



MORALITY IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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Abstract

Morality is an integral part of the novel. Morality deals with the principles that differentiate between right and wrong or good and bad. Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian woman novelist, said that there is an intricate relationship between literature and morality. She is primarily concerned how the new morality is taking shape in contemporary India. It is true that both literature and religion are seriously concerned with the role of morality but it must be said at once that moral writing cannot be religious writing or vice versa. Moreover, morality in literature has a different role to play because it is not something which is taken and added from outside. She points out that the idea of morality keeps on varying from person to person. She believed that great literature should have a transparent moral foundation. She observes in *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays* that "Without morality, there is no order in the world. Order is restored only with recognition of the wrong, with some kind of atonement with redemption". Deshpande's vision and treatment of morality is constantly broadening. Almost all her major works *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, *Binding Vine*, *Roots and Shadows*, *If I Die Today*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On*, *In the Country of Deceit* and stories like *An Antidote to Boredom* etc. deals with morality through relationship. The objective of the present paper is to deal with man-woman relationship to highlight morality in Shashi Deshpande's novels *Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit*.

Keywords- Morality, Consciousness, Relationship, Atonement, Redemption.

Introduction

Morality in literature has a different role to play. Most of the important novels have strong relationship with Morality. Literally the term morality means the principles that differentiate between right and wrong or good and bad. A great imaginative novelist and critic, Henry James has

discussed the nature of this relationship at the end of his classic essay 'The Art of Fiction' (1884). He dwelt on it at great length in his critical essays on French and English writers. After James, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster also encountered with the question and observed that a novelist is not a didactic artist. His aim is not to deliver a discourse on ethical education. In fact, the

question of morality is inseparably interlinked with the artist's consciousness.

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian woman novelist has frankly expressed her views on the intricate relationship between literature and morality and it will be seen that she seems to agree with what James has said on the nature of morality and its role in shaping the aesthetic imagination of the writer. In her classic essay, "Literature and Morality" Shashi Deshpande has observed:

I said a little earlier that the process of writing is one of making discoveries. Even this little piece seems to have become a small journey of discovery for, when I began, I had no idea that I would reach this point which I now have: which is that you cannot separate the creator from what is created. Morality in literature, therefore comes from the author, basically from the philosophy of the author which is the foundation of all that s/he creates. But there is more if the writer does not have integrity, if the writer is not free, there can be no moral literature. (Writing from the Margin and Other Essays, 116)

Shashi Deshpande is primarily concerned how the new morality is taking shape in contemporary India. It is true that both literature and religion are seriously concerned with the role of morality but it must be said at once that moral writing cannot be religious writing or vice versa. Moreover, morality in literature has a different role to play because it is not something which is taken and added from outside.

Shashi Deshpande points out that the idea of morality keeps on varying from person to person. The quest for something gives a special meaning to a voice that within that speaks to us of those things and upright and wrong. It is clear that the novelist's primary concern is to give verbal formulation to the voice in order to understand the intricate

relationship between what is right and what is wrong.

In Shashi Deshpande's opinion, great literature should have a transparent moral foundation but at the same time she also asserts that it does not mean that literature preaches morality. She quotes John Gardner: "True art is moral. It seeks to improve life, not debase it." Deshpande's task is to explore the intricacies of incomprehensible motives and while the creative imagination is engaged in exploring the subtle nature of human motives, the moral voice guides indirectly the future course of action which determines the aesthetic structure of a work of art. In fact, if the character in a fiction makes a wrong choice, he has to pass through an intense fire of suffering and there is some atonement, a kind of redemption. In this connection, Shashi Deshpande discusses two important fictional characters: Raskolnikov and Emma. Both these characters are aware of the great moral wrong they had done and ultimately after passing through an intense fire of suffering they realize and redeem themselves. That is why, the novelist observes: "Without morality, there is no order in the world. Order is restored only with recognition of the wrong, with some kind of atonement with redemption" (Writing from the Margin and other essays, 109). If the novelist is committed, his/her commitment is the part of the morality of literature.

In other words, morality lies in being true to one's belief. Shashi Deshpande approvingly subscribes to U.R. Ananthmurthy's views: "A great creative writer would never simplify this phenomenon (of the fight against evil forces). There is always a tension in creative writing of a high level between the values of order and the forces of violence and anarchy". (p. 114). In fact, the serious literary writer always tries to create something which is true and alive and is undoubtedly imbued with moral vision. It is this vision which lends a new perspective to fictional art.

Deshpande's vision of Morality

Deshpande's vision and treatment of morality is constantly broadening. Almost in all her major works *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, *Binding Vine*, *Roots and Shadows*, *If I Die Today*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit* and stories like *An Antidote to Boredom*, the female protagonist has a male friend/confidant/lover with whom she is more at ease than with any other relative even husband. She behaves in a completely natural manner. With such a person she sheds each mask, every inhibition that social role-playing demands of her. Here she is neither wife nor mother; neither sister nor daughter. Her true self comes to the fore and the emergence of her peculiar personality reflects her dormant aspirations and passions which embody her mental makeup. Shashi Deshpande is actually aware of the fact that "...sometimes in relationships with the other sex certain parts of you come alive" (In the interview entitled "Women's Journey from Self-effacement to Self-actualization"). It is through these relationships that her protagonists are able to realize their true potential. In fact, these relationships serve as a trigger to their imagination. These encounters, though strange and socially unacceptable they may seem, enable them to ponder upon their own peculiar social role and situation and make them aware that there has to be some solution for their problem and make them feel confident to undertake the journey from "Self-effacement to self-actualization". This extra marital relationship (except in the case of Devyani in *In the Country of Deceit*) seems to be a necessary evil as Deshpande proclaims:

But I have seen marriages to be kind of restrictive. In a marital relationship I cannot speak of man but I can certainly speak of the woman much of the woman has to remain unexpressed. It is expected of woman that certain things are not to be done or not to be said or you have to be a certain kind of person so the real 'you' remains unexpressed.

(In the interview entitles "Women's Journey from Self-effacement to Self-actualization")

Hence, we have **Bhaskar** in **The Binding Vine**, **Kamat** in **That Long Silence** and **Naren** in **Roots and Shadows**. In these three novels the level of intimacy is minimal. Though the protagonists depend a lot on these male friends for emotional support, these are no overt signs of physical intimacy except in the case of **Indu** who has sex with **Naren** but which means nothing to her. Her primary aim in the act was to express herself without restriction because her own husband reproved of her sexual arrogance and expression. He was not comfortable with the fact that a woman can never be interested and expressive in sex, as he considers it a male prerogative. As far as **Jaya** in **That Long Silence** and **Urmi** in **The Binding Vine** are concerned, they withdraw the moment they realize that the male counterpart is interested in them as a woman. **Bhaskar** is never mentioned again and **Kamat** and **Naren** die so no question of the revival of this relationship in future arises. However, there is a shift in this arrangement in Deshpande's later novels.

In **Small Remedies**, **Moving On** and **In the Country of Deceit** these encounters are the prolonged ones and very much physical. In **Small Remedies** we have three stories running parallel to each other. The relationship between **Ghulam Saab** and **Savitri Bai** raises the question of honesty, morality and both these questions are indirectly interlinked with the theme of betrayal. It has been made explicitly clear that Bai did not want to enter into the arena of marriage because for her what was important was faith and devotion and not social sanction.

What is important to notice is that Shashi Deshpande questions the very idea of so-called social morality in order to see that the question of morality in fact is an extremely complex question which poses several social and economic challenges. The novels **Moving On** and **In the Country of Deceit** place the protagonist into the thick of a grave moral

wrong particularly in the Indian context i.e. having physical intimacy beyond the frame of marriage/outside matrimony.

Discussion

A dead man's diary as **Moving On** seems to be at first. The novel carries in it strong notes of positivism and irresistible trust in moving on: Moving on in lives -private as well as social. Through her Baba's diary **Manjari** discovers the key to put herself together. **Manjari** is the daughter of a teacher in medical college who marries at an early age much against the wishes of her parents. They have two very strong logical reasons for their resentment. Firstly, she is very young and secondly marriage at this age means she has to leave her education in medicine incomplete. But she does not listen to anybody as her passionate, defiant love for **Shyam** blinds her to the practicality of love and life. She does not want to wait to be one with him. This kind of sexual arrogance displayed so early in **Manjari's** life speaks a lot about her character. It justifies her body's involuntary response to **Raman's** impulsive touch. She experiences a very brief period of total happiness. In the early days of marital bliss with **Shyam** she felt complete. This was a precious time which put her mind and heart; body and soul together. She came from a family that offered her all the love and security that the child needs. Her mother could never reciprocate her father's love and passion for her because of her own inhibition and later it became a remote control in her hand to control **Manjari's** father as well as much of the decisions of the family. But she was a sensible mother who understood the need of both the parents in a child's life. Not only physical but mental and emotional development of a child depends a lot on people and his/her surroundings. Before marriage **Manjari** has strong ties with her family members. But as soon as she falls into love with **Shyam** she is ready to leave everything for him. It is the first time she commits a moral wrong by being self-entered and impractical. She realizes what she done within a few weeks of her marriage to **Shyam** when she is forced to live in

a room with **Shyam's** family. When financial problems arise, almost homeless **Manjari** goes back to her father's house with her ailing son **Anand**. **Anand** seems to have bridged the gap between her and her parents but it was never the same with **Malu**. She sleeps with **Shyam** and dies after giving birth to a girl. **Manjari** is still trying to come to terms with the fact of betrayal of her loving husband and dear sister when the news of her husband hits her hard. All this within a span of two years! This changes her forever. She snaps all the ties she had valued so much till date.

She decides to live on her own with two kids to take care of. She supports herself and her kids doing all kinds of odd jobs for so many years. It is the news of her mother's serious illness that brings her back for a short while. She goes back to her world of endless struggle after her mother's death. She comes back finally to be with her father who has been diagnosed with cancer and has little time left with him. She finds herself back to the square. Here she has to deal with some old as well as some new problems in store for her. There is her childhood friend **Raja** who wants to marry her, property matters (land mafia indeed), a tenant **Raman** with whom she can connect because of his homelessness and financial problems, her past and of course, her own body which has turned into an enemy against her. When **Manjari's** body responds to **Raman's** touch, she is herself surprised of the emotion. Her body takes the charge and reason and logic takes a back seat in same way as in the past. She gives herself away to the demands of the body and take a plunge into this unknown region. After that she has a number of sexual encounters with **Raman**. She re-discovers her old passionate self through him and in the course realizes that she can no longer ignore the fire of the body. She also realizes that she has done something very wrong to **Raman** who might not be able to forget her as she has not been able to forget **Shyam**. This is something that she and **Raman** can never erase for all their lives to come. At the same time there is a longing for companionship.

All these years she has starved herself of all the relationships. She had been so distant, so objective, so mechanical. This caused the disintegration of her mind and heart; body and soul. She is in her forties and is afraid to commit herself to Raja who is very serious about her. Though it is only towards the end that she realizes that Raja had always been in love with her. She promises herself to set things right by facing them - no longer running from life and relationships that she had been doing so far. She wants to share the children's joy.

In her latest novel **In the Country of Deceit**, Shashi Deshpande further explores the question of love, passion, morality and betrayal. This is a story of love at the first sight. It has all the passion and tension of teenage love except that the lovers are not at all teenagers. The girl in question is a mature independent spinster and the man holds an influential post, is married and is also the father to a ten-year old child. The social positioning as well as the age of the couple takes away all the innocence of a romantic love story and there lies the web of ploy-the deceit.

Devyani around whose life, love and passion in the novel **In the Country of Deceit** revolves is a spinster. She and her sister Savi are the daughters of an over-ambitious, over-confident father who achieves nothing in life except a piece of land on which he builds a congested house and commits suicide when he is not able to cope up with the pressure life puts on him. Her elder sister Savi marries their childhood companion Sree and settles with him. She is left alone with her ailing mother to take care of her. **Devyani** has no immediate support to fall back on. She handles the situation with maturity and responsibility which is indeed admirable for a person of her age. She stays with her till her death. After her death she receives good offers for marriage. She also receives letters from her relatives Sindhu and Keshav who persuade her to get married but she has her own doubts about an arranged marriage.

Savi and **Devyani** demolish their old house and Savi designs a modern house and Devyani supervises. **Devyani** is financially independent. She chooses to stay alone in this house. Till date she has lived a tiresome life and now she wants to be by herself. No doubt there is something peculiar about Devyani-Sindhu relationship. Sindhu never appears in the novel but her letters speak of their close alliance. Sindhu shares many private secrets with her; she lets her know of her private life with her husband Keshav. She speaks of her joy that her body gave both of them. This is a kind of re-affirmation of Devyani's, a woman's, passion. Another important acquaintance is **Rani** who was an actress and now a rich man's wife. She is Devyani's neighbour. She seems to play an instrumental role in Devyani-Ashok relationship. It is in her party that Ashok sees Devyani for the first time and is drawn towards her. Ashok again meets her at Rani's house and gets a chance to express his feelings for her when he goes to drop her. He tells her of his marital status; his nine-year old daughter and that he can promise her nothing. In spite of all this he exclaims, "*Since the day I saw you in Priya's house, your face has been with me I've never felt this way before*" (In the Country of Deceit, p. 91). This announcement turns Devyani's world upside down. Her thoughts are confused. She does not know what to say yet she feels drawn towards the inevitable.

Her restlessness may be explained through her experience after watching the police interdepartmental match in which she sees (sort of, as it is from a great distance) Ashok for the first time. That night when she goes to bed football ground scene comes back to her. At the same time, she is acutely conscious of the moral wrong to love someone by deceiving somebody else:

I believe in marriage, I believe that marriage means loyalty. It means being honest. I think it is wrong, treacherous to deceive your wife (or husband-yes, there's that too). I am always on the side of the wronged wife of husband. I'm

against the wrongdoer. As for love, I think it does not justify deceiving another person, I don't think it excuses cruelty.....(In the Country of Deceit, p. 94)

But she ultimately lands into the country of deceit when she is out of town on a business trip with Rani. Ashok follows her there and finally gets her to be with him. **Devyani** does what her heart tells her to do. There is no logic, no reason for what she does. We may say that she acted on an impulse. Their alliance turns out to be very passionate, very physical and very satisfying for both of them. Ashok confesses of having slept with many women before her. He tells her that no woman, not even his wife gave herself away with such an ease and so completely as Devyani did. This speaks of Ashok's unfulfilled physical as well as emotional love, his incompleteness and his unhappy married life. For **Devyani**, this is an altogether new experience. She longs for him. She loves him. She wants to spend limitless time with him. The two days that she spends with Ashok in Bombay are worth a lifetime for her: *"I became another person too; it was like I had uncorked a self who had been bottled up inside me all these years. He made me feel a young girl again."* (In the Country of Deceit, 189). At the same time, she is acutely conscious of the fact, *"This is what I want, this is what I'll never have"* (In the Country of Deceit, 191).

Though Ashok wants her to say that they will meet again but Devyani no longer wants to linger on in this country of deceit. Both Ashok and Devyani are aware of the moral wrong of their affair. Devyani knows she can never be at peace in this relationship and Ashok cannot bear the thought of losing his daughter to this relationship, however, it means a lot to him. Devyani constantly grapples with the question of love, life, morality and happiness. Sindhu's letter evokes a response out of her:

Why did I do it? why did I enter the country of deceit? What took me into it? I hesitate to use the word love but what

other word is there? And yet. Like the word "atonement", the word love is too simple for the complicated emotions and responses that made me do what I had done. Ultimately, I did it because he was Ashok, because we met. That's all. Our meeting- it was a miracle, a disaster. (In the Country of Deceit p. 257)

Devyani's thoughts have a striking similarity with what Badri Narayan, Manjari's father in **Moving On** thinks aloud when he writes in his diary: *"An identity becomes active, positive and meaningful only in relation to others. The whole potential of who we are and what we are is realized only through our relationship with others."* (Moving On, p. 56)

Throughout the novel Devyani is not so unhappy about the predicament but she is definitely traumatized of being the other woman, someone for whom a husband has cheated on his family. No doubt she loves Ashok but she also knows the complexity of this relationship.

It is deceit on her part with which she cannot come to terms. Though she found the ecstasy of true love through Ashok yet she has put her whole life on stake. Her relationship with her relatives can no longer be the same. She knows she has crossed the line and there lies her atonement:

The characters who make the wrong choice know they have failed to measure against the moral yardstick and they pay for this in some way or the other. There is some atonement, a kind of redemption. (Writing from the Margin and Other Essays, p. 108)

However, it is a creative writer's imagination to journey through his/her character's life and faults which he/she makes throughout the course of the novel and give it a moral meaning and ending. As Shashi Deshpande herself confirms: *"Morality lies, not in trying to prove morality, but in being true to one's belief."*

(*Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*, p. 111)

Conclusion

Morality is an integral part of Deshpande's novels. Her novels speak a lot about human beings and the complexity of their predicament in a given social structure and she is of the opinion that without morality, there is no order in the world. Order is restored only with recognition of the wrong, with some kind of atonement with redemption. She said that morality emerges out to be a genuine human concern. Almost all her major works *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, *Binding Vine*, *Roots and Shadows*, *If I Die Today*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On* and *In the Country of Deceit* etc. deals with morality. She illustrated morality through man-women relationship to in her novels.

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