Chapter-VI

Latter Novels
Chapter-VI

Latter Novels

In *A Matter of Time*, the author "subtly debates the whole issue of individual freedom. The novel has three parts-The House, The Family, The River and each title carries within it a meaning. ‘The House’ is the body; it is also memory and lineage, the coming together of all different elements .... ‘The Family’ consists of three generations .... The Third part ‘The River’ is about immersion in the river waters which clean and purify. It is also about the stream of life which flows.” Deshpande’s “novels are not about women but social institutions and the nature of freedom ... Freedom, when it comes, brings with it its own burden. Gopal is aware that Sumi by not bringing in any legal action against him is giving him his freedom while at the Sarue time, learning to build a sense of freedom for herself.”

Ph.D. Thesis
Madhu herself is a victim' of sorts of which the reader is aware only towards the end of the novel. She had been brought up as a child by two men—her father and Babu, a male servant, but she had no complaints. On the other hand, she felt pity for the children who seemed to be constantly harassed by their mothers. She says:

Motherless child that I am, motherhood is an unknown world to me. The mothers I see in my childhood are drab creatures, forever working, forever scolding their children, certainly they are not the women to arouse a sense of deprivation in me.\(^2\)

Deshpande spares no effort to present the picture of life it is without conforming to stereotypes. This is all the more obvious in her portrayal of motherhood, which she seldom glorifies. Her protagonist, Madhu, says:

I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself through the songs that speak of 'ma ka pyar.' But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who
ignored her daughter; Ketaki’s mother, stem, 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.3

But Madhu herself, turned out to be a doting mother and ever perceptive of her son’s every need. Therefore it was all the more tragic when Aditya, her son, died in a bomb blast.

Madhu’s estrangement with her husband, Som, began earlier than this tragedy, when Madhu, waking up after a nightmare, one night, revealed to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind. She had slept with a man when she was only fifteen, a man who later committed suicide. Som is unable to accept this of his wife. As one who had been a good husband by any standards and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife, he is now unable to come to terms with this news. He is totally devastated. Madhu is unable to comprehend this:

Ph.D. Thesis
But it's the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it's this fact that he can't let go of, as if it's been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen-these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter.⁴

It does not matter that Som himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage. It is a typical situation where a man may have any number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It's all the more undigestible to Som that his wife had been a willing partner. Madhu thinks 'that he could, perhaps, have borne: that I had been raped, forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant.'⁵

Our society has been so conditioned as to label women as immoral on the minor deviation on their part from the normal course of behaviour. Madhu observed how Hari and Lata looked at her when she returned after inadvertently spending a night in a hotel room with Chandru. She thinks:
It does not matter that Chandru is Som's friend and Chandru and I had been friends as well for nearly 25 years. I remember the waiter's look last night, when he brought us our dinner, the gleam in his eyes when they rested on me.

Men and women can never be friends. Men can be brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands, but never friends—is that how it is?⁶

In Shashi Deshpande's novels we find inversion of the usual plot because the problems begin with marriage—the problems of self-definition and self-identity. The ending is also ambiguous and we do not know whether the resolution that the protagonists make will really be carried out in practice. Another aspect of the inversion of plot may also be noted: the plots, as in men's fiction, are not full of dramatic happenings and episodes; the stress is not on episodes and happenings as much as on thinking, analysis, observation, and other such aspects. If there is any moment of crisis that aims to shock the protagonists and shake them out
of their beliefs, it appears mostly at the beginning. But otherwise the novels remain a quiet search of self.

In Shashi Deshpande's novels, Mira (BV) and Akka (RS) experience love as violence. When Mohan (LS) is accused of corruption, Jaya is reminded of a family that entered a suicide pact. Jaya (LS) feels lonelier during and after the sexual act. Jays, Indu, Saru, Madhu and Sumi isolate themselves from their daily life and understand themselves and others better in their isolation. But, as in Anita Desai, we do not find adolescent females who resist social norms by retreating into a green world of nature.

An evolutionary and a very comprehensive picture of the Indian women belonging to different educational and economic levels emerges on the large canvas that Deshpande chooses for her novels. In The Binding Vine Akka, Mira and Inni represent the older generation while Urmi and Vanna represent the younger one. Akka's husband is indifferent to her. Mira's husband is a pervert and Inni is separated from her child. Urmi is
even more liberated than Vanaa. In *A Matter of Time*, Kalyani, who represents the older generation, is never forgiven for being responsible for the loss of her male child. She is so scared of Shripati that she trembles at his sight. Her daughter Sumi takes Gopal’s walking out on her with resignation and tries to evolve her own independent identity. Sumi’s daughter Aru seeks legal aid to punish her irresponsible father. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya’s mother, Mohan’s mother and both the Ajjis represent the older generation. But among these, Jaya’s mother and the Saptagiri Ajji are selfish and dominating. Mohan’s mother is completely crushed by mental torture and repeated childbirths. In *Roots and Shadows* too, the women of the older generation have to suffer because of sexual violence, widowhood, drudgery etc. Sunanda, who belongs to the next generation, becomes devious while adapting herself to the circumstances. Sumitra becomes a social snob. Padmini belongs to the younger generation and is aware of her mismatched marriage but is helpless due to the circumstances.
The same range of characters is seen at the level of class. The problems of Shakutai, Sulu, Kalpana (BV), Jeeja, Nayana, Tara (LS) are different from those of the middle class women.

Lack of educational and economic opportunities, especially for women, has made patriarchy even stronger among the working class. Men have mistresses and neglect the family. Women have to look after the children and be breadwinners too. Physical violence, sexual abuse and mental torture are a part of daily life. In spite of poverty, childlessness and not having a male child are treated as calamities; women have to suffer for it. Women, having internalized patriarchal values, blame themselves for their barrenness. Unable to retaliate, their aggressiveness turns inward or is directed at children. Shakutai becomes a dominating figure as soon as she enters the home. Sulu sets herself afire and dies. Kusum too becomes loony and commits suicide.

But here, the younger generation is bolder. Tara does not suffer as resignedly as her mother-in-law Jeeja. She openly prays for the death of her drunkard husband.
However, the writer and her protagonists seem to believe that both in the middle class and the working class, the necessary changes will come only through education. The younger girls, even from the working class, go to school and develop the strength to fight against injustice.

REFERENCES

1. That Long Silence p. 84

2. Ibid., p. 96

3. Ibid., p. 16

4. Ibid., p. 4

5. Ibid., p. 4

6. Ibid., p. 25