

PORTRAYAL OF VICTIMIZED WOMANHOOD IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S MOVING ON

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is the historian and analyst of the plight of sensitive Indian women caught in the vestiges of patriarchal one-upmanship. Her protagonists reveal a progressive evolution from passivity and surrender to achieve self-assertion, self-redefinition and accompanying survival strategies. From *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to *Small Remedies* and *Moving On*, we see a progressive pavement of Indian womanhood in the throes of realignment with the existing and emerging socio political milieu.

It is in this light that this paper attempts an analysis of the portrayal of victimized womanhood in Shashi Deshpande's ninth novel *Moving On*. Manjari is different from the earlier protagonists. In spite of widowhood, she survives the threats of patriarchy and marks a progress from Sumi of *A Matter of Time* and anticipates Anu of *Shadow Play*.

KEYWORDS: patriarchy, self-assertion self-redefinition.

Introduction

The term 'victimization' means making someone a victim. A victim is a person who has been attacked, injured or killed as the result of a crime, a disease, an accident etc. The term has connotations of 'hunting' and 'sacrificing'. From time memorial, women have been the victims of men, always remaining objects of pursuit, possession and persecution. Human society has been built on the bedrock of patriarchal authority. Women have been dependents in all fields- political social, cultural- even spiritual or religious. According to Manu the ancient law- giver, in childhood, a woman should be under her father's control; in youth, under her husband's and when her husband is dead under her son's. She could have independence at no period in her life.

Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On* is about the secret lives of men and women .The novel employs several strands using memory, experience and written texts, the diaries of a deceased father in a palimpsest self history, that is entangled in an endless complex drama. The novel introduces to us, a father who delights in the human body, its mysteries, its passion, and the knowledge that it contains and hides; a mother, who controls and exerts her love mercilessly; a sister separated in childhood, an uncle, who plays games of life and death as a member of the Bombay underworld; a passionate love concern that gripe the family apart and a young woman left to make sense of the world and of her own sexuality. It is a story that begins, conventionally enough, with a woman's discovery of her father's diary.

Manjari Ahuja is a middle- class widowed woman who suffers tremendously in life. She informs us in detail about the past life of her family and also about her own life. The novel unfolds her stream of consciousness with a flashback technique. Her father, Badri Narayan's diary which she reads after his death, helps in the unfolding of her childhood days. She enjoyed

warmth and affection in a close-knit family. After the birth of her younger sister, Malvika, she felt herself responsible to her family which meant 'Baba-Mai-Malu and I' (*Moving On, 41*)

The novel presents the personal life of Manjari's parents and her own life through two voices i.e. Manjari and Baba's diaries. The past is unravelled through Baba's diaries that Manjari finds after his death. As Manjari grapples with the challenging present, she reviews the events of the past in the retrospective light of Baba's self-disclosures. The content of the diaries unfolds surprises concerning the image of her father. These diaries cease to remain external and magnetize the internal - i.e., Manjari's own story. Derrida, while exploring "Plato's Pharmacy," maintains in his reflections on writing, "If it were purely external, writing would leave the intimacy or integrity of psychic memory untouched." (*Dissemination, 1858*) But here the external (Baba's diaries) becomes internal to the narrative and to a great extent controls and contributes to the narrative flow. As Deshpande says herself: "Memories and pictures of the past, dreams, hopes and plans for the future – these are as real to us as the present" (*Literary Review, 6*). The past life of Baba, which is full of alienation, betrayal and violations, is presented through his diaries.

All violation of social norms by individuals stems from the quest for independence and self-realization. This however brings in social boycott. The individual is left afloat to find his own moorings. Manjari's father was the first child in his family. He does not fit in; even as a boy he was different from his siblings and cousins. Her grandfather, Badri Narayan being a Gandhian, marries a Harijan girl, revolting against 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 for the second time with a Brahmin girl "who

had an inauspicious Mangal in her horoscope” (MO,7). The Revelation of these facts to Badri Narayan by his father, when the latter was on his death bed, changes the son’s (Badri’s) view about him from a dull man to a rebel. This changed perspective about his father leaves Badri Narayan forlorn after his father’s death. Left alone after the marriage of his sister Gayatri, the death of his father comes to Badri in the form of an “emptiness, a blankness that seemed to swallow” him up. He is completely left distraught not just with the finality of death, but with its ability to make nothing of life. (MO,14)

In the beginning of the novel Manjari falls in love with Shyam, a Sindhi and a cinematographer by profession, and marries him against the wishes of her parents. While living with Shyam, she realizes the value of the place and people with whom she had lived for a long time. The indifferent attitude of Shyam’s family members and his suffocating house bring about a drastic change in her: “I remember how I changed even in that short while, from an open, friendly girl into a suspicious unhappy one” (MO,262)

Unfortunately, Shyam’s death within three years of marriage leaves Manjari lonely and vulnerable facing all sorts of hardship. She has to maintain her family, her relationships and a cordial behavior. Her study of medicine is discontinued. She somehow manages to get a B.A. degree, and takes up odd jobs. She feels victimized in society in a number of ways because of her widowhood.

Manjari tries to discover herself with the help of her father Badri Narayan’s diary which throws light on her parent’s lives, their initial married life, and the little battles in the family and so on. Her father had a passion for the human body, but Vasundhara, her mother, had a different passion altogether. She was interested in aesthetics, beauty in art, in creation; and the feeling of

love mattered for her more than the body. Her interest in writing was inborn. She liked to write stories on the deep unspoken love of her heroines. She had been a dedicated mother and wife, and so had naturally felt betrayed and shocked when Manjari married Shyam, leaving aside her studies and career in medicine.

Inheriting the rebellious spirit of his father, Badri marries Mai (Vasu), a girl of another Brahmin caste whose “tiny dainty body, her exquisite face that drew him to her so immediately” (*MO,107*) He is an anatomist. He has a skeleton -jokingly called Mr. Bones -in his home. This body and his own is important to him. But he is not totally physical or sensual. It is not only the beautiful body of Mai (Vasu) which attracts him towards her but “an emotion stronger than any he had felt until then” (*MO,107*). It makes him overlook the fact that Mai did not feel the same way for him. Badri is confident of making up the deficiency in her feelings through his love and passion but he was “hopelessly, completely naïve” (*MO, 108*). Their divergent ideas about passion come as the first discordant note in his idea of perfect love. Being a passionate man, the desires of the body hold immense importance for him but his wife, Vasu, fails to respond with equal intensity. Vasu’s passivity in physical relations makes it impossible for Badri to get any pleasure from their bodies.

Dissatisfaction in sexual relations brings despair and frustration for Baba “You can convince yourself that one can love enough for two, but what about passion?” (*MO,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, not 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 the body on Vasu’s part act

as barriers, separating her from Baba, hampering the harmony in marital life which he hankered after throughout his life.

Baba in his diary had mentioned two dominant emotions- joy and sorrow- that drive life. He had felt guilty for not supporting Manjari in her married life and so he thought of her second marriage with Raja brushing aside the age-old custom of women compulsorily leading a life of widowhood. He wanted Manjari to move on, “Grief shackles you to the past, it pinions you to a moment of time, whereas happiness sets you free, it allows you to move on; Jiji has to learn to move on” (MO,304).

But Manjari does not agree to marry Raja, a widower with a son, because of the promise she had made to herself after the death of Shyam. To strengthen her mind, she visits the place near the sea where Shyam had committed suicide and revives herself to her past emotional life. She decides to move on all alone: Since Shyam’s death I’ve travelled alone.... It was when I stood facing the sea after Shyam’s death that it began, something that has grown over the years, a conviction that I would not let anyone into my life ever again. (MO,261)

Manjari seems to have realized the underlying philosophy of her parents who seemed to suggest to her: “when you love someone, like I did Shyam, you become vulnerable” (MO,261). So, she decides to protect herself from getting hurt. Yes, her father Baba and Mai should not have told this word.

The significance of the title *Moving On* lies in the second epigraph that speaks of the continuity of life and also of the inevitability of death. Manjari narrates the story of her family not only through the diary of her Baba, but also by recalling the past incidents. Her Baba and

Mai carried on with their pleasures and pains. Malu, her sister, who died giving birth to a baby girl, continues to live in her child. Raja moves on in spite of his loneliness. The story is full of deaths- Mai's painful death due to her illness, Laxman's bizarre death due to his criminal activities, the accidental death of Raman's friend, the suicidal death of Shyam out of grief, the natural death of Baba, and of Baba's friend Krishna, her aunt Gayatri's husband. Deshpande is of the view that life would be dull and static if nothing happens; both happiness and sorrow are required to bring a force or movement in life.

Similarly, Manjari recalls her quarrels with her mother. One day her mother says "one of those clinching arguments parents use- clinching because there is no reply to it" (*MO, 206*) when Mai accuses her of breaking her (Mai's) heart by defying her wishes. Mai says that no person realizes the grief of breaking the heart unless his or her own heart gets broken by his or her own children. But Manjari feels that parents too can break their children's hearts. Manjari's heart gets broken at the sight of her dying mother and the empty space where her leg should have been.

The house of Shyam's parents provided no emotional support to Manjari. She felt alienated. She is restored to her real self when she returns to her Baba's house, though she has her own resentment towards her father's legacy to Sachi. The house provides her both safety and security which was disturbed for sometime by the underworld goons. Raja makes necessary security arrangements, and the Police inspector reveals the fact to Manjari that Raman Kumar, the new tenant, was a suspicious character. Manjari shakes off her weakness for Raman Kumar, and throws him out of the house. She justifies in her retort her transformed personality as a revolutionary step towards this lustful society:

.... I rage at him, uncaring of his expostulations, what it is for a woman to live alone? I gave up wearing saris because I didn't want to look womanly, I cut my hair short like a man's, I wore my most forbidding expression. But it was of no use. They can smell it, yes, they can smell the woman in you (MO,284)

Thus the frustrations, disappointments, failures and hopeless dreams of life mould Manjari in a new form, and she decides to be skilful and confident in re-organizing her life. She is now determined not to sell the house and not to be frightened. Thus the rebel in Manjari prompts her to bring about a radical change in her character. Manjari accepts that change is inevitable for survival: 'yes, I've changed, Raja. I couldn't have survived if I hadn't changed' (MO,69)

However, Manjari also repents her rejection of Raja's marriage proposal. Wiping tears from her eyes she thinks she acted stupid. She remembers her father's words stating it is man's imperfectness which forces him to go against his own thought. Manjari tries to pacify her restless soul by the couplet from the *Isha Upanishad* which her father learnt from Ramchandra sir:

Purnam adah, purnam idam, purnat purnam udachayate

Purnasya purnam addaya purnam evavasisyate. (MO,336)

His father explains this verse to Baba. "It asserts that creation cannot make a dent in the wholeness." To achieve wholeness is the final stage of evolution or salvation for the soul. But it is really difficult to attain 'wholeness' because the moment our "umbilical cord is cut, we begin

our search for the part of ourselves that will complete us,...It never happens, I know that now.”(MO,336)

Conclusion

Thus Deshpande's novel, *Moving On*, modernizes women's ambitions and aspirations without destroying the domestic frame of their lives. It widens women's space. In respect of narrative technique also the novel is both revolutionary and evolutionary because it allows a daughter to peep or investigate into the life of her parents, and thus remove the orthodox barriers of privacy and authority. *Moving On* is a re-affirmation of Deshpande's view of liberal domesticity, as opposed to aggressive or militant feminism for she essentially writes for human beings; of a kind of domesticity that leaves room for necessary adjustments and re-adjustments. There is a movement in the novel from various mode of victimization to possible escape routes. The title suggests that in spite of victimization women can and do move on.

Works Cited

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