that bridges have to be built she escapes the alienation and loneliness, and begins to take pride in her mother hood.

A different perspective on this situation is seen in *My Beloved Charioteer*⁶ which is a study of the relationship of an old lady with her widowed daughter and her grandchild. The old lady and the child feel at home in each other's company but the daughter remains a sort of alien. The old lady tries to establish a cordial relationship with her daughter in order to shake her out of her stupor caused by the death of her husband. But the daughter takes refuge in her father's room. She is unable to bear isolation from her daughter, makes an attempt to communicate with her grown — up yet immature daughter by confrontimg her with the reality of her own situation

"He was your father….but what was he of mine?"

"I lived with him for 25 years." ⁷

The disclosing of the oppression she has experienced throughout her life opens her daughter's eyes to the true character of her father which results in the reconciliation of the daughter with her mother. The realization that it is the inescapable "feminine destiny" to suffer secretly for the sake of material and moral security, which seems to be a continuation of the situation dealt with in *Why a Robin*, but from a different perspective. Both the stories suggest the strong influence of a dominating father upon a growing daughter.

Shashi Deshpande herself explains:

"I have been able to feel more for a house — wife, who is most devoted .... Women so do not go out to work, who are literally trapped.." ⁸

It is necessary for the women characters to live "Within relationships." Hence it is their compromising attitude that sentences women characters to a life time of repression in Shashi Deshpande's stories.

A classic case charged with irony is that of the mother *Death of a child* who, weighed down by the weariness of life, impulsively get rid of her baby the third in four years, before it is born only to feel an acute sense of less caused by her own willful action.

The protagonist in *Death of a child* and her husband has sharp differences with each other on the issue of the termination of the pregnancy. The story has a dramatic opening,

"How does a woman know she has conceived?" ⁹
The protagonist's husband adds:

"You women have a phobia about Pregnancy" 10

Shashi Deshpande suggests subtly that men are outsiders to the feminine experiences of women and that they have no business to speak on their behalf. She reiterates it by saying:

"To a father an unborn child rarely has the same reality that it has to the mother who harbours it.

Perhaps, like any other Hindu male, he wants another son." 11

Shashi Deshpande indicts not only patriarchy but also the religion which in their combined strength try to marginalize women in every possible way.

The Protagonist in this story is not passive like her counterpart in The Intrusion, but she is articulate and committed to her course of action, abortion, despite her husband's stiff opposition to it. She asserts,

"I cannot imagine that the main purpose of my life is to breed."12

Initially, she considers her life to be a "tangle". She feels that marriage destroys the "reserve", the "Secretiveness" and the "innocence" of a woman. She wants to preserve at least some part of her self and her life. But after the portion has taken place, she wails:

"I feel a heaviness in my own breasts. There is a hallow feeling within me . . . I am conscious of a piercing pain in the place he had filled. Grief becomes real ... I feel that the ghost of my dead child walks with me." 13

Obviously, she had loved her unborn child and feels guilty of having sacrificed its life for avoiding the pain involved in bringing it up.

Shashi Deshpande takes a revolutionary stand against the conventional norms of child bearing and motherhood. Her truthful projection of the facts directs the reader to believe that both the partners should accept the responsibility of creation and shoulder the ensuing complications. In this story, Deshpande analyses the problem that had disturbed Sita, the protagonist of Anita Desai in Where Shall We Go This Summer? The question that was raised is: should an unwanted child be brought into this cruel world? Sethe, the female protagonist in Toni Morrison's Beloved kills her daughter to save her child's future honour and liberty. In all these artistic endeavours many questions are articulated:

"Do the mothers have the liberty of womb?" 14

Why should a woman be made to feel guilty if she decides to deconstruct the stereotyped image of a mother to protect her identity and the welfare of her unborn child?

Deshpande "demaximizes" a mother, the eternal breeder and one who nourishes, and ultimately emphasizes the mother — child bonding. The mother of this story had already played her role satisfactorily by having two children and nourishing them with love and care. It is definitely not 'selfish' lo reserve something for herself. By asserting a woman's right to be an individual, the protagonists affirms her self —hood and rejects the definition A mother — hood pronounced by the men for their convenience. The mother's role in It was Dark presents the picture of a strong woman who to ensure her daughter's welfare, forsakes the conventional attitudes regarding the problem of rape. The daughter despite the knowledge of biology is sexually abused. The father condemns the mother for not teaching the girl about the lurking dangers round the corner. The mother had her own reasons. Since she was always told as a girl, "Don't — don't — don't -You're female," she had decided, "I won't let my daughter live behind walls" and also because one had to break all the 'walls' once a girl was married. The traumatic experience turns the girl into stone, she continues to live without seeing anything. The mother as a constructive force reacts against the conventional morality; her commitment to the new thought is endorsed when she pulls back the curtain and "Sunlight poured into the room." Symbolically she refuses to submit before the dark forces of conventional morality that is destructive and is instrumental in marginalizing a woman, that is her daughter. By sheer determination she brings her daughter back to the central position of life from the periphery. In the absence of her help,
the daughter would have been doomed to eternal marginality. Deshpande's women neither practice immortality nor are very rigid about inadvertent lapses. They have learned to fight against oppression at least for their daughter's sake, despite the cheap manipulations of the andocentric culture that constantly wishes to dehumanize women- mother or daughter. Deshpande portrays sensitively the agony of the mother; the anguish of the father and the trauma of the girl. She uses the strategy of "Silence" as a powerful medium to reconstruct the entire episode — how the girl walks into the trap of an offender.

In spite of all the paradigms of patriarchy and the world of violence to which women and their bodies are prone, there is a ray of hope. Shashi Deshpande demonstrates successfully and convincingly the sources of traps and violence awaiting women at various stages of their existence and also suggests ways and means to possibly overcome them through courage and confidence.

Thus in Shashi Deshpande's stories, the implications of being a mother and having a mother are quite different. As a mother, the woman is expected to make all types of sacrifices for others. She is the proverbial milk cow but Deshpande deliberately alters the perspectives to reveal implicitly that despite the limiting circumstances the mother can make a successful attempt to rise above serfdom. The same suffering mother can turn into a tyrant and oppress other women when he becomes old.

Deshpande is realistic and unromantic in her evaluation of the institution of marriage and a woman's role in child bearing. Women, the inhabitants of the fourth world, have been tutored to believe that to be a wife and a mother are her means of ultimate salvation and fulfillment. The mother image is revered all over the world but she is not a true partner in the act of procreation. She is a slave to be acted upon, meant to satisfy the physical appetite of the masters. Woman here is presented to us in all her roles, but mainly as a mother, a wife and a beloved. Her stories are seized with the problem of 'Violence' on women both at physical and Psychological levels.

Works Cited
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