

The portrayal of mother-daughter relationship in Shashi Deshpande's Short-Stories

Ajay Sangwan

Shiv Colony, Near ITI, Bhiwani, Haryana, India

Abstract

The Indian culture gives vital place to a mother. She comes next to God. As Devaki Jain points out, "everything life-giving is mother" (Devaki, XIX). Traditionally, she is likened to Shakti: The Goddess of power. In Hinduism, the words '*Jagatjanani*', '*Jagatmata*' and '*Jagadhatri*' evidence the prominent position attributed to the mother Goddess. "A mother is a woman first, and a woman is a mother as soon as she is born" (Usha Bande, 1). Due to this reason, a woman is often called 'Ma' or 'Mata', the world itself symbolises devotion, love, care and self-sacrifice. The mother is repository of all constructive values which influence the quality of life and transform the society. She is the creative, protective and centrifugal force in a family. The concept of mother has been treated with utmost care and concern in our culture and literature.

Keywords: Hinduism, concept, treated, literature, goddess

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande examines, in detail, the complexities in the mother-daughter relationship. Her mothers are affectionate and altruistic, their daughters do not obey them blindly but at the terminating point there is a note of reconciliation between them. There is a constant mother-daughter tension in her stories because the educated and the forward-looking daughters cannot identify themselves with the mother nor do they toe the given line.

In some of her stories, Deshpande portrays the mother-daughter relationship seen from the perspective of a mother trying to reach across a barrier to her daughter. "Why a Robin" and "It Was Dark" are first person narratives of a woman's real concern at her inability to be an ideal mother, the epitome of succour and comfort, and her difficulty in communicating with her daughter.

Shashi Deshpande depicts mother-child relationship as a very close and emotional one. Mother's love for her child is, beyond doubt, the purest form of love and self-sacrifice. The essence of motherhood lies in the protective and selfless love for their children. The mother helps her child to tide over the emotional crisis. The story "It Was Dark" portrays the mother as a strong woman who, to ensure her daughters' welfare, forsakes the conventional attitude, regarding the problem of rape. The grief-stricken mother narrates the grim and gloomy tale of her fourteen-year-old daughter who gets kidnapped and raped by a stranger. Silence and the feeling of isolation haunt the family members since the girl is brought back home after three days of her abduction. Through the drawn curtains of her room, the mother can see her daughter sleeping in a "foetal position" on her side, with knees drawn up. The posture is an implied hint that there is presence of "a new life" in the dark womb of the girl.

A survey analyses that more than 90 percent of victims show one or the other emotional problem after having been sexually abused. "These problems includes anger, fear, depression, crying spells, anxiety, irritability, loss of self esteem, feeling of humiliation, alienation and a sense of helplessness and vulnerability" (Pratibha Chauhan, 1). The abduction and sexual abuse left a deep imprint on the mind

of the girl. This traumatic experience virtually turns her into a stone. She continues to live without seeing or feeling anything. The girl had lost her mental equilibrium and she was not in a state to recognize even her parents. "There had only been a constant swivelling of her eyes, like a person searching for something" (22). The "search" seemed to have ended after reaching home and her eyes remained fixed on one spot on the ceiling.

The mother recollected those three days, when they waited for the daughter, "were like an abyss, cutting us off completely from the past" (19). The parents have to face, not only the grief of the daughter and the risk of her pregnancy but also the censure of the society, hidden behind the ugly mask of sympathy. The news about the girl in the paper has made the neighbours curious and a group of women have come to meet them. The mother is reluctant to meet them but her husband urges her to face the reality. She has read such news items many times in the paper and reacted to them, but this time her daughter's news leaves her tongue-tied. Commenting on the role of society in such cases, Dr.Savita Malhotra, Professor in Psychiatry at the PGI, Chandigarh says, "There is an urgent need to take up the problem of child sexual abuse as a large social issue which the society has a responsibility, to help the victims overcome their trauma and move on with life as normally as possible(Pratibha Chauhan, 1).

The typical male attitude is revealed when the father condemns the mother for not teaching the girl about the lurking dangers round the corner. The mother is no less worried than her husband but she keeps her cool and looks for a solution out of the mess, they are in. The mother remembers her own youthful days when she had been warned, "Don't, don't, don't... you're a female" (23). In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the view that she is to be given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her life in future. The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is perpetually reminded of her femininity. She is prevented from developing her individuality. Her mother constantly reminds her that a girl is destined for

man. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage-market. Simone de Beauvoir observes, “the daughter, for the mother, is at once her double another person, the mother is at once overweening affectionate and hostile towards her daughter. She saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of revenging herself for it” (Simone de Beauvoir, 309). In other words, a daughter is an alter ego of the mother. The mother wants to realize her unfulfilled dreams through her daughter.

The mother sees a marked change in the daughter after the incident. The girl was a “small, fastidious eater” but now she drinks and eat “eagerly, almost greedily” (21). Probably the girl was not given enough to eat during those three days. The mother pressurized the daughter to reveal everything about the incident, but in vain. The strategy of “silence” is used as a powerful medium to reconstruct the entire episode. The mother is careful about the impact of an unpleasant situation upon the tender psyche of her young daughter. All her efforts to make the daughter talk about the incident, elicits the answer: “It was dark”. Suddenly, it seems to the mother that “the enemy was not the dark, it was not being alone; it was the man” (25). The rapist is identified with “the dark” or with “the evil”. A.N.Dwivedi interprets that “the dark” represents the engines of tyranny and forced submission (Dwivedi,221).The metaphor of the “dark”, with the same signification, is also used in Shashi Deshpande’s very first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) where the protagonist Sarita was afraid of “the dark” at night since she feared that her husband would invade her body and commit monstrosities upon her. The “dark” engulfs her completely and Sarita yearns for the “light”. The metaphor of “dark” is here associated with fearfulness and tyranny.

Mothers in Deshpande’s world stand by their daughters in their hours of need. The mother in the story shows maturity and wisdom in tackling the tricky situations. As a constructive force, she reacts against the conventional morality. She manages to console her and brings the daughter back to her senses. Her action of pulling back the curtains of her daughter’s room implies that she wants to light up the dark recesses of her child’s mind. “Sunlight poured into the room, mote upon mote, invading it, filling it with brightness” (25). This symbolises that the mother refuses to accept the present state of her daughter. By sheer determination, she brings her daughter back in the stream of life, where she is ready to fight against oppression, against the society, which dehumanizes woman. The story ends on an optimistic note. The daughter turns her gaze to her mother. This shows that she is heading towards a normal life. Triumphant, the mother says, “She saw me” (25). At last, the daughter ‘responded’ to the motherly care. Through the incident of rape, Deshpande’s purpose is to depict the reality of women’s position in the society. Her women have learned to fight against oppression, at least, for their daughter’s sake.

Deshpande brings into sharp focus the absolute necessity of the benign, protective and vigilant presence of a mother. The mothers are particularly protective towards their daughters, and that is why they put restrictions on their movements especially during the adolescent years. The mother, in the story “Can You Hear Silence” is a working woman, who keeps a protective watch on her three adolescent daughters- Rashmi, Chhaya and Megha. She has already warned them about the ways of the world that they

should neither talk nor go anywhere with any stranger. She makes her daughters aware of the realities of the life. The mother wants to bring them up as graceful and dignified young girls. One day, when a man offers chocolate to Megha in the shop, Rashmi hisses at her saying, “Don’t you know what men do to girls?” (31) Megha, too, is conscious of the most dreadful thing that can happen to a girl. When the mother hears about this incident, she pats Rashmi approvingly. She fully understands her responsibility as a mother and so teaches her daughters the way of life to avoid any mishappening. The presence of a mother is very important for the overall development of the children.

Sometimes mothers crave to have a fulfilled relationship with their daughters. “Whya Robin” focuses the mother, who strives to overcome her feelings of inadequacy and failure in front of her brilliant daughter, and gains confidence after ridding herself of her fragile obsessions. The story depicts the hostility of a twelve-year-old girl towards her semi-educated mother. The mother often feels isolated from her husband and the only daughter. She considers herself “foolish”, “stupid”, “inarticulate”, and “dull” in their presence. One day the daughter is asked to write a composition on a robin in the school. The girl seeks the mother’s help in vain, for she can offer information on any bird except a robin. It was almost for the first time that the daughter has asked for her help in this matter. The mother feels ashamed of herself, as she cannot rise up to her daughter’s expectations. Her failure to help her irritates the child, who bursts out, “You’ve been no help, no use at all” (50).

The mother is conscious of having failed her daughter and tries to make amends by suggesting that she should write about a peacock instead, but the girl dismisses the suggestion. T.N Geetha points out that “Peacock” that stands for “antiquity and the past tradition brings out the plight of the traditionally educated or nurtured mother” and “robin on which the daughter wants to write stands for modernity” (T.N.Geetha, 184).Disgusted at the mother’s obtuseness, the girl turns towards her father for help. Her tone and the glances lacerate the mother internally as if she had “bleeding nicks” all over her body that “bleed profusely and heel fast” (51). The rejection by the daughter terrifies the mother.

The daughter is indifferent towards the emotional needs of her mother. Moreover, there is no warmth in the relations between the husband and the wife. There is total “blankness” between them. Their two beds are like “two islands”, as the lady describes them. The woman suffers from a sense of guilt for being a “total failure- as a wife, as a companion, as a mother” (52).

On the other hand, a perfect understanding exists between the father and the daughter. It adversely affects the girl’s relationship with her mother. The mother feels “helpless” for she cannot cope with her daughter’s fits of excitement, her questions, her rage, her tantrums and her ideas. She longs for a better and closer relationship with her daughter and thinks: “Bridges have to be build. They do not come out of nothing. They have to be created” (55). With the realization of this fact, the mother escapes alienation and loneliness, and begins to take pride in her motherhood. Rapt in such thoughts, one night, she hears the sobs of her daughter from the adjacent room and she gets up to attend to her. The daughter is on the verge of womanhood and is practically lonely. She seeks comfort in her mother’s

company. The mother tries to allay her fears: "I talk to her gently, trying to make her feel it is natural, a part of growing up, something to be welcomed, accepted. She listens to me silently, lying there her knees drawn up to her chest like an unborn foetus, Waiting to be born again" (56).

When the mother prepares to leave the room, the girl firmly holds her arm and asks her if she too has been frightened thus. The mother told the daughter that she too had undergone the same experience and her grandmother held her hand as she was holding hers. The daughter is surprised to hear about her mother's grandmother and wants to know more about her. The mother had long been waiting to tell her daughter about her childhood experiences. For the first time, the mother feels that the 'bridge' is being build between the two.

Daughters always need mothers to train, protect and guide them. Psychologists believe that mother is indispensable for girls, particularly during puberty and adolescence. Here, too, the daughter's attainment of puberty ends her unnatural estrangement from the mother. The girl's father can cater to her intellectual needs only but her mother can satiate her psychological needs. The comfort lies in the mutual understanding, sympathy and help. The daughter, at last, comes out of the father- fixation. The womanhood brings them closer together. The mother has found, at least, one 'key' to open one door. The realization of the suffering of life unites them and the woman may now give up the thought of self- abnegation.

"Lucid Moments" is another mother-oriented, touching story. It discloses a dying woman's search for her mother's name, and this process highlights her own individuality. Sumati is in her mid-fifties. She is on her deathbed. For the past few days, her mind has been disorientated. She amazes her daughter Sujata by asking a strange question, "What is my mother's name?" (71) Sujata's maternal grandma dies while giving birth to her mother and she has never spoken of her mother to the children.

The mother's question helps the daughter to mull over her own bitter relation with her mother in the past. The daughter recalls that unlike her sister, Shilpa, she never acquainted herself with her mother's requirements or even discussed hers to her. There was an unnatural yawn between the two. The mothers under all circumstances try to be protective and careful towards their children. Sumati once tried to reduce her daughter's grief of her barrenness but Sujata rebuffed her mother in anger. The daughter feels that her mother is wrong by showing her sympathy for her grief. She cries, "I would not let her intrude into that dark world of mine" (71). The reconciliation between the mother and the daughter takes place when the mother is struggling between life and death. Sujata's attitude is completely changed towards her dying mother. The daughter now nurses her with all the motherly care and affection. The mother is sweating profusely, and Sujata sponges her body. She also applies "red bindi" and "mangalsutra" to her, the sign of wifehood. It also helps the daughter to brood over her life with her husband, Shyam. She, at once, longs for his support and to be back home. On seeing her mother, the daughter feels that she is sharing with her mother the "pain of dying" as they both once "suffered together the pangs of my birth" (77). The daughter cannot go with her dying mother but can take the edge off the pain.

After the mother's death, Sujata saves her mother from the agony of facing total oblivion, by teaching Shilpa's daughter

her grandma's name. Deshpande provides the reader with an insight to probe into a social condition that condemns a woman to die unnoticed, unremembered and muted as an individual. The loss of identity is the root cause of all problems in human life. At least, for Sumati, there is no identity crisis. Deshpande repeatedly stresses the close relationship that exists between a mother and a daughter.

Deshpande provides a complete picture of this relationship to the reader. Stories like "It Was Dark", "Why a Robin" show mother's perspective of the situation, while the story like "Lucid Moments" depicts daughter's point of view of this relationship. Usually, in all the stories, the daughter and the mother, both move from periphery to the centre and they are seen standing on a platform where they can convey their respective views to each other.

References

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *It Was Dark and Other Stories*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1986.
2. Jain, Devaki. Ed. *Indian Woman*. New Delhi: Publications Division, 1975.
3. Bande, Usha. Introduction. *Mothers and Mother-Figures in Indo- English Literature*. Jalandhar: ABS Publications, 1994.
4. Chauhan, Pratibha. "90 percent cases go unreported." *Sunday Tribune*, 2003.
5. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. H. M. Parshely. Harmond, 1953.
6. Worth: Penguin Books, 1983.
7. Dwivedi AN. *Recurring Metaphors in Shashi Deshpande*. The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande. Ed. R. S. Pathak. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998.
8. Geetha TN. *The Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande*. Indian Women Novelists.
9. Ed. RK. Dhawan. V. 1. New Delhi: Prestige books, 1991.