

FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *SHADOW PLAY*

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ABSTRACT

Among Indian women novelists Shashi Deshpande stands unique in her positioning as a silent ideological volcano. Her novels are replete with telling portrayals of family relationships. There is how ever a strong undercurrent of feminist ideas. The novels reveal her concern with the life of cultivated women in a patriarchal set-up. But family relationships are the final security, Deshpande offers her protagonists. This paper analyses *Shadow Play* which is an extension of *Matter of Time*. The novel weaves a complex texture of familial relationships that have man-making potential in their complementary and contrasting features.

Keywords: feminism, familial ties, survival, tolerance “connect”.

Introduction

Among India's foremost women novelists, Shashi Deshpande stands out unique in her position as an unconscious ideologue and feminist. Though she has authored an article “Writing from the Margin” that could be conceived as a confessional platform, though she has given a few interviews to literary reviewers, her ideological stance on women's issues are more clearly embodied in her works than in her critical pronouncements. Her silence about her feminist orientation and the clinical objectivity that characterizes her intimate portrayal of the feminine predicament reveal her deep understanding of the web of human relationships in which the protagonists are caught, in the overtly and covertly patriarchal social fabric of India.

Deshpande explores familial roles and relationships in all her novels. Such familial relationships are the staple of all her novels. It is from these relationships that all the

complications and resolutions of the plots of Deshpande's novels emanate. The family is portrayed as a snare as well as a crucible for self-formation, modification and growth. All Deshpande's novels exemplify this. In the *Shadow Play* we find this creative alchemy at work.

The *Shadow Play* was designed as a sequel to an earlier novel *A Matter of Time*. In the acknowledgements appended to the novel, Deshpande records:

A Matter of Time, an earlier novel of mine, contained some vague glimpses of the future. I left it there, but the characters didn't forget my promise to reveal their future and, years later, came knocking at my door. And so *Shadow Play*, which takes up their story about ten years later (*Shadow Play*,304)

The note reveals the characters in search of the author, but the import of the work is much wider. The *Shadow Play* narrates a multi-familial, multi-generational saga of the building up and breaking up of familial relationships. The relationships portrayed are of a complementary nature, each supplementing, modifying or enriching the others. They represent the whole gamut of human passions in their pristine heights and corresponding depths. The writer employs a fine admixture of parallelism and contrast, providing almost a Brechtian sweep to the situations and characters in their interrelation.

Deshpande works through a variety of characters, situations, locales and belief systems to project her message on how we are shadows fixed in multiple roles to seek a reality through self and mutual confirmation, validation and support. We seek to know what others are and in the process stumble upon our own real or imagined selves. It is a quest for identity which is elusive and in various stages of perpetual formation and re-formation. The quest is incomplete. As Deshpande writes:

All novels, even the longest ones, have to come to an end. But the story goes on. Intrepid travellers in space and time, we are constantly moving on an endless road of which we know neither the beginning nor the end. Each one of us imagines that we are unique, that our journeys are like none other. Unaware, too, that we are hurtling towards an unknown future, we continue to live as

if this moment, this little slice of time given to us, is for ever. Perhaps we are fortunate that the future is unfathomable, that it remains dark. ... even the novelist's crystal ball, wayward and unreliable at the best of times, and smudged by much handling, yields very little, though the clouded and misty surface does allow some space for the imagination. The little space suffices to round off this (the) story (*SP,301*)

This shows the novelist in the confessional. Life is nebulous. As Virginia Woolf comments:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is little other than custom would have us believe it. (Virginia Woolf: "*Modern Fiction*" in *The Common Reader*, 1925)

Identifying the human passage through life, the novelist has necessarily to make use of human relationships as a torch towards the truth. Deahpande has made use of familial relationships in a masterful way in *Shadow Play*.

What strikes us about the novel is the wide range of familial and human relationships in their complementary and contrasting correlation. We have Gopal and his daughters - Aru, Charu, and Seema. They get a second chance to reconcile and rebuild through a sort of *Paschatap and Prayaschitta*. In the elder generation, we have Kalyani, Premi and Goda. Among the men we have Rohit, Nikhil, Hrishi. The inter-relationships among these characters, their care and concern for each other are finely portrayed. Many of the relationships show a fine balance of conflicting attitudes, and mutual non-interference, lest old wounds should sour the present.

To add variety and a fascinatingly fuller presentation of character, Deshpande has a wider range of familial relationships like those of Kasturi and her kin, Surekha, Nagma, Tressa, Ramu and past references to the previous generation like Vithalrao and Manorama, Kalyani and Shripati and Sumi and Gopal. Such relationships enlarge the crucible of action and explore how changes in society impact individuals and families. We are treated to a bomb blast and a gang rape that puts all relationships out of order, setting in motion a series of adaptations and modifications of the fine balance of life. And this 'home in the world' element enlarges the canvas of the novel. But Deshpande does not stray into ideological considerations of right and wrong. She is confined to the family domain. Well meaning individuals, Deshpande's characters do not explode, implode or surrender, but manage to survive all calamities.

This is because in Deshpande's novels the family serves as a kind of straining sieve and training ground, distilling the essence of the human personality. In *Shadow Play* especially, familial relationships shape and reshape the characters making them finer individuals. In this novel, the characters are given a second chance to ruminate on and undo past wrongs. In the aftermath of Sumi's death, Gopal comes to the house, not as a visitor, but stays on at the behest of Kalyani. His reasons for leaving his family are explained as protectiveness, having caught it hot with a controversial publication that triggers retribution from a group of offended extremists.

In *Shadow Play*, Gopal forges a new relationship with his daughters. Aru appears to have forgiven him and Seema almost becomes his protégé. Similarly Seema, from whom not much is expected, turns out to be a commercial success as a model in fashion - designing. We do not hear much of Charu, beyond the fact that she is happily married to Hrishi and has a son. The couple is just presented as visitors. Aru and Rohit battling with childlessness are seen as unable to decide on adoption but they do not seem to be unduly concerned. Their professional life keeps them busy. Social issues like adoption and the legal nuances of divorce are hinted at but they are not allowed to overthrow the domestic familial focus of the novel.

But the bomb blast that kills Tressa and the rape of Seema jolt the characters out of their normal routine. As a parallel, runs the story of Kasturi and her chequered family life and her excursions into politics at Jogipura. Thus there is an interweaving of the private and the public and we find Deshpande's characters surviving through sheer tolerance and the will to stick together. The lesson seems to be that familial human relationships are the only refuge that can

help survival in a strife- torn world- a Fosterian emphasis on the personal as against the political. It is this emphasis that enables Aru to appreciate Seema's stand on not making an issue of her cruel rape. The feminist lawyer falls in with her victimized sister who proceeds to Mumbai to pursue her career, as if nothing has happened.

Life has to be played out in the shadow of the protective family where mutual bonds survive against all odds to equip one for the real battles in the outside world. The title *Shadow Play* seems to suggest the spirit of tolerance and mutual give and take, an attitude of 'forget and forgive' and the spirit of compassion and conciliation that should inform right familial relationships so that individuals develop the fortitude and forbearance needed to face the harsh realities of the outside world from which evil and violence cannot be wished away. What matters is the spirit to move on as suggested in another title of Deshpande's. To realize that human life is a cosmic *Shadow Play*, one needs only a little time to think and understand. It is all *A Matter of Time*.

The message seems to be what E.M. Forster stresses in his superscription to *A Passage to India* - "only connect". We find Gopal pointing to this

There is a better self inside us, that the need to love is an intrinsic part of us, so that we can care even about strangers- I had to go a long way to see this miracle of our humanity, to understand that an invisible umbilical cord connects us to all of humanity (*SP*,57).

Conclusion

Life goes on at the cosmic level following its own rhythm in spite of our petty, prejudices, jealousy, misconstructions and misadventures. Life is beyond all-isms and ideologies. So the *Shadow Play* of life on earth and in human society should be treated for what it is worth, through a spirit of compromise and acceptance. Life goes on, only on this premise.

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