

## A PORTRAYAL OF DIFFERENT SHADES OF RELATIONSHIP IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *MOVING ON*

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### ABSTRACT

*Human relations are enormously complex in nature. They not only tend to operate on different levels, but it is through them that the entire persona of the individual is manifested and reflected. Shashi Deshpande being an illustrious and distinguished novelist writing in English conjures up numerous and distinct shades of relationship in almost all her novels. Her characters come from different walks of life and present a diverse panorama comprising the different shades and hues. It is through these relationships that her protagonists grow and manifest themselves in the face of threats and challenges in the world. Deshpande's novels display a whole range of characters that go on stultifying the rituals and traditions which thwart the very existence of women in our society. This short paper is an attempt to trace the struggle of the protagonist, Manjari, in the novel *Moving On* to free herself from the smothering and stifling constraints in order to admire and embrace a spontaneous celebration of life. It will also take into consideration how in order to bring out the meaningful definitions, life yields self-knowledge which imparts strength, fortitude and wisdom to her to confront the challenges that life throws up.*

**Key Words:** *Meaningful, Smothering, Stifling, Persona, Panorama*

Shashi Deshpande being an illustrious and distinguished novelist writing in English conjures up numerous and distinct shades of relationship in almost all her novels. Her characters come from different the walks of life and present a colourful panorama of different shades and hues. Her novels depict the possibilities of exploring changes within oneself. Her women protagonists are always willing and receptive for redefining attitudes and relationships. Shorn of undue romantic embellishments, they want to free themselves from the stultifying traditional concerns and cherish a spontaneous surge towards life. The spontaneity of life arrives only with a cessation of over-eager planning and openness to change - the commonality of this motif is discernible in almost all her novels. From Sara of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) to Madhu of *Small Remedies* (2000) or to Manjari of *Moving On* (2004), one can trace the struggle of a woman protagonist to eke out a meaningful definition of her life, to free her from the smothering and stifling social constraints and to admire and embrace a spontaneous celebration of life. Though in her essay "Masks and Disguises", Deshpande has advocated a "slant" in writing,<sup>1</sup> her own directness seems to be palpable in her thematic handling as she vociferously puts forth the private truth about what women want. It

can also be pointed out that her span is limited and like Jane Austen she works on her two inches of ivory constantly redefining and enriching it. No doubt, women feel their emotions strongly, yet they retain a constant value judgement about themselves as well as about other relationships they have to live through. Though they belong to conventional middle class families, they do possess an inner independence to experiment with their lives. In the process, life yields self-knowledge which imparts them the strength of accepting that a woman's desire to succeed like an individual is not incompatible with her desire for love or small pleasures of domesticity and relationships within/outside marital frame. In *Moving On* also, she has taken up the theme of problematic relationships ("the inability or refusal of people to communicate with each other, as marriage partners, parents, friends and lovers, is underlined by the intricately meshed structure of the novel"<sup>2</sup>), as well as of the certainty of change. Manjari, in the novel, comments that she could not have survived if she had not changed. Portions of *Moving On* in which she has touched upon the underworld through the portrayal of Manjari's uncle Lakshman Mama remind us of the earlier novels of Deshpande *If I die Today* (1982) and *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983). The theme of the existence/acceptance of a parallel criminal world is unequivocally peripheral though; Deshpande has skilfully riveted the readers' attention to the central theme of the crisis of maintaining balance in relationships. "An identity becomes active, positive and meaningful only in relation to others. The whole potential of who we are and what we are is realised only through our relationship with others."<sup>3</sup>The story line begins with Manjari's attempts to know about her parents not as figures she had created in her childhood as pacifiers and comforters she could hug for security, but as real individuals. Simultaneously, her hesitations about the impossibility of ever scrutinising fully any individual also become apparent. "But can there be any one truth about people? People are complex, undecipherable and protean- there is no absolute about them".<sup>4</sup>

In her several novels, Deshpande has taken up the theme of parent-child relationship. Her portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship can be interestingly juxtaposed against the portrayal of father-daughter relationship. Never eschewing the contemporary context, Deshpande has shown how girls have to put up with victimisation from their own mothers and get condemned to a life of bitterness (*The Dark Holds No Terrors, Small Remedies*). Her portrayal of father-daughter relationship on the other hand is sensitive and beautiful. *Come up and Be Dead, That Long Silence, Small Remedies* and *Moving On* present a sensitive closeness between the father and the daughter which imparts tenderness to the themes. Manjari is close to her father. In 'Family Stories', chapter three of the novel, Deshpande presents beautiful pictures of companionship and dependence Manjari has shared with her father in her childhood. She feels effervescent joy in the company of her father. After a long gap of estrangement with her family, Manjari comes to stay with her father during the last few moments of his life. His chemo sessions become the point around which the cycle of their days revolve. Life has changed Manjari during these years. From a lanky teenager who needed everybody's approval and was willing to do anything to please others, she has changed into an assertive middle-aged person who had to struggle hard to raise her children. She has learnt to be clear about her needs also. Gradually, however a routine builds up only to be crumbled soon. Baba's death leaves emptiness within her compelling her to review the life her parents had led as

individuals. In the process, it also enables to re-identify her own self and place her relationships with her parents, others and self in a better perspective.

The woman writer's struggles to get published and be accepted and her concerns about the limitations of her craft is again a common phenomenon in Deshpande's novels. Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Madhu in *Small Remedies* are some examples. In *Moving On* also, we have Mai as a writer, "if she recognised her own talent, she also knew her limitations, her ability to write only a particular kind of story. Which she did, ensuring herself a steady readership".<sup>5</sup> Like the women authors in Deshpande's other novels, Mai also does not take her writing ostentatiously. Manjari recalls, "She never, as far as I know, publicly proclaimed herself a writer. It was a kind of secret business, an activity she did in private, something no one in the family ever spoke of".<sup>6</sup> She is shown as a prolific and popular fiction writer, creating images of happy romance, large families and satisfaction of living through conventional roles. One of her stories is converted into a movie also. Her behaviour, though, is dictated by the conventional gender stereotypes. She is always meticulous to give her husband a paramount place in the house muttering "Annadatasukhibhava" after every meal. In her essay "Masks and Disguises", Deshpande has talked about the disguises the women authors normally take up. One of the disguises which Deshpande's own mother had taken up proudly was to keep nothing of herself in her writing. Making a cipher of herself is also the justification Mai has taken up for an activity which she regarded perhaps not only as being outside her domain, but worse, something that could be called selfish and self-indulgent. Thinking of Mai, Manjari always comes up against 'a blank wall, and enigmatic silence', and wonders how she could manage the professionalism of sending her stories before the magazines' deadline. Through the readings of her father's diaries, Manjari for the first time comes face to face with the writer self of her mother, and also comes to know of her sexual frigidity, her abhorrence for the naked flesh. Her mother was incapable of responding to her husband's sexual passions, and therefore found Manjari a complete mystery when she so desperately wanted Shyam. Insights gained from her forages into the past of her parents' life help Manjari to better understand the enigma of her own unfathomable self and creates sensitivity about her parents' need to be individuals. It also allows her to understand how valuable freedom from the role of 'aachhi Mai' was to her mother. It, in fact, helps Manjari to correct her perspective about her own spurning of her parents after Shyam's suicide.

*Moving On* underlines the societal expectations from women while living through their various roles. Manjari's understanding of Mai, before she goes through the diaries, is symptomatic of a social/stereotypical understanding of the image of a mother. The traditional Indian concept of motherhood easily translates into a willing tolerance of a life of sacrifice, suffering and exploitation. Traditions encourage mothers to sublimate a whole series of natural urges or at least believing that she should endeavour to do so. In their roles of mothers and wives, women are expected to possess archetypal fortitude and follow an intensively rigid moral pattern of life. The possibility of individual choices is not discussed even theoretically. In *Moving On* too, the children's behaviour towards their mother is a product of this unconscious social conditioning. It is reflected not only in

Manjari's attitude, but also in Sachi's conduct towards Manjari. "But Sachi, I remember, has always wanted me to be what I'm not, not to be what I am. 'Why can't you be like other mothers?' She'd asked me once".<sup>6</sup>Deshpande also depicts how marriage is treated as the final destiny for girls. Recalling her childhood Manjari comments, "we pulled all of us take the right path, leading us to our final destinies of becoming good wives and mothers".<sup>7</sup>For a wife, self-effacing norms are exalted to create an environment which pressurize women to mould themselves according to their husband's needs. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu is afraid of becoming such an ideal wife. In *Moving On*, we have figures of Kamala, Medha and Mangal - Kamala does not let BK indulge in any household core. Soft, docile and silent, she even serves him drinks with averted face; Medha keeps pace with the widening social needs of Bharat; Mangal transforms herself into a mother figure to become the public face of her husband Lakshman silently putting up with beatings and ill treatment. Gender conditioning makes women vulnerable and silent but it is a double-edged sword. Among men it generates an intolerance or condescension towards women's attempts at individuality. Patriarchal traditions make men aloof, occupying a privileged position, able to realize their potential within the total gamut of society, whereas women are expected to submit themselves passively, doing nothing outside their dependence on the breadwinner. Deep-rooted indoctrination of a patriarchal society corrupts the objectivity of psyche. Manjari's father, though a liberal person in many ways fails to empathize with her wife, and takes her work with a non-serious and nonchalant demeanour; treating it as pastime to occupy her in spare time. After Shyam's tragic death, Manjari spurns her parents. Through a minor character Roshan, Deshpande also hints at the possibility of social conditioning through the bonds of sisterhood among women themselves, a concept used by many African-American women writers effectively. Roshan helps Manjari to settle down in life shaking her out of her apathy and hopelessness.

In all her novels, Deshpande has taken up the theme of women's sexuality within and outside marriage. A friendly and intimate male and female relationship outside marriage is presented by Deshpande not as a matter of choice, but of compulsion. In an interview, Deshpande has commented that such relationship gives a woman freedom to be herself, and that it need not be necessarily an affair. In *Moving On*, she has depicted up close relationship between Manjari and Raja which has the openness and trust of mature friendship. Simultaneously she has portrayed Manjari's purely physical association with her tenant Rajan. To some extent it can be compared with the relationship of Indu and Naren in *Roots and Shadows* where Indu had succumbed to her bodily desires. Manjari is also crippled by her physical needs and wants to treat it 'like drinking water when you are thirsty'. But it also draws her into ethical dilemmas, "Like a diabetic's craving for food. Nothing wrong with it. And yet, why do I bathe three times a day, why do I scrub myself when bathing as if I want to flay myself, why do I punish my body so angrily? The body and mind so much at variance with each other".<sup>8</sup>This episode is dealt at a purely physical level. When Raja confronts her with it, Manjari is quite open about her sexual hunger.

Another recurring theme of Deshpande's novels, which has been repeated in *Moving On* also, is of introspection and confronting the past as only after it the process of amelioration can begin.

Manjari's stay at her father's house gives her precisely such an occasion. She constantly reminisces about Malu, Shyam, Mai, Baba, Raja, children - above all she wants to find her own self, solve out her own inner intricate knots. She gets the same message in her father's diary and hopes that someday the pointlessness and emptiness of her life will force her into confronting her past. Ultimately, she gets rid of her anger, guilt and loneliness, and learns to reach out to other human beings. She realises that life carries truth within it, and in order to change one's circumstances, they have to be accepted. Deshpande emphasizes an analysis of one's predicament and overcoming it with rational resolutions. Manjari also reaches this conclusion towards the end: "There's always a fork in the road, there's always a choice we have to make. It's no use going back, recognising over the choice we made, imagining what would have happened if we had taken the other road".<sup>9</sup>She shares her tortuous past with Raja, forgives Shyam and decides to communicate freely about her past to the children - her son, Anand and Malu's daughter, Sachi. She realises that life is a mixed yarn of happiness, tragedy and villainy; and this mixture alone imparts it charm. The novel ends on a hopeful note, and Deshpande concludes that chaos, fear and disintegration do not stop life; it simply moves on, "we know that the wicked stepmother and the bad fairy won't have it all their own way. We know that there is still one good fairy to come - the damage control mechanism at work, goodness coming back into the arena to fight wickedness".<sup>10</sup>The search may be doomed to failure, yet "the search is what it is all about....., the search is the thing".<sup>11</sup>

## REFERENCES

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