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## **Theme of Alienation in Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On***

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The present paper attempts to study the theme of alienation in Shashi Deshpande's novel *Moving On*. Shashi Deshpande is a novelist who is interested in human experiences rather than experiences of woman. One such human experience which affects almost all the characters in *Moving On* is the feeling of alienation. Through the emotional wounds, intrusions, dissention, domination and violations within the family or domestic space, Shashi Deshpande mirrors the social vagaries, always fraught with disjunctive and alienating potentials for individuals. Those who are shown suffering from this feeling are often sensitive, idealist, egoist and escapist individuals.

Shashi Deshpande, writer of ten novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a screen play, has invited wide critical attention from her readers. Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for her novel, *That Long Silence*, Deshpande's works have been translated into many European languages. Her success as a novelist can be gauged by the vast readership she enjoys, and the number of critical studies available on her works. The survey of criticism available on Deshpande's fiction shows that her critics have remained all along preoccupied with the question of woman in her fiction. The interest of critics in the treatment of woman and her problems is certainly understandable, because most of her novels have women as their protagonists. But like any other major artist, Deshpande also deals with larger human issues, transcending gender, class and generation. It is this preoccupation of Deshpande with the larger human issues, with different social, moral, psychological and philosophical dimensions and nuances, which has not been adequately appreciated, resulting in a number of gaps and imbalances in her assessment as a novelist. It is only by exploring in depth and detail those of her themes and concerns which serve as important and unifying element for the entire body of her fictional product, that a comprehensive, fair and balanced assessment of Deshpande's mind and art can be made. One of such themes which has either gone totally neglected or has been touched upon rather inadequately, is her treatment of the human experience of alienation suffered by a large number of men and women, young and old, rich and poor in different ways, dimensions and intensity. It is this necessity of looking afresh at her fictional world with a focus on her treatment of the theme of alienation that has motivated the present attempt.

Shashi Deshpande's preoccupation with the complexity of human relationships, the dramatization of varied responses to challenges in life, conflicts and tensions caused by maladjustment in familial relationships, women's obsession with their own battle between the contradictory demands of body on the one hand and commitments of mind on the other, the ultimate denial of gender specific role and the efforts of the female protagonists to redefine their identity in the context of totality of the experiences related to their own selves and society

prepare the foundation on which she constructs the novel, *Moving On* (2004), to project varied aspects of the feelings of alienation.

In *Moving On*, Shashi Deshpande reverts to her favourite subject, i.e. family as the “family is a timeless and universal institution – everything begins here, everything that happens outside the family mirrors what happens within it.”<sup>1</sup> Through the emotional wounds, intrusions, dissention, domination and violations within the family or domestic space, Shashi Deshpande mirrors the social vagaries, always fraught with disjunctive and alienating potentials for individuals.

An individual violates the social norms and betrays the faith of close ones only to be independent and to assert his free will which, in turn, alienates him from his family and society at large. Badri Narayan’s father, being a Gandhian, marries a Harijan girl, betraying family tradition and honour. For violating the norms of caste hierarchies he is disowned and disinherited by his father. In spite of this, he enters into a socially unacceptable marital bond second time with a girl who had an inauspicious Mangal in her horoscope. Revelation of these facts to Badri Narayan by his father, when he was on his death bed, changes his (Badri’s) view about him from a dull man to a rebel. This changed perspective about his father leaves Badri Narayan forlorn after his death. Left alone after the marriage of his only companion his sister Gayatri, death of his father comes to Badri in the form of “emptiness, a blankness that seemed to swallow”<sup>2</sup> him up. He is completely left distraught not just with “the finality of death, but with its ability to make nothing of life” (14). Badri continues his life after the death of his father by marrying Mai but the “emptiness, the ice cube within me remained, surfacing suddenly at times, taking me by surprise, angering me too, by its persistence” (14). This feeling of emptiness is relieved for a while by new relationships through marriage and fatherhood.

Inheriting the rebellious spirit of his father, Badri marries Mai, a girl of other caste whose “dainty body, her exquisite face” drew him to her so immediately. Being an anatomist, who has a skeleton jokingly called ‘Mr. Bones’ in his home, body holds immense importance for him. It is not only the beautiful body of Mai which attracts him towards her but “an emotion stronger than any” he had felt until then also played its role. It makes him overlook the fact that she did not feel the same way for him. He is confident of making up the deficiency in her feelings through his love and passion but he was “hopelessly, completely naïve” (108). Their divergent ideas about passion come as first stroke to his idea of perfect love. Being a passionate man, desires of body hold immense importance for him which his wife, Vasu, fails to reciprocate with equal intensity. Vasu’s passivity in physical relations makes it impossible for Badri to get the pleasure from their bodies he always wanted. Dissatisfaction in sexual relations brings despair and frustration for Baba who “can love enough for two, but what about passion?”(108) This lack of passion on Vasu’s part can be attributed to the societal norms which have made sex a taboo. Even the mention of sex is taken to be a breach of chastity in our society, what to talk of expressing sexual feelings. It is because of this consciousness that Vasu dislikes Mr. Bones, the obscene, uncovered body. This frigidity and hatred for passions of body on Vasu’s part act as barrier, separating her from Baba, hampering the harmony in marital life which he hankered after throughout his life.

Denial of physical pleasures distances Baba from Mai. Though, apparently, he seems to adore her but most of the times he has his own way even at the cost of her discomfort. Her

boredom and displeasure in the company of RK, BK and Gayatri is not taken into account by Baba who forces her to visit them every now and then. This lack of concern for the comfort of Mai on Baba's part can be attributed to her failure in providing him physical satisfaction. Puritanic obsession with purity and chastity is not only a cause of dissonance and alienation between husband and wife but also from her own self. This alienation from her own self, which she suppresses very dexterously in her real life, can easily be inferred from her writings. She does not believe in love in real life but she writes about love stories with a happy ending. Like other protagonists of Shashi Deshpande, for Mai also writing is an expression of her private self: "It was a kind of secret business, an activity she did in private, something no one in the family ever spoke of" (121). Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Madhu in *Small Remedies*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Mira in *The Binding Vine* adopt creative writing as a remedy to give vent to their frustration. Creative world of Vasu is her own space where there is no place for the commands of Baba. Her interrogation with her own self emerges in her stories. She writes about "silent, sacrificing women" as against the women "who had to be aggressive and strong to survive the endless drudgery" (125). It provides a peep into her psyche torn between the pulls of her instinct for freedom on one hand and the definition of a good and dedicated wife she has internalized, on the other. That's why, there is a marked contradiction between her "real self" and her "creative self". Manjari seems to sum up well this divided self of her mother when she describes her as "a maverick self hidden behind the decorous woman so conscious of the proprieties, a self that she was constantly battling against" (125). This contradiction between the creative self and real self is a clear indication of split in her inner life which aspired for remoteness and freedom while writing about togetherness and relationships. Mai's negation of her real identity in her stories suggests that Mai has taken up an activity which she regarded perhaps, "not only as being outside her domain, but worse, something that could be called selfish and self indulgent."<sup>6</sup> By involving herself in her writing, she can get away from the pestering demands of her husband and children, for what she valued most was 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 'aamchi Mai'"(125).

Mai's desire for freedom from her children's demands makes Manjari uncertain and suspicious of her own worth as a child. A child is the most important person for a mother. This feeling of importance provided by mother makes the child confident of his/her worth. But constant chiding and indifference from Mai's side make Manjari unsure and fearful of "not existing, for if Mai did not see me, I did not exist. It frightened me" (119). Only a mother's love and approval can make the existence of child meaningful. That's why, Manjari declares and shows her love towards her mother by clinging to her. But Mai's constant rebuffs make her doubt Mai's love towards her: "But there was always this tiny mustard seed of suspicion in me; like a jealous, possessive lover I was always weighing things, wanting to be sure I was loved, that she wanted to be with me"(119). This doubt whether she is loved by Mai gets strengthened with the birth of Malu because she feels that for her parents Malu "mattered more than anyone else"(44). Here, in *Moving On*, Shashi Deshpande deals with sibling jealousy between sisters for the first time. In earlier novels she has shown how the boy child controls the life of girl child but here Shashi Deshpande shows how the love and affection tilted towards one girl can affect the life of the other. Extra parental care which Malu gets makes Manjari condemn her as "the little tyrant who knew her power, who used it to get what she wanted" (44). She painfully becomes aware of the fact that she will have to work hard if she wants to be loved as against Malu whose

mere existence promises her parental affection. Realizing Malu's central position in the family and her mother's power over herself (Manjari), she becomes more and more anxious and "willing to do anything to please others. The girl who needed everybody's approval" (69). This need for approval is a clear indication of her need to be loved, need to be wanted and cared.

Need to be loved is the main innate desire of every human being. When this need is fulfilled on certain conditions, there is every possibility of change of object of love as soon as a better alternative is available. Manjari revolts against the conditional love of her mother as soon as Shyam accepts her unconditionally, overlooking her ordinary looks: "She knew I was her slave, she had no doubts about it; she just liked to feel her power, to flex her muscles, so to say. But I escaped finally, I escaped because I met Shyam..." (230). In her urge to be loved and to be married to Shyam, she even overlooks her studies and career. Mother's disapproval, as in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, strengthens her decision of marriage with him. Marriage with Shyam acts as a means through which she declares her defiance towards mother and all other repressive forces which deny a woman the life of her own choice. Her choice of marriage with Shyam is triggered by bodily desires which leave even her father, Mr. Bones, flabbergasted: "As a father, I found it hard to be a witness to the raw sexuality of my daughter's feelings for a man, something Jiji almost flaunted" (109).

Manjari's longing to feel a man's arm around her body for a crushing grip is fulfilled after her marriage with Shyam. Like all the earlier protagonists, Manjari fully enjoys physical pleasures with Shyam. Her features and physique which were a source of constant tension for her now become the means of ultimate pleasure. But her body, which gets some solace in the arms of Shyam, soon starts wriggling once the sexual spells are over. Moreover, she finds herself ill at ease living in Shyam's house with its disgusting ambience. The practical responsibilities of human life cannot be met by mere romantic swearings and beautiful ballads in praise of body. Shyam's professional failures and Manjari's increasing demands after the birth of a son prove too much for their marital happiness. Frustration borne out of failure to fulfil Manjari's demands make Shyam irritable, who blames her that she has changed: "I never knew you were so money minded. I never thought you were such a bourgeois" (290). Differences start widening between them due to financial crunch caused by Shyam's joblessness: "Closeted in one small room though we were, we seemed to be living on two different continents. In bed, we lay close, but without touching. It was like the game of pebbles I'd played as a girl, a game in which, if two pebbles touched, you were out" (290). Manjari's process of getting out in the game of marital happiness is accelerated by her denial to give Shyam the space he urgently needs for himself. Manjari's constant naggings for a separate home, Shyam's failure in his profession and the resultant tensions between the two intensify Shyam's feelings of loneliness which ultimately lead him into the arms of Malu, her younger sister. With Malu's pregnancy the ugly truth of his liaison with Malu comes to the knowledge of Manjari and at "first there was disbelief, then anger and finally humiliation. I felt betrayed, shamed" (317). This feeling of betrayal is further aggravated by her mother's indifference towards her who, instead of Malu, blames her of being guilty, of being the wrongdoer. She feels herself like a forlorn who has been forsaken by everyone around her. This incident creates a lasting rift between them and she "lost Shyam" (292). But the loss of Shyam, when he commits suicide "had seemed the final betrayal, his dying in the sea, the sea by which we had lived those days of perfect happiness, the worst treachery" (327). Though she feels let down by Shyam's behaviour, she is left distraught and devastated by

his death:

I had entered a dark tunnel after Shyam's death, a space in which nothing could grow, nothing could survive. Worst of all was the feeling that I was set apart from human kind, that I no longer belonged to the world of ordinary people, ordinary living; each thing I did was a painful reminder of what had happened to us. I had lost the innocence which makes it possible to face each day with hope. Time is the greatest healer, they say. But for me, time was the enemy as well, taking me further and further away from Shyam, turning him into a memory eventually making even the memories fade, so that finally I was left with nothing. (326)

Married at eighteen and widowed at twenty-one, she is left to deal with this feeling of nothingness and the responsibility of bringing up two young ones, Anand and Sachi. Widowhood brings new problems in its wake for Manjari. Shashi Deshpande brings the stark reality of the lives of widows to light through the example of Manjari. Widows in our society are expected to lead a life of austerity by suppressing their physical desires and urges. But here Shashi Deshpande shows that the rigid restrictions of social codes cannot stop the rhythms of body. These rhythms of body which forced Manjari to marry Shyam and invite her parents' wrath and displeasure, push her into the arms of Raman, a person of dubious identity: "It's my body that frightens me, it's my body that is suddenly my enemy. I feel as if I have been invaded by a stranger, a stranger I'd kept out successfully so long" (226-227).

Her body fails her ultimately and she gives in to its commands. Her body makes her forget the difference between good and evil. It is for this reason she invites him to bed. What differentiates Manjari from Indu of *Roots and Shadows* who goes for physical relationship with her cousin, Naren, is that unlike Indu, Manjari has no emotions and feelings involved in the relationship: "I don't want to hear his voice either. Only the body, his body, only my body, my starved body. No thoughts, no feelings, only sensation. The smell of sundried clothes, of sweat, the hardness, the pressure of his body, it's weight on mine and my body responding, welcoming his" (257). Though she feels at peace with her body but soon her mind gets unsettled due to variety of fears, tensions and guilt. This suggests a powerful conflict between her natural libidinal desires on the one hand and her consciousness of this act as something immoral on the other. The urge to bathe and scrub harshly to punish her body is a clear proof of guilt her mind gets gripped by. She is also fearful that she might lose Anand and Sachi if they come to know about her relationship. But what precipitates her fears and tensions is the fact that she had thought that with this man she would be able to let Shyam go "but it has not happened. Each time I have been with him, I have thought – this is not Shyam. Each time, I have hated him – and myself – because he is not Shyam" (278). This creates in her a tormenting feeling that she has betrayed Shyam by turning to Raman for her carnal satisfaction. The body, which she had found to be source of satisfaction, ultimately comes to be viewed by her as a kind of culprit responsible for her digression from the socially sanctioned moral conduct of a widow. This is an expression not only of alienation of her mind from her body but also from the moral ambience of her social world. This feeling of betrayal, caused by the hungers of her body, alienates her from her own self.

Thus, undue importance given to the fulfilment of physical desires plays havoc in the life of all the main characters i.e. Baba, Manjari, Malu as well as Shyam. Baba's passion, which

could not be matched by Mai's, becomes the main hindrance in attainment of happiness in his marital life. Manjari's thoughtless and instinctual decision to marry Shyam, based on hormonal urges, proves disastrous for her in the long run. As soon as physical desires begin to pall their relationship starts withering. The relationship established merely on physical desires, and devoid of emotional union, moves towards doom as quickly as it starts. The bond between Shyam and Manjari is based purely on physical fascination and carnal urge which is further evidenced by the fact that he takes no interest even in his son, Anand. He is utterly negligent, both as a father and husband, having no feelings of emotional attachment to them. When Anand is sick, Shyam leaves him alone in Manjari's lap instead of taking him to the hospital. Shyam, with a deep emotional vacuum ultimately tries to find solace in his relationship with Malu and makes him pregnant. Again it is characterized by a thoughtless submission to the desires of body which shatters the very foundation of relationships and consequently of the family. All the characters react differently according to their personalities to this tragedy. For Shyam and Malu it proves too heavy a burden to bear with. That's why, Shyam commits suicide and Malu loses her balance of mind which eventually becomes the cause of her untimely death. Malu's death comes to Mai as a shattering shock, and she withdraws into silence: "...she wrote nothing, not a word, she spoke very little and only when necessary" (113). Her silence eats into her mind which pushes her into a state of coma and finally towards death.

### **Works Cited:**

<sup>1</sup>Shashi Deshpande in Literary Review, *The Hindu*, 5th September, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Shashi Deshpande, *Moving On* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 14 All subsequent references to the text of the novel are from the same edition, and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parentheses immediately after the quotations.

<sup>3</sup>Shashi Deshpande, "Masks and Disguises," *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Viking, 2004), p. 189

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