

**CHANGING DIMENSIONS OF MOTHER-DAUGHTER
RELATIONSHIP IN THE SHORT STORIES OF
SHASHI DESHPANDE**

Alpana Gupta

After the independence, the major concerns of the women writers were to depict the plights of the powerless and uneducated woman. They depict their female characters as family oriented human beings, who do not reject patriarchal power structure and try to control the situation within the frame of patriarchy itself. The result is that the writers support stereotypes and qualities like self-sacrifice, meekness and such other virtues but the focus does not fall on the problems of women.

However, a major change is seen in the fiction after the sixties. A set of new paradigms related to women's life came into existence, tradition and modernity, self assertion and self effacement, economic independence and psychological independence made contrary demands. In earlier writings, women have been treated as helpless children and they too accept the image silently. But now women are enlightened and have acquired an identity. As Nirmala Prakash says, it is very natural that women writers mostly focus on female characters, on feminine experiences in their writings and describing changed perspectives in relationships. Books written by women writers provide detailed accounts of women's emotions, ideas and preoccupations. When a woman writer writes, she is not a woman but a person who is aware of her times, whose desire is to expose the inner feelings of women characters. Shashi Deshpande writes about women because she understands their feminine problems and experiences. Her writings explore interior spaces and confront existential loneliness. Her engagement with the working of individual emotions continues as minutely detailed vignettes are created.

In some measure Shashi Deshpande has inherited this tradition which is concerned with the problems specific to women. She deals with the crisis of the contemporary women in her works. As N.B. Masal describes Shashi Deshpande's stories present a social world of many complex relationships. Many men and women live together. They journey across the life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. Doubt, anxiety and often a feeling of void of

values drive characters in her stories to an intense self-exploration. Deshpande, who belongs to a middle class family, has the first-hand experience of the conditions of middle class woman and her problems.

The mother-daughter relationship has always occupied an important place in Deshpande's stories. It is a crucial relationship in feminine experiences. In her stories mothers and daughters are at loggerheads but still it is the most important relationship in their lives. Shashi Deshpande herself says that in the relation between a mother and daughter, fight is very natural; if they don't fight then there is something abnormal. Some of her stories poignantly depict the relationship from the perspective of a mother trying to reach across barriers to her daughter. These stories are first person narratives of a woman's real concern at her inability to be an ideal mother- the epitome of comfort, and her difficulty in communication.

"Why A Robin" is one such story in which a mother and daughter re-establish their links and bridge the gap through a shared experience of womanhood. In the beginning of the story, the protagonist mother thinks that there is nothing common between the two. The mother is justified in thinking that her twelve year old daughter has an attitude of rejection towards her. Even physically there is little common between them. The mother thinks:

How did I, so plain, so common, get a daughter like her? Her beauty always gives me a physical wrench. And saddens me. It puts distances between us. Can one envy one's own daughter? I think I do. She gets so much out of life, effortlessly, gracefully. While I ...? ("Why A Robin" 45)

The story starts with a confrontation between the daughter and the mother. The daughter comes home from the school and asks her mother to write a composition on a robin. But her mother offers information on any bird except a robin. The mother says:

'I don't know,' I say at last. 'I know nothing about it. Except that it's a pretty bird. With a red breast...? And it comes in winter ...? Children feed it bread crumbs ...?' (45)

Disgusted by the answer the girl bursts out, "Oh! Is that all! What's there the use of that? I'm supposed to do a two page composition on the robin and you tell me two words. You can't help me, you're no use at all (46). But the mother again tries to help her impatient daughter:

Why don't you write about a peacock? That's a beautiful bird.

Teacher said no ex-o-tic birds'. She pronounces that new word carefully and with pride.

"But a peacock isn't exotic. It belongs here. In some places it quite common".

The mother understands as much about robins as she understands her own child. The bird, robin, stands for the child, and makes it quite clear that the mother has again failed her child. On being offered information that is not relevant to her topic, the daughter stamps out of the room saying, "I will ask Papa. He's sure to know, he'll help me" (46). Her tone lacerates the mother and leaves her as if with "bleeding nicks" all over. Deshpande summarized this situation in these heart wrenching words:

I didn't have the key to open up this beautiful child, through she is mine. I don't have the key to her father either. It is as if I am, in my own house, confronted with two closed rooms. I am condemned to sit outside and gaze helplessly at the closed rooms. (47)

The mother's knowledge proves to be inadequate. The father helps the child with books and ideas, while mother watches on in helplessness nursing a feeling of alienation (Jain 160). For mother the situation is nothing less than an insoluble puzzle. She thinks "have they locked me out or have I locked myself in" (48).

It is during that night when the mother is rapt in her thoughts, that she hears the sobs of their daughter from the adjacent room though at first she checks her impulse back, thinking it would be the father, the daughter wants. In her words:

The weeping sounds of her daughter disturb her too much. She stares at her husband but he is in deep sleep. As she again looks at her husband the "conviction grows within" that the "bridges have to be built. They do not come out of nothing they have to be created" (50). And then she gathers courage to go and see her daughter. It was as if this gathering of courage, this making a bold step towards her daughter, break the barrier between the two. It was on this night that the daughter is no longer merely a child, has crossed the threshold to womanhood. This change of body and abdominal pain frighten the woeful girl who has suddenly grown into womanhood. In those painful and bewildering moments the mother and daughter find each-other, re-forging the links, which had snapped long before. This time it is the mother who wants to comfort and nurse her. The womanhood brings them closer. It is the night on which the mother, trying to comfort the daughter, tells her about the peacock, tells her about her childhood and herself. It is the night on which the daughter is ready to listen to the mother, to acknowledge that

she is after all a person worthy of notice. The gap is finally bridged when the daughter sleepily says, "I'll ask the teacher- why not a peacock?" and the mother responds, "Why not a robin" (52)? Both, the mother and daughter are ready to take the necessary steps to understand each other's worlds. The mother is happy to have found one key at least to open the door. The bridges are built between the two and she may now give up the thought of self – abnegation.

"My Beloved Charioteer" is the story where the common state of widowhood of the mother and the daughter cannot bridge the gap of communication between them. It also narrates the futile suffering of widowed mother – and widowed daughter, with a bridge of the third feminine generation between them. Three generations are locked in a situation of grief and hopelessness, the mother who is a widow, the daughter who has recently been widowed and the grand daughter who is a young child. The recently widowed daughter is absorbed in her grief. Another aspect which is highlighted in the short story is female submission as the basis of a harmonious man-woman relationship.

The question which occurred in the story "My Beloved Charioteer" is, "is it that submission on the part of the woman is the basis of marriage? Or do willingness and unwillingness characterize the relationships as justified or oppressive (Jain 163)?"

In the story, the widowed mother had been living alone for seven years before her widowed daughter and granddaughter come to live with her. She says:

I had got used to this silence in the last seven years. It had never seemed terrible to me. It was a friendly silence filled with the ghosts of so many voices in my life. They came back to keep me company when I was alone – my younger brother, my aunt who loved me when I was a child, my two infant sons who never grew up, and even the child Arti who seems to have no connection with this thin bitter woman who now shares the silence with me. (182)

For the narrator happiness means to start a new day with her granddaughter. She says, "Happiness can mean different things to different people. For me, it is the beginning of a new day with this child" (182). The mother tries to bring back her daughter to normal state but the recently widowed daughter is absorbed in her grief, indifferent to the world around her. Her "face has the arid look of desert - no smile, no happiness ever blooms there" (184). The narrator mother feels that "life has been cruel to her. It was her father whom she had loved and he died,

while I live. It was her husband she had loved even more than the child, and he died while Priti is left to her and she never sleeps at all, she just reads and smokes. And I don't like that smell" (184).

The mother hopes that her daughter will laugh and talk again one day. Her failure to understand her own daughter saddens her. And one day when she asks her if she had slept well or not, her daughter gets irritated and replies, "slept well? No, I will never sleep well again well all my life. I have to take something every night so that I can close my eyes for a few hours. Now never ask me again if I slept well" (182). The mother, shocked with her reply, thinks that her daughter is hiding her sorrows from her, and closes all the doors on her. Mother's utter helplessness is conveyed when she says:

Nine months I carried this daughter of mine in my body. I had felt every beat of her heart, every moment of her limbs within me. But – and my doctor had told me this then – my pains and shocks could never penetrate to her. She was insulated against them. Even now, she is protected from my pains, even now, I have no protection against her pains. I suffer with her but like all my emotions, it is a futile suffering. For I cannot help her. I can only fumble and blunder and make things worse. (183)

The lack of communication between them is so immense that she only keeps struggling to bring back the happiness of her daughter. She tries to build bridges to reach out to her daughter. She tells her, "You cannot hold on. You will have to let go" (186). Opportunity comes when the daughter knocks down a photograph of her late father accidentally and the glass cracks. The mother seizes this opportunity to tell her daughter, who feels as if she has committed a crime towards her mother. The narrator mother tells her of her own marriage which had been one between two strangers – one demanding, the other submissive or at least expected to submit. The grief associated with widowhood – an emotion that has absorbed the daughter – also has another aspect of the story and the mother's story comments upon the hollowness of the whole relationship, if it is only the body which is the basis of it (Jain 163). At the end of the story the daughter springs up and glares at her mother. At last, the mother succeeds in making the daughter look at her, the conversation has been started between the mother and daughter, and the monotony in the life of her daughter has been broken and now she will lead a normal life.

Similar to the mother's narrative, the story entitled "Memorabilia" is the portrayal of a mother by her daughter and her effort to understand the feelings of her mother. "Deshpande's portrayal of the mother also seems to be a reaction to idealized depiction of the mother and motherhood in mythology" (Atrey & Kirpal 109). In the story, a daughter, the youngest of siblings, makes a visit to her mother's house. The daughter finds it difficult to convey the plan that she and her siblings wanted her mother to give up her home of forty years, around which most of the mother's life centered and come and live with them.

The daughter feels helpless as she looks to her mother but then she thinks that if she will show her weakness, she will never be able to convince her mother. The daughter starts conversation with her mother fearing resistance in the form of anger and tears. She says the things they had planned to be said. But the mother's ready acquiescence surprises her. The mother is silent and listens to her daughter without a word. But at one point she interrupts her daughter, and asks will she stay with each of them for three months? Or will she move faster than that if they don't have the time for her? All these questions aroused a feeling of guilt in the daughter's mind and she became silent. The daughter thinks: "her loneliness, her isolation, her need of us, her understanding of our exasperation, her reproach that we could not – no, that we could not be what she wanted us to be" (103).

And after that the mother asks when she has to leave, the daughter replies, as soon as possible. They both start clearing up instantly. The daughter is unnerved by the silent, passive apathy of her mother and mother willing to let the daughter tell her what to do next. After sorting things out when they both are about to retire for the day, the daughter finds a kumkum box and when her mother sees it, she wishes to keep it with herself.

The box opens up a door of memories to the mother and she is lost in her past. Later that night the mother wakes up suddenly after having a bad dream. The dream was about her mother. Disturbed by the dream she is unable to go back to sleep. She tells her daughter about her mother who had died in child birth. She says that her mother went to her parent's house, which is in a remote village, without any medical aid, every year for delivery because as her aunt had told her to do. She wanted to be away from her husband because she says, "If I get away, I'll get some more time between babies. Six months away means that the next baby will come six months later" (111). She still remembers and fully agrees with her aunt's comment on her sister, "My

sister was a strong woman but what choice did she have (111)? These words serve as an eye-opener for the daughter. She feels her mother's pain and agony. She understands that her mother had no choice. She says "Four pregnancies – and each time living with fear of death, of leaving her babies motherless, seeing her mother's shrunken body, her blood-smeared hair whenever she closed her eyes" (113). The daughter now realizes that her mother may be ageing, isolated, friendless and incapable of living alone but she is not ready to give up her home and by forcefully making her to do so her own daughters are leaving her no choice. The story ends with the daughter giving up her idea of winding things up at her mother's house, hoping that her siblings too would understand. There is a new understanding in the relationship between mother and daughter.

Shashi Deshpande very interestingly portrays the re-establishment of links and the new found appreciation of each-other's feelings by the mother and the daughter. Deshpande very realistically describes the relation and understanding between the mother and daughter. In her stories, in the course of self-exploration the protagonists analyze their relationship with their mothers with maturity and sensitiveness. They realize and understand that their mothers too have been victims of patriarchal socialization and gender-based oppression (Atrey & Kirpal 78).

In Deshpande's stories, mothers mostly try to build bridges to understand their daughters and the daughters see them in a negative way. The antagonistic attitude of the daughters is sometimes due to the villainous and strict attitude of the mothers when they were younger. These daughters are closer to their respective fathers. Shashi Deshpande breaks the ideal and powerful mother myth in these stories. She explores the concepts and ideas that have made it impossible for us to get past the image of the ever forgiving, the always sacrificing mother. In Writing from the Margin & Other Essays, she writes:

When I became a mother, I found such a discrepancy between what I was told about how mothers felt, and what I really felt, that I was deeply disturbed. It was only as a writer that I could get across this disturbing split and approach reality. And I realized that motherhood does not turn you overnight into a different person. It does not make you a nobler, stronger, more loving and lovable individual. You are the same person, except for the enormous bond that suddenly appears between you and the new born. In fact we know that mothers can be selfish, jealous, possessive, that they can even at times be cruel. (97)

The Story entitled “Madhu” portrays one such mother, who is not exactly cruel, or negative but is unable to understand her daughter. Madhu is a young girl who is impertinent, casual, careless, impatient, and intolerant of her parents. She is doing her B.A., which to her own view is pointless and she is doing it only to please her parents.

Her mother gets irritated with her sharp replies. She wants intimate relationship with her daughter but fails to do so. She says, “She never seems to have much to say to me. If I ask her anything it’s interference. Or boring” (94). Madhu wants to do a course in journalism and she spends most of her time out of the house either freaking out with friends or working on the magazine she and her friends are bringing out. For this attitude for hers, the father scolds her. In his words, “She treats this house like a ... a hotel. A place to eat and sleep. We can’t ever ask her where she’s going or when she’ll return home. She flares up. And no help at home at all”(95). The mother also misunderstood her and feels no better for her. Madhu on her part has her own complaints. She thinks that her mother is always ready to misunderstand her. She says, “Just can’t talk to mother these days, She’s always ready to misunderstand. I think” (94).

One the other hand, mother feels alienated and thinks her daughter treats her as if she was an enemy to her. But the same Madhu’s indifferent and casual approach changes drastically when her father has a heart attack and is admitted in a hospital. She behaves in a very mature way and seems to have suddenly grown up. When her father is lying in the hospital, she comes in.

She walked across with quick, short steps that were alien to her. Her face had the rigid self-consciousness of a person facing the camera. ...Yet it was she who took the news with the greatest composure.”(97)

Apparently, she has vowed to sacrifice something in exchange for her father’s health. She says, “When I was a kid, if I wanted something very badly I used to tell myself, ‘I’ll sacrifice something I like very much, and maybe I’ll get the other thing’” (99).After that, her father makes a steady recovery and in a month, he is at home. She sacrifices her long beautiful hair for her father’s good health. And when everything falls into routine, she is back to her old ways.

The story describes the difference of the two generations very touchingly. Shashi Deshpande explores parent- child relationship in several of her short stories from this point of view. These relationships are often like under currents, unrealized or unidentified, not really fully

expressed and often instrumental in expressing feelings of hostility until some unknown fact comes to light or a crisis takes place, which breaks down the barriers (Jain 174).

“It Was Dark” is the story of a minor girl, who is brought back after the three days of abduction. The story highlights mother’s anxiety and worry of handling the police case. The violation of the child makes her mother feel guilty for not having been able to protect her child better, angry for not being about to inflict a similar amount of pain on the culprit, despair for the sake of the emotional state of the child and hostility to the caring but ill timed concerns of her husband’s actions. The story begins with the protagonists coming out of an ugly dream to come face to face with a much uglier reality.

“Are you awake?”

I came out of an ugly dream, in which I was wandering all over and unfinished skeletal building, looking for someone...

“Yes”.

At first there was only a relief that was in bed, not on a scaffolding hopeless searching for something. (“It Was Dark” 26)

The daughter cannot cope with the crisis and is numbed into a state of indifference. In her innocence, she equates the experience with the darkness of the room where the act had taken place. She is too traumatized to react to anything. The mother’s frantic efforts to make her say something are only able to elicit a single expression. “It was dark”- from the daughter who keeps staring at a point on the ceiling. The changes that the child shows after her abduction are not only beyond the comprehension of the mother but also horrific. She tries to reach out to her daughter, trying to find the child of old times in her but fails miserably. The mother says, “She just lay on here back and stared at the ceiling. I had found myself staring at the spot here eyes were fixed on, as if I could find it there, the thing she wasn’t talking about” (27).

The mother is firm to take her child out of her apathy towards life. Mother is neither concerned about how the society reacts nor does she burst in anger when the culprit is identified by the police. She only concentrates on the physical and mental equilibrium of her daughter.

The author also describes the male response to the situation. The girl's father feels embarrassed by the incident and unable to show a single supportive gesture toward the girl. "He had not spoken to her after his one attempt at the police station" (29).

The agonized mother sees enemies all around the visitors, the fear, the loneliness, the dark. In her frenzy, she opens the curtains of her daughter's room and sunlight pours into the room filling it with brightness. The paralysis brought on by the darkness of the act and the physical darkness that surrounds the child is one which the mother struggles to relieve. After softly treating the child with kid gloves for a while, her desire to get a response becomes so strong that she seeks to elevate the mental darkness in the child's mind introducing the physical light into the room. The reaction is gratifying for the daughter. She is suddenly transported from the dark confines of her mind's memories into the brightly lit in her room.

The mother's act of opening the curtain is an act of rebellion against traditionally ingrained ideas of patriarchal honour. The narrative is framed through the mother's sensibility to understand the miseries of the physically violated daughter, who herself a woman, is torn between the need to protect the child and the necessity to face the physical problems (Jain 157).

In the stories of Shashi Deshpande, her young female characters understand that their mother were victims of biased treatment. But they rebel against the control of their mother because they want to be themselves. The daughters try to break free of their mothers only to discover that they are merely extensions of their mother's personalities.

As Jasbir Jain says mother-daughter relationships go on to work differently from generation to generation reflecting the social conditions and structures and individual need (58). In an articles "Mother, Daughter and Daughter's Daughter – A Study of Shashi Deshpande", Usha Bande exposes important issues. According to her, the attitude of early heroines towards their mother's is ambivalent and 'full of anger and remorse, hostility and harmony' and mothers and surrogate mothers are not 'matriarchs' to reckon with, but suffocating "shadows" to be shunned (134). Deshpande explores this oppositional relationship between mother and daughter as one rising out of a need to find and define "self". "Both individuation and social change – an opening up of spaces and opportunities, the possibility of reaching out, of breaking away from the cloistered and claustrophobic existence of the mothers – are the forces which govern these relationships" (Jain 58).

Nowhere can we find such a vast variety of female characters of different age-groups – a girl of fourteen years, a young lady, a middle-aged woman, an old lady – each one trapped in some peculiar situation. In her stories, Deshpande depicts that awakening in women, their realization of self-worth, may lead to social revolution. “The roles of women in literature now are no longer restricted and a woman can earn appreciation for reasons other than playing well her role as a daughter, a wife and a mother. She is not required to find her total fulfillment in submissive domesticity” (Bande & Ram 141). We encounter such strong women characters in Shashi Deshpande’s short stories.

REFERENCES

- Atrey, Mukta & Viney Kirpal. *Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of her Fiction*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1998.
- Bande, Usha. “*Mother, Daughter and Daughter’s Daughter - A Study of Shashi Deshpande*”. *Mothers and Mother figures in Indo-English Literature* . Ed. Usha Bande. Jalandhar: ABC Publishers, 1994.
- Deshpande, Shashi. “*Telling Our Own Stories*”. *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003.
- . “Why A Robin”. *Collected Stories_Vol 1*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003.
- . “It Was Dark”. *The Intrusion and Other Stories*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993.
- . “My Beloved Charioteer”. *Collected Stories_Vol 1*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003.
- . “Memorabilia”. *Collected Stories_Vol 2*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004.
- . “Madhu”. *Collected Stories. Vol 2*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writing of Shashi Deshpande*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003.