

Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On*: Family, Bonds and Freedom

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande, a novelist with broad humanistic concern has written many novels centered around women, family and the complexities of human relationships. Her novel *Moving On* is different from her other novels where the character Manjari is projected as a bold, dynamic, strong build independent lady, who is ready to handle the issues of her life alone. She is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel. In this paper, the theme of family ties bondings and a craving for freedom and independent life has been discussed in details. In this paper, the journey of Manjari and her family with all the odds and uncertainties has been highlighted. Difficulties faced by a single women in the male dominated society has also been focused in this paper.

Keywords: Family, Society, Familial bonds

Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On* (2004) is a novel where the novelist ventures deeper into the territory of mind, dismantling our comfortable notions about the relationships within families. The title of the novel suggests that 'moving on' is a detour, it is a journey from within to without and from without to within. An individual always needs an entanglement in form of family, bonds and relationship. The epigraph of the first part of the novel quotes Erica Jong -- "All the stories that have ever been told are the stories of families – from Adam and Eve onwards". It clearly indicates that the author is going to explore the complexities of familial bonds and its impact on an individual's life. The novelist in one of her interview comments, "Each novel is a voyage of discovery for me, a discovery of myself, of other humans, of our universe" (Deshpande, "Of Human Bondage", *The Hindu*). With her uncanny insight into the nature of human relationships and an equally unerring eye for detail, the novelist ventures further than she ever has into the terrain of the mind, teasing out the nuances and exploring the stereotypes of familial bonds. With this novel, the novelist seems to reach a stage where she treats her characters not merely as men and women but as individual human beings. The themes of alienation, loneliness, emptiness, death, life and hope are interwoven in the tapestry of the novel. The novelist through the story of Manjari, shows how it is difficult for a single woman to live in this male-dominated

society. It is noteworthy how Manjari faces the various odds and uncertainties of life and hindrances of the society.

The novel is divided into two parts with twenty three segments revealing various angularities of familial relationships and focusing on various incidents of the central characters. The diary written by Badri Narayan is presented through the segment “Baba’s Diary” which appears repeatedly between the twenty three segments of the novel. The narrative of Baba’s diary helps in linking the present with the past. The novel has a complex narrative structure, that embodies several strands using memory, experience and written texts, the diaries of a deceased in a palimpsest self history. The two voices distinct are those of Manjari, the narrator and Baba, her father. Grappling with a challenge Manjari reviews the past in the light of the diary written by her father. The complex life drama, introduces us, a father who delights in the human body, its mysteries, its passion, and the knowledge that it contains and hides, a mother who controls and exerts her love mercilessly, a sister separated in childhood, an uncle who plays games of life and death as a member of the Bombay underworld, a passionate love affair that separates the family apart and a young woman left to make sense of the world and of her own sexuality. Nandini Lal writes that in this novel “we meet prematurely widowed Manjari (Jiji) who she is remembering her dead family (Baba-Mai-Malu-I) and Shyam (perfect lover and imperfect husband) in her old home” (Lal, “Middle Class Minutiae”). The novel is basically about a small family where the members are the father, mother and their two daughters Manjari (the narrator) and her sister Malu. Unfortunately, except Manjari the other three are not alive, when the novel opens. But through the narration of Manjari, the various angularities of their familial bonds are unveiled. It is a story that begins, conventionally enough, with a woman’s discovery of her father’s diary. Manjari, the central character and the reader of her father’s diaries, feels as if there is a message for her in those pages of the diary.

The narration by Manjari and her father Badri Narayan’s (Baba) diary sets the narrative pattern of the novel. The combination of the two contributes to the smooth flow of the narration. About the novel Shashi Deshpande says, “Memories and pictures of the past, dreams, hopes and plans or the future - these are as real to us as the present.” (Deshpande, “Of Human Bondage”). The narrative moves in the novel are its intimacy and integrity that, holds the past and the present together and weaves the complex play of all familial relationships. *Moving On* is basically story of a family of intimate spaces, of emotional pains and of such intrusions that are absolutely unexpected. The picture of family and gradual distancing of the familial bonds are well-summarized in the following words of the narrator Manjari:

And in any case, there was nothing unusual in what had happened to our family. All families follow essentially the same path: a gradual distancing, a tapering off of bonds, hostility and rivalries between siblings, expectations and disappointments that distance parents and children. Things have to change; only a child can imagine that things remain the same forever, that families remain the way they were. And so our family changed too. After all, we were not unique. (47)

She further writes, “We were a happy family. And then it all came to an end” (104). But this small family gets disintegrated due to unavoidable and undesirable circumstances.

Manjari Ahuja (Jiji), the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is a widowed woman who moves into care for her ailing father. Discovering her father’s diary after his death she sets out to evaluate her life retrospectively, in view of her father Badri Narayan’s (Manjari’s father, called Baba in the novel) revelations that show past events in a new light. She attempts to search the clues in her childhood spent with her anatomist father, along with Mai (Manjari’s mother, Vasu), who wrote impossibly perfect romantic stories for popular magazines. Manjari comments that it was a happy family of “Baba, Mai, Malu and I” (41). Manjari’s idyllic childhood was populated with an extended family which included Badri Narayan’s childless but loving sister, Gayatri and her husband Ramkrishna (RK). It also included Badri Narayan’s best friend Balakrishna (BK) (RK’s younger brother) and his wife Kamala and Mai’s two brothers and their wives. Manjari recalls that the household was ruled by the beautiful but reserve Mai, her mother. While Manjari’s past appears to be the picture-perfect, her present is riddled with uncertainty. Grappling with choices about the future, she lives alone in the large house that her father has bequeathed to her daughter, Sachi. With both her children away in school, she gets mysterious phone calls from strangers who want her to sell the house and marriage proposals from Raja (BK’s son), an architect and widower, who lives in the neighborhood.

The account of the past, as revealed in the novel is that the gradual distancing of the family had started when the young and naïve Manjari gave up her education to marry Shyam, the savvy cinematographer who introduced her to the world of passion. Both fell in love and married despite the objection of family members. But suddenly the circumstances took an adverse turn. Manjari’s sister Malu was made pregnant by her husband Shyam. Malu died after giving birth to a girl child and Shyam killed himself. This led to disintegration of the happy family comprising “Baba-Mai-Malu and I” (41). Manjari estranged herself from the family and her mother too succumbed to illness and died. As a widowed woman Manjari struggled all alone to live on her own. The novel opens with Manjari’s approach to her ailing father who was at the verge of death. It is Raja (Balakrishna’s son), her cousin who informs her about her father’s illness. When she returns home, the father becomes extremely happy to find his daughter around him.

It is after her father Badri Narayan's death, while cleaning up the papers that she discovers his diary. The diary unveils her father’s childhood days, his sister Gayatri’s place in his life and various other matters. But her need to understand her father and his life, drives her to open the diary. Manjari is not an affectionate reader of her father’s diary, but a critical reader. She realizes that she cannot ignore his words. While tears fall on the pages of the diary, Manjari also narrates the wonderful life she experienced as a child. She remembers that it was a childhood full of the feeling of belonging, of being a part of the entity, ‘Baba-Mai- Malu- and- I’. Through her father’s diary she is acquainted with the past history of her father’s family. She

comes to know that Badri Narayan's father a Brahmin by caste and son of an orthodox and wealthy landed man, had married a Brahmin girl after the death of his first wife, a Harijan girl, whom he had married under the impact of Gandhism. Badri Narayan and Gayatri were born out of this wedlock. After the sudden death of Badri Narayan's mother, the father took complete care of his children- Badri Narayan and Gayatri. Under these circumstances Gayatri not only was Badri Narayan's sister but a companion to him. This made Badri Narayan to have special love and care for his sister Gayatri. Badri Narayan, an anatomist and a doctor by profession married Vasu of his choice whom he loved deeply. Vasu, Manjari's mother was a famous writer of romantic stories. However, it was a small happy family where the inhabitants were Badri Narayan and his wife Vasu and their two daughters Manjari and Malu.

Badri Narayan almost at the end of his life, is happy to find Manjari around him after the long years of estrangement despite the awareness of his impending death. He is also willing to revive that old adoring relationship that they once shared as father and daughter. His wish to revive the old emotional attachment to his daughter is expressed in the following lines of his diary:

And to me, death has become even more unwelcome since Jiji arrived. I want more time with her, I want to break the barrier between us. It makes me sorry that we approach each other carefully, as if we are carrying water in our cupped palms and are after of spilling it. I think of all the time we have wasted; yes, so much time wasted. I am now full of regrets. I want to live for some more time, I want to make up for lost time, I want to recover, for the first time, that old relationship between us. (206)

Manjari was very much attached to her father since her childhood and her father's diary unveils to her how deeply concerned he had been about her welfare. The pages of diary also reveal to her the various facets of his personality as an adoring father, a loving, passionate husband and a caring brother. The diary also reflects his deep-stricken sorrow that he felt in the absence of his daughter Manjari. The father writes in his diary, "It is enough for me to know that she is here, enough to know that I will not die alone, that she will hold my hand when I'm going" (245).

Manjari also comes to know that her father always wanted to be with his family members since he believed in family togetherness. For this reason, he wanted to purchase land in Bangalore along with his brother-in-law Ramakrishna and his brother Balakrishna, so that they could build houses next to each other.

Badri Narayan loved his daughter intensely whom he called Jiji out of love. In the last days of his life he wanted to share with his daughter the burden of the grief of his heart.

Badri Narayan remained worried about his daughter and as a father he gave the message that the essence exists in moving.

Manjari is less emotionally attached to her mother. She remembers that her mother Vasu had an enigmatic silence around her. Recalling the childhood days she comments, "Mai was the centre of our universe, she was the sun around whom the three of us, Baba, Malu and I, revolved" (118). Unlike her father, her mother was

devoid of warmth and passion for her husband and family. As a child, Manjari always wanted to attract her mother's attention and to be loved by her. Gradually she realized that her mother was indifferent and lived in her own world of writing. She was famous as the writer of romantic stories but in her practical life she was different.

Her mother preferred to remain aloof. About her remoteness Manjari further comments, "It was something else, a remoteness, yes, that's the only word I can use, it's what comes to mind when I think of her in the midst of the family. As if she wasn't wholly present" (126). Her mother's self was different from the self she expressed in her stories.

Badri Narayan's diary too focuses on this indifference of the mother towards her daughter Manjari after the death of her husband Shyam. Badri Narayan observes the difference in Manjari's relationship with her mother. The following lines of his diary solidify this:

Vasu was her mother, they had inhabited the same body for nine months. How could she cut off the roots of her own being without pain? The umbilical cord continues to exist, a phantom link, all our lives. We can never deny the ties of the body, we can never leave them behind us. (114)

Manjari too never tried to smooth the relationship with her mother even after Shyam's untimely death.

The diary of Badri Narayan strongly suggests that Vasu and Badri Narayan never had a passionate and loving relationship as husband and wife. Badri Narayan was an anatomist whereas Vasu was a writer of fiction. Both inhabited two different worlds, the former's being the physical world and the latter's, the emotional, and the huge gap between the two could never be bridged. Badri Narayan too writes in his diary that his was a case of love marriage with Vasu but he always failed to convey to her the enormous tenderness he felt for her. It is strange to note that Vasu as a writer wrote stories about passionate love but was unable to feel that kind of passion or understand the passion felt either by her husband or by her daughter. Vasu's role as a writer was more powerful than her role as a wife and mother. Badri Narayan was a man who passionately loved his wife. His passion for his profession equally matched with his passion for his wife. Vasu did not live up to Badri's physical passion; she however escaped that passion by creating world of passion in her writing.

The alliance of siblings is very significant in any family. Manjari and Malu are the two sisters of the happy family 'Baba-Mai-Malu and I' depicted in the novel who spent their childhood in "a close and impenetrable togetherness" (152). To Manjari Malu was not only her sister but part of her soul. Manjari is also known as 'Jiji' in the novel, an identity given by her younger sister Malu.

Manjari felt betrayed when Malu was raped and made pregnant by her husband Shyam. Malu died soon after giving birth to Sachi but her death left Manjari with a sense of emptiness.

Manjari the protagonist cum narrator, plays the double function of participating in the main action of the novel as well as narrating it. There are two stories running parallel to each other in the novel—one is of Badri Narayan and the other is of the narrative voice of Manjari who also displays her own identity as an individual, daughter and a woman. Manjari is probably the most powerful of Deshpande's female protagonists, more courageous, bold and more independent.

It was not just the immediate family, but extended family embracing uncles, aunts and their kids which made Manjari's childhood so ordered, so stable. The ritual of all the Sunday evenings spent with BK, Kamala and their kids Raja, Hemi, and Premi were as necessary to ensure stability in her life as the summer holidays spent in Bangalore, visiting her aunt Gayatri and her uncle Ramakrishna.

Actually there were no visible ruptures in the familial relationship of Manjari, yet the fine ruptures are noticed when Manjari decides to marry Shyam of her own choice and will. Manjari's decision of marrying Shyam may be a violation but it was a repetition of the old family history because her father and her grandfather also married out of caste. Chanchala K. Naik considers this decision of Manjari as freedom of choice:

Deshpande always tries to posit such events in a dialectical mode; hence there is no endorsement of any singularity. But a singularity always invokes in its wake, its negation, in a process of reiteration or repetition, as in case of Manjari, who repeats what her grandfather and father did. (Naik 218)

Manjari, a young and prematurely widowed woman of thirty five, with her grown up children away, is living alone in her father's house after his death. Through Badri Narayan's diary and Manjari's reminiscences, we are introduced to the past of Manjari. Manjari, daughter of an anatomist father (Badri Narayan) and writer mother (Vasu) gave up her medical education and married Shyam, a Sindhi young man at the age of eighteen going against the will of her parents. After a few months of her marriage during her trying times she discovered that her own sister Malu was made pregnant by her husband. This was another traumatic experience for her. Malu, her sister died after giving birth to a girl child (Sachi). Immediately after this her husband Shyam too committed suicide. Shyam's death devastated Manjari completely. Manjari had to look after her son Anand all alone. Estranged from her family, living among strangers, she grappled with a number of difficulties to support herself and her baby son Anand. She tried for a number of jobs but nothing became permanent. Living alone was a great problem to her. But Manjari decided to face life alone, without any body's support either morally or financially. Manjari describes this dark period of her life in the following words:

I had entered a dark airless tunnel after Shyam's death, a space in which nothing could grow, nothing could survive. Worst of all was the feeling that I was set apart from humankind, that I no longer belonged to the world of ordinary people, ordinary living; each thing I did was a painful reminder of what had happened to us. I had lost the innocence which makes it possible to face each day with hope. (326)

During such moments of her life marrying Raja, her cousin could have been the best solution for her to be free from anxieties but she turned down his proposals. She also referred her father's help. Looking back to those days she writes:

I would support myself, I said, and I did. The struggle to earn money, to survive, kept all thoughts away; I had no time to brood or grieve. It was down to the basics: work, eat, sleep, wake up, go back to work ... Yes nothing but the body, only our bodies to look after, Anand and mine. (213)

Such words unveil the strong determination in Manjari to support herself all alone without depending on others. After her mother's death Manjari took the responsibility of Sachi and treated her like her own daughter. She never disclosed to her anything about the relationship of Malu and Shyam. She enjoyed Sachi's presence in her life.

The writer has not concluded the novel concretely, she mentions the changes that Manjari accepts to move on in life. She emerges as a strong willed, independent lady taking care of her son Anand and daughter Sachi, is not ready to marry again in life but ready to grow and develop as an individual. She has encountered real test of her life when, she is visited by strangers and receives anonymous phone calls from the mafia underworld, who pressurize her to sell out the ancestral house left by her father in the joint ownership of her son Anand and Sachi. When she doesn't respond to the threat, she is physically assaulted. She becomes more stubborn and decides to stay back and continue her fight. She refuses to succumb to the pressures of the mafia world.

She goes to the extent of disapproving Raja's role of a protecting male in her life. She is a woman who wants to take hold of the reins of her life to reach the place of her choice. She says, "I want the brakes under my feet, not someone else's. I don't want a dual control, the control should be mine, mine alone" (88). There are pressures on her that she should marry Raja but she dismisses this idea. If feminism is a matter of freedom of choice making, she is a feminist from the very beginning. Much to the disappointment of her parents who wanted her to complete her graduation, she decided to marry, a man of her choice and challenged patriarchy by discovering her own strength as a woman. Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta praises Manjari's courage. She says, "Manjari is fearless" who wants "to fight on her own terms" (Dasgupta, *The Telegraph*). When Manjari fails to control her sexuality she indulges in physical relationship with her tenant Raman, a much younger man, on her own terms. She says, "Only the body, his body, only my body, and my starved body. No thoughts, no feelings only sensations" (257). She does not look back. Manjari knows very well, that, any act of violation is a means of gaining access to alternative knowledge. She has to move on and live her own life, without getting dictated by anyone. The novel ends symbolically when both of them part different ways at the end of a long tedious journey.

The freedom of self means the idea of self-determination—the right of all women to make individual life choices freely and independently without any form of external influence, in a self-reliant manner. The individual has to be authentic and independent and should have self-governance and Manjari displays the spirit of self-

determination towards the end of the novel. The novelist ends with a possibility of Manjari and Raja living together but that's not what is important. The novel has an open ending that may lead to various conclusions but what seems obvious is the celebration of selfhood and womanhood by asserting herself by Manjari.

The novelist shows in *Moving On* how to move on, how to make - remake-one's life. Badri Narayan, Manjari, Raja, Sachi, BK, and even Nirmala are fighters, and thus are eventual winners. It is a novel in which the characters are capable of leaving behind the past hurts and breaking through the chains of moral codes imposed upon them by the society. They are the kind of people who would say that we have to make the best of this life that has been given to us. We are our own creators. Manjari, apart from being a narrator, is also a reader, for she reads her father's diary. She visits her parent's past and wonderfully discovers the hidden twists and curves of their lives. She emerges as a strong character who can face the challenges of life and can take her own decision without caring for others, but she is a loving daughter and a caring mother too. She is broad-minded and believes in freedom of living. Manjari, as the survivor, is the new woman, who fabricates the new dimension of freedom and relationships. She is thus a model practitioner of relational autonomy in family and bound by relationships, yet subservient to none. An affectionate daughter, a loving sister, a caring mother, and a good friend, she is hardly imposing or demanding, and is not dependent on anyone. She is not over protective or over possessive of her children and allows them their own space. Her engagements with life adopt a middle path - be in yourself and allow others to be, live on your own terms and let others live on their own.

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