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Women in the Family: A Reference to the Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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Family is the greatest gift of God to everyone. The relationships, love and affection, sharing and caring, pain and suffering, everything is learnt in the family. It is a small world of creations. Women play a specific role in the family as a mother, wife, sister, daughter and sometimes everything. But how many men really know the true meaning of a 'woman' and give her the respect she deserves. Does the society realize her need and necessity? Will the world give her the respect she deserves? The question remains unanswered. Shashi Deshpande highlights the role of women in various characters in all her novels. The present article discusses about the role of women played in the family.

Each and every human being is a member of family, which is the smallest cell of society. It provides some degree of mutual caring and sharing that transmits knowledge, values and material benefits from generation to generation. As infants and small children we learn from our families the patterns of behavior that affects all our later relationships both with other individuals and with society as a whole. Families continue to be society's most basic and pervasive organization, bridging the gap between the individuals and the larger context of group activities such as jobs, communities, recreational activities and all the other social and economic organizations within which we interact.

With the changing times and values, the family, like the rest of society has undergone radical changes. In India the tradition has been of joint family which is nowadays transforming into nuclear family. There have been many positive sides and advantages of living in a joint family, because it gives us an atmosphere to experience variety of emotions, thought and ideas of different members. The company of grandparents sows the seeds of finer sensibilities early in life. Right family gives right dosage to the child to make him a good human being which is not to be found in nuclear families. But many a time it also leads to clashes, conflicts, tensions, foundations, frustrations and expectations etc.

Family is also characterized by relationships between individuals and these relationships change along with the experiences of the individuals. Family is a way of living together of meeting emotional needs through interactions. The living, the hating, the fun and the violence all provide an emotional environment within which the individual learn the skills that will determine their interactions with others in the world around them. It will determine their feelings of self-worth and their concern for others. It is the milieu within which people interact in order to deal with the emotional and physical needs of the family members. It is in this milieu that children learn the process of making decisions and the techniques for handling situation, emotional issues, actions etc.

Various factors have made the family both the purveyor and the recipient of change. If the individual has contributed to the transformation of the family according to his/her needs, the family too has provided the individual with opportunities for self-discovery which takes place in the process of the individuals interpersonal relationships within the family. Woman sincerely plays her role of upholding the traditions of family. Family values a lot to her. And a modern educated working woman faces some major conflicts and problems in

adjusting herself between these two worlds, of family life and career life. Then also it is the family from where the discrimination starts.

The Indian society can broadly be classified into three hierarchical level in terms of distinctions based on economic and political power: the upper class, the middle class and the working class. Though it is not always true that the three classes have very clear and defined boundaries, there is nevertheless a certain distinctive identity that each of these classes projects in terms of life styles and attitudes. Shashi Deshpande deals with the middle class urban life in major. Her protagonists are all product of it. They are educated, cultured, traditional, intelligent and intellectual too.

It is contended that the family and familial relationships in the novels of Shashi Deshpande represents crucial transition of modern India, from a conservative and traditional social order to a liberal and urbanized socio-economic and cultural ethos. Shashi Deshpande's novels seek to explore the psychological complexities in which the Indian middle class family gets implicated in the process of radical changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization and the growing influences of western thoughts and attitudes. Her novels also reflect a radical shift in interpersonal relations and their consequences upon the changes in the Indian family. The recurring themes of Deshpande's novels are identified – woman's struggle for self-realization and self-definition, woman's quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level.

Indian family forced gradual changes in its structure and functions as it moves from an agrarian and rural to an industrialized and urban social ethos. Deshpande also focuses on the emergence of the nuclear families from joint family with all its problems of interpersonal relationships.

There is nothing if women are ambitious and want to put their own mark and identity in world outside along with their home and family. Why male in majority take this as threat to family and tradition. But the two worlds are closely connected because the family is the smallest cell of social life. Jasbir Jain writes about the novels of Shashi Deshpande in her famous book, *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces : The Writing of Shashi Deshpande*

Deshpande's novels show a concern with families and space.

There are families, nuclear families with memories of living in joint family structures, families with arms extended in every directions, those who hold together and those who don't.¹

Families always work through relationships and interdependence, the base of the families are always marriage. But these families have their critics, rebels and dissidents like any other social group. So families in themselves are powerful medium of socialization. They transmit the values and ideas to next generation. Family has variety of people or members who have their own individual identity. Deshpande's protagonists have their own analysis of various bonds, ties and relationships. Families always play an important role in her life, she tries her best to struggle for her family's survival. Her protagonists are not radical feminists they don't perish, they don't discard, they don't collapse, but survive through their self-realization and awareness which emerges from their own mind, which is the centre of struggle, conflict, intellectual amendment and revolution.

As in the case of Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, who discarded her parental home and her mother's wish, to marry Mohan but she suffers a feeling of alienation and guilt, though she tries her best to hide it from others. Sarita decides to seek her own identity outside the parental hold. She is never close to her mother and never shares her thoughts, feelings and emotions, discussing mother – daughter relationship Simone de Beauvoir says that:

“The daughter is for the mother at once, her double and another person, the mother is at once over weaningly affectionate and hostile towards her daughter: she saddles her child with her own destiny, a way of revenging herself for it.”²

Same is in Indu's case the protagonist of *Roots and Shadows*, she also went against the wish of family and married Jayant but her roots are pulling her towards them. Happy family gives healthy vision towards life which is to reunite it and give strength to struggle but a family is not supportive fill individual with a sense of frustration. As in the case of Jaya, *That Long Silence*, Sumi in *A matter of Time*, Urmila in *The Binding Vine*, Madhu in *Small Remedies* and Manjari in *Moving On*.

Women have the power to assess and judge their condition and situation. Family is their priority and is of the most important thing but how much the family provides space and freedom to the individual is also a most question. Sometimes it reduces personal space and imposes aspirations and expectations which the individual take as burden in lack of capability to hold it. Rejection by a family can make the individual alienated and rejection of the family lead to feelings of loneliness and guilt. In words of Dermot Clinch:

That Long Silence was a gloomy novel but **The Binding Vine** is gloomier still.³

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 are full of many more relationships uncle-aunt both paternal and maternal, their children and relation with them, the grand children's relation with their grand parents 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 an what kind of impact it leaves in the individual and his/her further life.

Shashi Deshpande's all major novels like *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *Roots and Shadows*, *That Long Silence*, *The Binding Vine*, *Small Remedies*, *A Matter of Time*, *Moving On*, all present conventional and many a time odd family atmosphere. The protagonists when reflects on her past, dismantles the joint family with sweet and sour experiences. So her novel is a sweet and sour journey towards family and familial relationships which is many a time parallel to ours. Distorted, disturbed and scattered family leads to frustration, crime and death as projected in her two crime novellas *If I die Today* and *Come Up and Be Dead*.

A close study of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian woman, who feel smothered and fettered in a tradition- bound, male dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fear, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and limitations, but find themselves thwarted by

the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mind-set. She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a male dominated society.

Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination, first as daughters and later as wives. They are conscious of the great social inequality and injustice towards them and struggle against the oppressive and unequal nature of the social norms and rules that limit their capability and existence as a wife. Fettered to their roles in the family, they question the subordinate status ordained writing to her credit, her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle class women. Her sincere concern for women and their oppressive lot is reflected strongly in all her novels.

The Dark Holds No Terrors is a telling example of men who are intolerant about playing a second fiddle role in marriage, and how their manhood gets hurt when their wives gain a superior status in society. Manu feels embarrassed and insecure with the rising status of his wife Saru and with it all the troubles start. But Shashi Deshpande has made society equally responsible for their deteriorating relations.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya also does not have any cordial relationships with her mother, and in turn her mother also does not have any strong maternal feelings towards her daughter. It is her mother's disapproval that makes her agree to marry Mohan. Jaya, in her turn, does not have equal warmth towards not living up to the ideal role of the perfect mother. Like Saru, she tries to be as dissimilar as possible, rejecting her as a role model. The novel works around three main strands of thought, the first of which is problematising of the institution of the family, the second of the syndrome of the male child and the third of Sarita's coming to terms with her own self. The resentment and the withdrawal are partially done with, and replaced by a new sense of self-awareness. Yet there is no miraculous restoration. It is a slow, painful process of self-realisation. It is obvious that she means to take control over her life and she d her passivity. As R. Mala observes:

The novelists credo is to 'take refuge in the self; which means that the self is not metaphysical but psychological. In other words, Deshpande means that the heroines will in future assert themselves; they will no longer allow their 'she' to get desceased. By this assertion of the self, Deshpande certainly takes her heroines to the pole of feminism, though she may not have aimed at propounding such an 'ism'.⁴

In *Small remedies*, we find that Savitribai Indorekar's relationship with her daughter. Munni is not so warm. Munni feels unwanted, unloved and rejected by her mother and she develops a feeling of aversion towards her or her identity. Her mother dissociates herself from her daughter and in turn, she too dissociates herself from her mother. Munni even goes to the extent of taking a new name, "Shailaja Joshi."

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists' quest for identity gets largely accentuated due to their frustrating experiences born of the prohibitive nature of the Indian patriarchal society. In her novels, the host of male characters – husbands, lovers, fathers and other relations – display different aspects of patriarchy and oppression. While the majority of the husbands are

patriarchal in their approach, the older men, particularly the fathers are broad-minded. Surprisingly the male friends are “feminist” in their approach and sympathise with the protagonists’ lot. Shashi Deshpande’s male characters only serve to enable the protagonists to define their identities more fully. Shashi Deshpande states that she does not “believe in a simple opposition of bad bad men and good good women. I don’t believe, the world is like that at all.” She takes pains a lot to explain that her writing merely mirrors the world. She finds that a lot of men are unsympathetic to her writing while a lot of women are sympathetic. The reason is, according to her, is not difficult to analyse because in her writing, “women see a mirror image and men see, perhaps a deformed image of themselves.”⁵

Thus, she has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of the Indian patriarchy.

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