

Tracing the Development of the Role of 'Matriarchal Figures' in Shashi Deshpande's Selected Novels

Dr. Sujata Bamane

Associate Professor, Department of English, Fergusson College, Pune, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, India.

Abstract: *Despite woman being the soul of any civilization, it is the hierarchy of patriarchal ideology in Indian culture that forbids the matriarchal values and offers woman a subordinate status. The present study is an attempt to judge how the matriarchal system offers woman the ruling as well as secondary position at the same time. However, the matriarchal system appears to be the sub-system of a patriarchal one. Hence, the present paper proposes to trace the changing role of matriarchal figures in the patriarchal ethos as depicted in Shashi Deshpande's selected novels. Shashi eventually in her novels goes on setting a new paradigm in which she doesn't mean the 'matriarchy' as the reversal of patriarchal form of society, but as system with its own rules. Her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* revolves around the female protagonist, Saru, who falls to be the victim of her mother's hatred. Whereas her next novel, *Roots and Shadows* projects the character of Indu, who in her struggle for self-accentuation is shown identifying herself with Akka, an old matriarch. *That Long Silence* deals with the contemptuous relationship between Jaya and her Ai that forces her to zip her lips and retract her assertion. *The Binding Vine* is a dramatization of the flourishing mother-daughter relationship to a certain extent in case of Urmi and her dead daughter, Anu. In short, matriarchal system that governs women as well men ultimately is the product of patriarchy and also the mode of its deconstruction.*

Keywords: *matriarchy, mother-daughter relationship, patriarchy, woman.*

I. Aims and Objectives and Research Methodology

The aim of the present study is to critically examine the changing role and status of woman in the patriarchal system of Indian Society. Woman is the soul of any civilization. But it is the hierarchy of patriarchal ideology in Indian culture that forbids the matriarchal values and offers woman a subordinate status. Even the ancient Indian Literature and mythology have internalized the concept of the sacrificing mother and committed, tolerating, rendering wife through the images of Sita, Savitri and so on. In case of woman, subordination results usually from factors like sex-discrimination, economic dependence, traditional customs, unfavorable environment, ignorance, superstitions, prejudices and so on. These factors conspire together to mould her mental makeup in such a way that she has to accept the subsidiary role in the given socio-economic context. A woman, who accepts the subordinate role, herself, can also be the cause of the subordination and subjugation of her own class. Such a woman is the product of the patriarchal male-dominated society and passes the same tradition on to the next generation. However, such a matriarchal system can be traced in the history of mankind thousand years ago with the advent of Dravidians followed by patriarchal system with Aryans. Hence, the matriarchal forces are found to be working within the existed patriarchal system as its sub-system and repudiate any society to be completely patriarchal. Rather both the systems co-exist. Hence, the present paper proposes to trace the changing role of matriarchal figures in the patriarchal ethos as depicted in Shashi Deshpande's selected novels. Therefore, it offers a restricted critical examination of the fluctuating position of Indian woman in the patriarchal and matriarchal system as well. The method adopted for study is based on the primary sources like the original texts and secondary sources like criticism, reference materials and internet sources with the topic related discussions.

II. The Concept: 'Matriarchy'

The concept, 'matriarchy' is introduced by Bochofen (1861) (www.matriarchiv.com) It is a social institution revolved around the idea of ruling mothers or females signifying the power structure. The term, 'matriarchy' is an acronym composed of the Latin word *mater* meaning 'mother' and the Greek word *archein* meaning 'to rule'. (www.wunrn.com) In fact, matriarchy as an institution doesn't stand as opposition to patriarchy as 'rule by women' has never existed in the patriarchal sense of rule. Shashi Deshpande eventually in her novels goes on setting a new paradigm in which she doesn't mean the 'matriarchy' as the reversal of patriarchal form of society, but as a system with its own rules.

III. Introduction to Author

The recipient of Sahitya Akadami Award (1990) and Padmashree Award in 2009 by the Government, Shashi Deshpande emerges to be one of the leading woman novelists in the Indian literary canon. She belongs to 'Women in Transition' and shares her belief in one of her interviews that 'The fact that we are human is much more important than our being men and women.' She has to her credit four children's books, no. of short stories, ten novels and several essays.

IV. Dark Holds No Terrors

With tremendous potential, Shashi Deshpande delineates the character of mother and motherly figures full of emotional upheavals in the minds and their reactions either to their daughters or other younger women. Her second novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* twirls around the female protagonist, Sarita mostly referred as 'Saru', who falls to be the victim of her mother's hatred. A close view of the character of her mother through a magnifying glass gives one impression of the authorial belief in the existence of ruling mother. Shashi Deshpande terms Saru's mother as an annoying being, who is unwilling to welcome her daughter's birth. Saru recalls her mother's words, 'It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible.' (DHNT, 169) Consequently, Saru grows with terrible alienated state of mind. Further, as an orthodox mother she imparts Saru freedom during Haldi-Kumkum ceremony as it was 'only for girls'. This incident makes her conscious of her existence. But very soon her sense of superiority dies down as she has to put up with mother's extra attentiveness towards her feminine aspect. In one of her recapitulations, Saru recollects her conversation with her mother:

Don't go out in the sun, you'll get darker.
Who cares?
We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.
I don't want to get married.
Will you live with us all your life?
Why not?
You can't.
And Dhruva?
He's different. He's a boy. (DHNT, 45)

The conversation above though casual and occupies very little place in the novel carries a deep meaning. Saru's resentment is directed towards her mother as she makes Saru obsessed with feminine charm necessary for 'marriage'. Hence, she is made physically and mentally disabled. Simon de Beavouir states,

To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile. The young girl is supposed to deck herself out, to make herself ready, but also to repress her spontaneity and replace it with the studied grace and charm taught her by her elders. (359)

Gradually, after marriage, Saru herself admits, 'Everything in a girl's life, it seemed, was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male.' (DHNT, 163) The event marks an indelible vestige on Saru's immature mind. It causes to revive her feminine instinct and paves a way for rebellion. She rejects her mother with a malicious remark, 'if you're a woman, I don't want to be one.' (DHNT, 62-63) In her attempt to elevate the matriarchal figure in the novel, author compels her heroine to ponder over the power her mother exerts. For instance, once when Saru goes to explore the 'desolate deserted place' near pond with Dhruva, accidentally, Dhruva drowns and dies. Besides carrying the enormous weight of guilt, she carries 'a turmoil of fears' anticipating Ai's reaction that comes with burning words, '*You killed him. Why didn't you die? Why are you alive, when he's dead?*' (DHNT, 91) Saru finds their mother-daughter relationship intolerable as it has left her with venomous 'words that scrape and claw and torture, like a hopeless, incurable pain ... ugly, hated companions I can never hope to escape from.' (DHNT, 184) Despite the indictment of her Ai, Saru does go back to her parental home after Ai's death and finally views her choice of profession and life-partner against her mother's wish as an act of betrayal. Her rebel or 'feminist autonomy' ends with remorse, and 'bitterness' as a mother within her struggles in anticipation over her children's further reaction in future.

V. Roots and Shadows

Roots and Shadows, though the first full-length novel by Shashi Deshpande was published after *The Dark Holds No Terror*. It confers on her the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize as one of the best Indian novels of 1982-83. The novel features educated individualistic middle-class woman protagonist, Indu, who too has

motherly shadowy figure in her life. In her struggle for self-accentuation, she is shown identifying herself with old matriarch, Akka. Bande Usha describes her, 'Akka is the head of the family and the unquestioned ruler of the roost. Akka is the traditional mother-figure, toeing the line set by old customs, rituals and traditions.' (135) She rises as a domineering personality, who reduces the elders like Kaka, Atya and others to 'red faced, stuttering' children 'by her venomous tongue'. Like Saru in *Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu rebels and marries Jayant against Akka's wish. She abandons her home for 'Akka specially' (RS, 20) Though Akka holds wrath against Indu after marriage by generalizing that –'such marriages never work.' (RS, 74), she makes Indu an inheritor of her property and strengthens the bond between the first generation and the third generation.

VI. That Long Silence

Shashi Deshpande shot into prominence with the publication of her fourth novel, *That Long Silence*. The subversion of woman on an extreme level under the stringent power of patriarchal structure as depicted in this fictional art forces readers to probe into the deep psyche of female characters. The manifestation of the deteriorating condition of woman unfolds the various facets of man-woman and woman-woman relationship as well. The writer considers the bond of marriage, wifehood and motherhood in the life of woman as different stages, where woman suffers, submits protests and finally adjusts with the existing situation with the new bond of 'selfhood'. Anuradha Roy categorizes the novel, in the light of its thematic aspect. She says, 'The novel represents a constructive attempt at the re-definition of woman's selfhood in an environment where age-old patriarchal assumptions clash with liberal ideas of individuation.' (84) However, the major focus of the paper is to judge how Jaya, the female protagonist of the novel recasts her past in her quest of self-identity in the course of her narration and develops flippant attitude towards her mother and mother-surrogate figures. Though the patriarchal system attains its aim with the entry of man as husband in the later part of the novel, it is being already assertively introduced by the male figures like Kaka and authoritative females like mother and aunt in the life of Jaya. Hence, Jaya develops the psychological imbalance under both the patriarchal and matriarchal systems. Jaya's mother appears to be a woman with lack of understanding. She enjoys the authoritative pleasure. Jaya recalls her prying questions with complaining tone, 'Why are you so late? Who was that you were talking to? Where are you going now?' (TLS, 75) or the discrimination made by Ai between she and her brother, Ravi puts Jaya into rage. She asks Jaya in a blaming tone, 'And you, Jaya, what kind of an elder sister are you? Is this the way for a girl to treat her younger brother?' (TLS, 101) The clash between Jaya and her tradition-bound and biased mother leaves her always under constraints and causes the hostility between her and Ravi. Hence, she is deprived of the joy of the 'link of shared childhood' with Ravi. Her contemptuous relationship with her Ai develops in her the claustrophobia of childhood place, where she was forced to zip her lips and retract her assertion due to feminine repressive forces, an extension of masculine one.

A close scrutinization of Jaya's shattered married life brings about a new facet of her personality. A woman like Jaya who is exposed to liberal western ideas by her father further fails to prove herself as Jaya- a victorious being. She is being thrust upon with male chauvinist ideas by elderly women around her. Jaya finds the pre-marital counseling solemnly done by Vanita Mami always in favor of her husband- 'Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree. ... keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies.' (TLS,p- 32) or 'Be good to Mohan, Jaya.' (TLS, 138) As Sunita Reddy rightly judges, 'Vanita Mami's long suffering role of a martyred wife prompts Jaya to think and understand her being similarly counselled as a 'bride'.' (78) In spite of her being frivolous on Vanita Mami's advice, Jaya finds herself sailing in the same boat after marriage. She fails to tackle the outburst from her husband, Mohan as her 'feeble defenses had no chance before this fierce onslaught.' Mohan's sister, Vimala too emerges to be a sufferer due to the ovarian tumour and callous matriarchal figure, her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law's response to her deteriorating health confirms this:

God knows what's wrong with her. She's been lying there on her bed for over a month now. Yes, take her away if you want to. ... What a fuss. But these women who have never had any children are like that.' (TLS, 39)

Thus, the severity of the matriarchal beings hinders the strengthening of emotional infrastructure of the young female characters. The periscopic view of the novel reveals other matriarchal figures falling under the category of the most submissive one. The graphic description of the death of Mohan's mother unfolds the stark reality of the male-ordained society represented by his father. In the general context, the idea, 'motherhood' gives woman a sense of being complete, a meaning to her life, but if it thrusts upon her then she accepts it contemptibly. Mohan's mother is the victim of the same thrust and is found in her framed photograph 'staring blank-faced at the world' (TLS, 38) Jaya's widowed grandmother, *Ajji* too deserves a mention. She gets herself confined in an empty room once widowed.

In this way the mothers and motherly figures discussed in the novels above belong to as Neeru Sharma in her article, Mother-Daughter Bonding in 'The Binding Vine' says, 'the mothers of the first generation, (*who*) consider their daughters as burden due to the rigid social set up which makes them look at their girl child as a liability.'www.museindia.com.

VII. The Binding Vine

In her next novel, The Binding Vine we find Shashi Deshpande discovering herself with no. of women characters with all their eccentrics. The novel dramatizes the elevated position of mothers and mother substitutes- grandmothers. The major woman character, Urmi is shown deeply grieving over the death of her one and half year old daughter, Anu. She is left in the world of 'absolute emptiness'. The idea of life overweighing with the presence of daughters withers away in the present novel as mother-daughter relationship is seen flourishing to a certain extent in some cases. On the contrary, Vanna's daughter, Mandira grows with the faith in the conventional role of mother as a full time caretaker and apparently shares her grudges towards her mother with Urmi, 'You know Urmi auntie, when I grow up, I'm never going to leave my children to go to work,' (TBV, 72) Sunita Reddy concludes her observation of the projection of mothers over generations in the following words,

One reads the recurring sagas of mothers over generations, enduring almost identical lifestyles. It is evident that the idea of the mother being solely responsible for taking care of the children has remained unchanged. (102)

VIII. Conclusion

Thus in the words of Bande Usha , ' Mothers and mother-figures are not matriarchs to reckon with, but suffocating "shadows" to be shunned.' (134) Saru, Jaya and Indu are the daughters of third generation, who identify themselves with their mothers as an obstacle in their personal and professional lives, whereas Urmi is helped for her identification with her mother's feelings by her grandmother, Baijiji and the dead daughter, Anu. The novels above with women centric narratives though interdict the possibility of co-existence of mothers and daughters show their irresistible yearning for maternal home. However, Shashi Deshpande's envisioning 'a dominance matriarchy' i.e. 'gynarchy' meaning 'a government by women over women and men' to certain extent, which itself is the product of patriarchy is an indication that she has gradually employed the post modern technique of deconstructing patriarchal culture. With its limitations the present research topic offers readers an advantage of viewing man-woman, woman-woman relationship in different contexts hence is proves to be beneficial to develop the holistic approach towards society with its cultural variations.

References

- [1]. Ahuja, Ram. Indian Social System. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1993. Print.
- [2]. Altekhar, A. S. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. 2nd edn., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959. Print.
- [3]. Beauvoir Simon, de. The Second Sex. Trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- [4]. Deshpande, Shashi. The Dark Holds No Terrors. 1980; rpt. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- [5]. That Long Silence. 1988; rpt. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989. Print.
- [6]. The Binding Vine. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992. Print.
- [7]. Deshpande, Shashi. Roots and Shadows: A Novel. Madras: Sangam Books, 1983. Print.
- [8]. Bande Usha, ed. Victim Consciousness in Indian English. Jalandhar: ABS Publications (1997) 123-127. Print.
- [9]. Reddy, Sunita Y. S. A Feminist Perspective on the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. New Delhi: Prestige, 2001. Print.
- [10]. Roy, Anuradha. Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999. Print.

Internet References

- “<<http://www.matriarchiv.com/>>”
“<<http://www.wunrn.com/>>”
“<<http://www.museindia.com/>>” Issue 51, Sep-Oct. 2013, 18.9.2013.
