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Reconceptualizing Motherhood: A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's

Small Remedies

Abstract:

Motherhood or maternal role is a crucial issue in feminist thinking. Feminists are of the opinion that although child bearing is a biological act in women, it is often idealized and romanticized in such a way that it effaces the individuality and subjectivity of a woman. Feminists argue against such culturally constructed images of motherhood that project mothers as self-effacing, self-sacrificing, beneficent, pure and sacred. The present paper reads Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies* as a critique of this institutionalized motherhood. The novel presents the experiences of a number of women characters of different age and of different social background, as mothers. The paper tries to examine how far the author negotiates and challenges the traditional concepts of motherhood and how the text offers alternative images of the same.

Key words: feminism, woman, motherhood, society, culture, subjectivity.

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”- this famous statement by the French feminist Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) opened up new grounds of discussion for feminist thinkers. It naturally led to question the long-standing and universally accepted familial roles of women as wives and mothers. Motherhood or maternal role is, in fact, a core issue in feminism. Feminists point out that though child-bearing is a biological act in

women, the term 'motherhood' is loaded with certain culturally constructed values. In this socially constructed form, "motherhood becomes a symbol of the true 'female'; it becomes the central role for women to perform; nurturing a child is (seen as) the woman's 'natural' job" (Nayar 89). This idealization of mother role reinforces the idea that woman is born to be a mother, a device for procreation and nurture and thus offers justification for women's exclusion from the realm of production and intellect which are seen as the exclusive domain of men. Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born* (1977) is an important text in this regard that distinguishes between motherhood as experience and motherhood as an institution. Unlike feminists like Simone De Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone who in spite of acknowledging the social construction of gender roles, believe that women have to get rid of their biological obstructions (like menstruation and maternity) to find equality with men, Rich emphasizes on understanding the fact that the dominant discourse of motherhood and mother roles are often in contrast with an individual woman's experience of it. Stressing the differences between the biological process of child bearing and maternal instinct, and the idealization of this role, Rich comments: "The institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of the self"(42). This idealized form of motherhood is perpetuated through religion and myths that give examples of self-effacing, self-sacrificing, beneficent, pure and sacred mothers so much so that women internalize this idealized role as natural, pre-ordained and unalterable.

This problematics of motherhood is now a crucial concern in literature as well. According to Elaine Showalter, "women's literature in the past dealt with 'matrophobia' or the fear of becoming one's mother.... Hating one's mother was the feminist enlightenment of the Fifties and Sixties; but it is only a metaphor for hating oneself. Female literature of the 1970s goes beyond matrophobia to a courageously sustained quest for the mother." (cited in Uniyal, 27)

Contemporary Indian English writing too deals with this complex issue of motherhood. Anita Desai, Anita Rau Badami, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur are some of the many who try to explore the inner condition of mothers in our society. The mothers in their novels are caught between tradition and modernity. They question and sometimes rebel against their maternal role, but are not able to reject it outright. As observed by Ranu Uniyal, "Indian women's writing seeks to problematize this quest with a greater need for self-assertion. While we have poetic

utterances eulogizing motherhood in the Hindu *Sashtra* with calls of *vande mataram*, *jai ma* [etc]...., Indian writers have been exploring the subject of mother as a person in her own right and mothering as a product of culture” (27-28).

Taking into consideration Rich’s view of difference between motherhood as a biological experience and a social institution, the paper aims to discuss Shashi Deshpande’s novel *Small Remedies* (2000) as a critique of the institutionalized motherhood. The paper tries to examine how far the author negotiates and challenges the traditional concepts of motherhood and how the text offers alternative images of the same.

Shashi Deshpande is a leading Indian English women novelist of the contemporary era with nine novels and four short story collections to her credit. She has received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence* (1989). Deshpande’s novels are rooted in India and are exclusively concern with the middle-class women of the country. She mostly writes with a purpose of bringing into notice the predicament of middle class Indian women caught between their desire for conformity to and rejection of the familial roles bestowed upon them by society. Deshpande comments about the source of her writings:

Most of my writing comes out of my intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society: it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles conjoined upon me by society, out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman (“Of Concerns, Of Anxieties”).

Her seventh novel *Small Remedies* is written in the form of a biography within a biography. It tells the story of Madhu Saptarshi, who has lost her only son Aditya (Adit) in a bomb blast. Madhu takes up the offer of writing a biography of Savitri Bai Indorekar, a famous classical singer and goes to stay at Bhavanipur to interview Bai and also to come into terms with her own grief. Madhu takes us into the life of Savitri Bai and tries to explain Bai’s conflicting relationship with her daughter, Munni (Meenakshi Indorekar). Through the interwoven life

histories of these two women, the novel reveals various facets and meanings of being a mother in our society.

Mothers are of crucial concern in Deshpande's novels. *Small Remedies* is not her first book that addresses the complexities involved in the role of a mother. In her previous novels, however, the focus was almost always on the protagonists' relationship with their mothers and the mothers are seen through the eyes of the protagonist-daughters. In *Small Remedies*, on the contrary, it is the experience of women as mothers that becomes the focal point. Madhu, starts by looking at Bai from the perspective of her daughter, Munni who was a childhood friend of Madhu, but eventually she overcomes this fallacy and succeeds in perceiving Bai as a fellow mother. "I have to negotiate my way between this woman and the cruel mother of my memory" (170), Madhu realizes after her interviews with the old woman.

In Savitri Bai the novel presents a woman who is far ahead of her generation. Born and married to tradition-bound Brahmin families, Bai seeks for freedom, and to fulfill her dream to be a classical singer, she elopes with a Muslim tabla-player, known as Ghulam Saab. Leaving all the comforts and respectability of a married life, she devotes herself completely to her music and establishes herself as a famous classical singer of the country. It is this image of Bai as a heroine that Madhu is expected to portray in her book. She is to represent "...Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist who lived her life on her terms. The great artist who struggled and sacrificed everything in the cause of her art. The woman who gave up everything-a comfortable home, a husband and a family." (166) But Madhu refuses to present her as such. She instead wants to bring forth the woman behind the heroine, who has suffered discrimination in the hands of patriarchal society, the mother- who has lost her daughter in the pursuit of her career and wants to reveal the guilt and contradictions in the mother who in order to make her acceptable to the society refuses to include her daughter in her biography.

Savitri Bai's character in the novel subverts many of the images of 'cultural motherhood'. Bai stands out as an unconventional woman by refusing to confine herself in her mother role, in a society that sees child-rearing as the only occupation for women and demands a renunciation of all aim and interest of women for the sake of their children. She appears to be a selfish woman even to Madhu for 'sacrificing' her daughter for her career. The idealized image of motherhood has become so part of our psyche that it seems unnatural for a woman to have anything other

than a child as the vital truth of her life. And in fact, Savitri Bai does not reject her daughter but she does not name her after the name of her father. She gives the child the title 'Indorekar', a name she herself has adopted as a singer after the name of her mother's home town, Indore. She claims her daughter as her child alone, neither the child of her marriage, nor the child of her lover. This is a bold statement by a mother against the patrilineal tradition of our society that identifies children solely after their father erasing the name of the mother.

But this non-conformity comes in between her relationship with her daughter who wants to be an accepted member in the society and which is denied to her because of her ambiguous identity. Madhu recalls how as a child Munni underwent great mental torture when the neighbourhood girls teased her by asking her about the identity of her real father. Desperate for social recognition and respectability, she dissociates herself from Ghulam Saab, rejecting him as her father and later does the same to her mother. Unlike the usual mother-daughter relationships in fiction where the non-conformist daughter revolts against the traditional mother, here we have a daughter who, seeking approval of society goes against the non-conformist mother. Because, "as a child, she has already had a very painful experience as to how society makes life difficult for one who tries to be different or unconventional." (Sharma 69)

Madhu recalls her childhood days in Neemgaon when Savitri Bai lives their next door with Ghulaam Saab and Munni :

One of the favourite games of the girls during my childhood was playing 'house house', in which the 'mother' settles down with her little pots and pans to cook, the children go to school or self-consciously play, and the 'father' goes out to work. When he comes home, he sits, legs crossed, calling out loudly to the children or the mother (101).

This is the pattern in which family and society work. Women are to be in the house engaging themselves in child-rearing and other household activities whereas men will explore the world. But neither Munni's nor Madhu's family fits into this pattern. "Munni's family, with her singer mother, absent father and another man- a Muslim- sharing the home, was of course, radically, shockingly different. But my father, with his unorthodox ways, was an oddity in Neemgaon as

well...being a widower and bringing up his daughter on his own, with only a male servant at home”(138). If Savitri Bai challenges the stereotypical mother role, Madhu’s father too subverts the institution of motherhood by making it an androgynous role.

Here, the author’s reference to the double standards of society is noteworthy. She portrays the gross discrimination women have to undergo in a society that had one law for man and another for woman. The same society of Neemgaon that looks at Bai with an eye of disapproval for her ‘unusual’ life, accepts Madhu’s father with all his oddity: “...being a man,...he could live the way he wanted, without open censure or disapproval” (139). Even Savitri Bai’s father-in-law is no different. He had a mistress whom he visited regularly. Everybody knew this but it was not at all a matter of furor. Yet for a woman to pursue a career in classical music was scandalous. Madhu recalls, “In Neemgaon she [Savitri Bai] was ‘the singer woman’, and there was something derogatory about the words, yes I can see that now, about the way they said them”(29).

Deshpande also questions the stereotypical image of mothers sustained through films and literature. Being a motherless child, Madhu has gathered most of her ideas about motherhood from the movies. But to her surprise the mothers in real life do not conform to this image: “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 mothers of the movies”(183). Thus instead of glorifying mother role, Deshpande, in her novel reveals its realistic pictures.

Ironically, however, Madhu herself conforms to this cultural image of motherhood. She gives up her job for the sake of her son and devotes herself completely to his care. And after his sudden death she becomes the ‘white-clad’, ‘sobbing’ mother failing to find any meaning to her existence. However, Madhu’s emotions can not be rejected as being influenced by the existing idea of motherhood. As suggested by Janice Harris, “To assert that motherhood is a torture to any independent, intelligent woman is sentimental-as far removed from actual experience-as to assert that motherhood is the true and highest fulfillment any woman could desire”(cited in Minocha, 243). It’s totally a case of one’s own choice. Motherhood is a crucial experience for any woman, but it may not be the only desired truth for all. In Madhu’s case, motherhood gives her as much satisfaction as music to Savitri Bai. If for Madhu, there is nothing matters more than

her son, for Bai it is music that is the only purpose of her life, all else remaining in the periphery. Bai herself admits, “The only thing that mattered to me, the only thing that mattered about me, was my music” (126). For Madhu, “A child is a beginning, a renewal, a continuation, an assertion of immortality”. But for Bai “...perhaps it is through her music that she is reaching out to immortality, it is by putting her life on record that she hopes to live on” (168).

Even then there is a hint of guilt in Bai, the guilt over her estrangement from her daughter. Bai once said in one of her sessions with Madhu, “If only I had known...” not in the context of her daughter yet Madhu feels it to be linked with her. Moreover, Bai’s constant silence about Munni and her father in her interviews with Madhu suggests her wish to erase her past which she considers a blemish in her character and respectability. Though Savitri Bai takes a bold step by coming out of her class for her undeniable desire to become a singer, she still sees herself through the eyes of the society. Bai had to repress her maternal love because in the patriarchal society “motherhood is ‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’- that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother” (Rich 42).

Arguing that guilt is a common leitmotif in most Indian Women writing in English, Uniyal rightly comments, “... freedom for women is never a question of choice. It is to be fought for. Either you give it up and continue living like a stifled toad or you rebel and snatch it. Even if you do so, be ready to live with a permanent sulk, anger and guilt”(22). And it is this conflict in Bai that makes her eliminate the existence of her ‘illegal’ daughter from her life. The daughter who had once rejected the non-conformist mother seeking a respectable position in society, now ironically is rejected by the mother herself for a desire of social conformity. But this guilt is unknown to men for he is not accountable to anyone for his actions. Talking about Bai’s father-in-law, Madhu questions: “Did he [Bai’s father-in-law] blame himself [for his having a mistress]?”(220)

Then there is Leela, whose exclusion would make this reading of motherhood incomplete. Leela, Madhu’s aunt, who has lost her husband at a young age and marries a Christian man with two children, does not have a child of her own but as a step mother she makes all the typical assumptions about stepmothers upside down. Quite unusually, it is Leela who silently suffers all the atrocities of Paula, the daughter from her second husband, who never accepts Leela as her mother. But from her relationship with Tom, the step son, and with Madhu

whose responsibility she takes after her father's death, Leela proves that a relationship of love and care is stronger than a biological link.

Thus, in her novel, Shashi Deshpande discloses various facets of motherhood as against the institution that homogenizes mothers under stereotypical images. She demystifies the mother role by showing its realistic pictures. A mother is also a human being with her own likes and dislikes, aims and aspirations in life. A demand to her to be selfless and benign will be a rejection of her subjectivity. Deshpande wants to bring forth this very human being behind the cloak of the mother. In order to conform to the pattern of institutionalized motherhood, mothers have been sacrificing their real selves, for they know that the slightest deviation from the norms would cause them to pay a high price for it. Deshpande records Madhu's feelings: "But I've begun thinking that in writing about Bai, I'm writing about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp.... But they paid the price for their attempts to break out. Munni's rejection was the price Bai paid, Munni who yearned for the common place, the ordinary, and stifled everything that connected her to her parents" (284). Deshpande's novel, just like Madhu's book is a tribute to all those mothers who have come out of this trap and have asserted their subjectivity.

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