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Women, Gender and Society: The Mother-Daughter Relationship in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

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Abstract: Shashi Deshpande is an Indian novelist writing in English who gives voice to the anguished female psyche through her novels. A relationship forms the crux of her writing. She has discussed various aspects of human relationship in her novels. The mother-daughter relationship is of immense importance to her. *Small Remedies* (2000), represents two types of the mother-daughter bond. The first is the relationship between Bai and Munni. Bai is a famous singer of Gwalior Gharana and Munni is her daughter from her illicit relationship with Ghulam Saab, a Muslim colleague of her and the other mother-daughter relationship involves Leela and Madhu. Leela-Madhu relationship represents the healthy aspect of the mother-daughter bond. Madhu is a motherless child who was brought up by her father. After her father's sudden demise, Leela acts like her mother. This paper aims at examining various aspects of these two relationships as portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: Human Relationship, Patriarchy, Oppressed Psyche, Society

Ours is a male-dominated society. Here, things are often judged through a male's point of view. Women's voices remain silenced. A relationship is an important aspect of our existence. If we cast a glance at the depiction of human relationship in art and literature, we shall find that emphasis has been laid on parent-son rather than parent-daughter relationship. In most of the cultures, the mother-daughter relationship is overlooked. Shashi Deshpande gives voice to modern women's predicament as daughter, wife and mother in the context of Indian society. She is a prolific writer who addresses the issues which have

been ignored or unexplored in Indian writing in English. Till date, she has authored ten novels and has analysed the issue of the mother-daughter relationship in almost all of her novels. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

Shashi Deshpande's early novels were published just at the time the post-*Midnight's Children* generation of writers was becoming big news. Since she refused to play by global rules, she could not be included in this league. The only other exportable slot the media could think of was the Champion of Oppressed Women. But anyone who has read her novels carefully knows that her special value lies elsewhere-in an uncompromising toughness, in her attempts to do what has never been attempted in English, her insistence on being read on her own terms and a refusal to be packaged according to the demands of the market. (Mukherjee 2000: n.p.)

The relationship is an important aspect of Shashi Deshpande's writings. For her literature is an exploration of human emotions. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan she says, "Human relationship is what a writer is involved with Person to person and person to society relationships-these are the two primary concerns of a creative writer and, to me, the former is of immense importance. My preoccupation is with interpersonal relationships and human emotions" (Pathak 252).

The mother-daughter relationship is an important issue in the domain of creative writing in English by women writers. It was Adrienne Rich who first talked about the patriarchal suppression of the mother-daughter relationship in her book *Of Women Born*. Later, feminist psychologists such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein raised the issue of the alienation of the feminine-self that patriarchal practices cause. Commenting on the contradiction of the mother-daughter relationship, Marianne Hirsch writes:

There can be no systematic and theoretical study of women in patriarchal culture, there can be no theory of women's oppression that does not take into account women's role as a mother of daughter and a daughter of mother, that does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generations of women and that does not study that relationship in which it takes place:

the emotional political, economic and symbolic structures of family and society. (19)

In traditional discourses, be it religion, sociology, psychology or any other discipline, it is the mother-son relationship that is focused while the mother-daughter bond is trivialized and depreciated. As Adrienne Rich writes, "daughters have been nullified by silence" (1986: 226). In most cultures, the mother-daughter relationship remains unrecognized. Indian society also neglects the issue. Even in myths, it is absent. Sudhir Kakar observes:

In a patriarchal culture, myths are inevitably man-made and man-oriented. Addressing as they do the unconscious wishes and fears of men, it is the parent-son rather than the parent-daughter, relationship which become charged with symbolic significance. (1986: 157)

Feminist examinations of women's issues have analysed the derogatory position of women in the context of man but few explorations have raised the issue of female relations within a familial and social context. Shashi Deshpande has explored the nuances of the mother-relationship in the context of Indian social scenario. This paper is an attempt to explore the mother-daughter relationship in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000).

Small Remedies covers wider issues than Deshpande's earlier creative adventures. It represents the diverse Indian culture. As Meenakshi Mukherji writes in her review of the novel:

In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande is attempting much more than she did in her earlier novels—all five of them different from each other—but smaller than this in scope...But none of them gathered up as this new novel does, in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of our composite culture where an Anthony Gonsalves (the reference to "Amar Akbar Anthony" is deliberate), a Hamidabai and Joe can all be part of Madhu's extended family, and the daughter of Ghulam Saab can opt, though not very easy to get accepted as Shailaja Joshi. (Mukherjee 2000: n.p.)

Small Remedies presents two different aspects of the mother-daughter relationship. The first is the mother-daughter relationship between Bai and Munni. Bai is a famous musician and singer and Munni is her daughter from her relationship with Ghulam Saab. Trying to cope

with her own grief over the death of her son Aditya, Madhu takes the responsibility to pen down Bai's experiences as she is "the doyenne of Hindustani music" and the mother of her childhood friend Munni. The hostility between Mother and daughter captures Madhu's attention as she tries to reconnect it with her own childhood Madhu's friendship with Munni didn't last long. The cause of separation was Munni's allegation that her (Madhu's) father was involved with another woman. But, after all, they were fast friends for a while.

The next mother-daughter relationship involves Madhu herself and her affiliation with Leela who serves as a mother to her. Madhu is a motherless child. Her mother died after her birth and she was brought up by her father. After her father's sudden death, Leela acts like her mother. Leela and Bai represent two different facets of conjugality and motherhood.

Bai deserts her marital home in order to pursue her career as a singer. She accepts a Muslim partner, Ghulam Saab as her lover. Munni is their daughter but she is not ready to accept Ghulam Saab as her father. Bai maintains complete silence on her lover Ghulam Saab and her daughter Munni while narrating her life to Madhu. She names her daughter Meenakshi Indorekar in order to conceal her marital dichotomy.

She gave that child the name 'Indorekar'-the name she adopted as a singer (from her mother's home town Indore)-not compromising either her maiden or her married one Meenakshi Indorekar. Marking her out as her child alone, not the child of her marriage, not the child of her lover (Deshpande 2000: 169).

Though Bai is a rebel and crosses patriarchal boundaries in her pursuit of music she fails to realize the need to nurture which is an essential quality of a woman. This causes an imbalance in her relationship with Munni. She pursues a new career but this choice subdues her maternal instinct. Munni also creates a different identity for herself to oppose her mother. She begins to hate everything that Bai stands for. Since Bai creates her new world by neglecting her duty as wife and mother, Munni prefers that very role her mother had rejected. In other words, she prefers respectability over achievement and recognition.

Leela, on the other hand, is a nurturer by heart. She maintains warm relations not only with her own children but also with the children from her husband's former marriage. She is caring and nurturing while

Bai lacks onus and care. This lack of responsibility and mutuality become a source of discord in the Bai-Munni relationship. Madhu focuses on this issue when she reflects:

. . . I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself, through the songs that speak of '*maa ka pyar*'. But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who ignored her daughter, Ketaki's mother, stern, dictatorial and so partial to her sons. Sunanda, sweetly devious and manipulating: Som's mother, so demanding-none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing sobbing mother of the movies. (Deshpande 2000: 183).

The Bai-Munni relationship is characterized by animosity and antagonism. But the chaos in the relationship occurs not because of any repression by the mother; nor from the daughter's feeling of non-cooperation by her mother in her move towards independence. It originates from the daughter's expectations to conform to the picture of a good mother. It is the daughter's inability to accept her mother's independent move that results in incompatibility.

Munni rejects her mother Savitribai because she chooses a track which is distinct and new. She is not a mother in the traditional sense. Munni's inability to accept her mother as a distinguished singer causes estrangement between them. Bai finds herself thrust into the role of a nurturer and is unable to pay the price it demands. She refuses to nurture. On the other hand, Munni expects her mother to be like all mothers. Born into a wealthy upper-caste Brahmin family, Bai develops a passion for music. Her mother instructs her to sing devotional songs, "aarti songs, ritual songs, stotras" (Deshpande 27). When she sings for the first time in the presence of her family members, she is depreciated as it is improper for girls and young women from the upper-caste families to sing in public. She gets married at an early age. As a daughter-in-law, she is not allowed to attend musical concerts. Unable to suppress her yearning for music, she persuades her father-in-law to allow her to take music lessons. Finally, she leaves her husband and martial home in order to learn music. Her guru Pandit Kashi Nath Buwa who once refuses to accept her as his disciple and tells her that music is not an honourable profession for a woman. Thus, she had to pay a lot for her distinct choice. As Madhu remarks:

In Neemgaon she was 'the signer woman', and there was something derogatory about the words, yes, I can see that now, about the way they said them. To my father, she was 'Savitribai'. But when he said the name, when he spoke of her, there was respect and admiration in his voice. To Babu, she was '*that bai*', by which he meant 'that woman'-the words accompanied by a movement of the head which said, 'the woman next door', as well as indicating a kind of rude contempt for her. (Deshpande 2000: 29)

In spite of such hurdles and humiliations, she decides to continue her career as a singer.

Bai and Munni hold a contradictory status in their respective ambitions. If Bai struggled for success as a singer, Munni wanted its opposite—a life of dignity and discipline, "she yearned for the conventional life Bai had found so stultifying (Deshpande 2000: 169).

The Leela and Madhu relationship reflects a healthy facet of the mother-daughter relationship. Leela is not the biological mother of Madhu but she plays the role of mother to her. After the sudden demise of Madhu's father, she looks after Madhu and enables her the opportunity to enjoy her independence. She encourages Madhu to do the job outside the home when Madhu gives up as the editor of a local magazine after the birth of her son. She warns her against the unnecessary involvement in motherhood. Leela plays an important role in shaping the character of Madhu. She shares a very natural relationship with Leela. She says, "With Leela in my life, I've never felt the lack of a mother" (Deshpande 2000: 151). Thus, Leela and Madhu relationship is based on mutuality and reciprocity.

If we consider the whole creative adventures of Shashi Deshpande, we shall see that the mother-daughter relationships are often incompatible except Leela-Madhu relationship in her *Small Remedies* (2000). Her women protagonists detest their mothers and consider them agents of patriarchal practices. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Sumi in *A Matter of Time*, all despise their mothers. That is why the critic, Adele King, describes the mother in Deshpande's novels as "mother-villain" (Atrey and Kirpal 76). Relationships are inseparable from human life. So, there should be faith and mutuality in it. In the absence of mutuality, relationships become meaningless.

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