

The Concept of Family in The Shadow Play of Shashi Deshpande

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In the general context a family means a group of people who belong to same parents, their close blood relatives and other relatives who care for each other and feel responsible without any self interest and accept all the family members with all their shortcomings in nature, while in the larger context a family is that group which can be extended upto certain friends, neighbours or to a group of people who share common hobbies and interest. In Hindu outcome of life this idea has been extended upto the farthest end where the whole universe is supposed to be a family and all people and animals even un-animated things are thought of having the same soul content hence the dictum Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam came into existence.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan is also of the view that "The inventions of science and technology, the political concepts, and the economic ideas are bringing the world into a close neighbourhood, and it is our great hope that this neighbourhood, may be transformed into a true brotherhood. The world must become our home, if we are to save the human race."¹ (P.47) In this way we can look towards the aim of human being's life as to grow from this world of intellect, this world of divided consciousness, with its discords, dualities to a life of harmony, of freedom, of love. Ultimately it is the humanity, which should be the religion of human beings.

In almost all the novels of Shashi Deshpande we come across the theme of life, concept of middle class families from the perspective of women characters. Almost all the female protagonists of her novels are mixture of tradition and modernity, tilting towards modern views of life, accepting some bold steps according to the fixed norms of middle class society but all of them retreat themselves in the end for the sake of family and for the sake of themselves also. In this context the latest novel of Shashi Deshpande The Shadow Play published in 2013 again centers round the theme of the meaning of a family, the meaning of a successful life in facing the problems of life and trying to unite the family members (family in the larger context which includes friends, neighbours, clients, servants, and sometimes strangers too) giving meaning to their life and thus improving one self in this condition to a super stage of spirituality.

The protagonist in the novel Arundhati called Aru is the representative of an intellectual class women who is also financially independent and can live life on her own terms. But throughout the novel she chooses to be the person who not only understands

the situations of other characters of the novel but also feels it and helps them overcome this situations in this way she works for the cause of a larger family and it gives meaning to her character. In the novel she works as the binding member among the characters, around whom all the characters revolve. Aru is the eldest child of the family and has to take care of her two younger sister along with grandmother (a cancer patient) as the father has left the home and mother died thereafter. She keeps grudge for his father because he left them when they were very young and needed him. He never told why is he leaving and where is he going to? It was sometimes after he left they received the news from him that he is in Himalaya region ,travelling, to find out a place for himself in this universe. Aru has so many complaints against him but she is not outspoken or frank enough to ask him directly the questions that have been haunting her for a long time.

After her mother's death her father Gopal has to come back to their home where he feels strange and finally feels relaxed in his relationship with Kasturi, a tenant to the house of Charu (Aru's younger sister who is a doctor and lives in America with her husband Hrishu) and is a very practical, social and independent modern woman who lives her life on her own terms and conditions. Initially Aru does not like her father's ease with Kasturi and talks to Charu on phone about it, feels herself small minded, mean, selfish after knowing the views of Charu who says, 'So what, Aru? If Papa's found a friend you should be glad for him. Poor Papa, he had a bad time'. (109) Charu's views on Kasturi and their Papa's relationship make Aru realize that Charu is more considerate than her and thinks that it may be due to her normal life as she is the mother of a child and Aru herself is issueless, so unconsiderate. She realizes the need of a child in her family to feel for others.

Aru helps Gracy a small girl whose mother is killed in a bomb attack, selflessly. Tressa, Gracy's mother was a maid in Aru's office who is killed but the small girl is waiting in the school for her mother to receive her. Aru goes to school, brings the child to her family and takes care of her until her father Ramu comes to fetch her after all the rituals are completed. It helps Aru grow in her grace and in her relations with her father and husband too. Gopal says, "Gracy was with us for two days we- Rohit, Aru and I - put everything aside and spent all our time with her. Even aru and I seemed to recover a bit of our lost companionship as we shared the heavy load of the child's loss and tried to keep the knowledge of her mother's death from her." (160) It shows that any act of caring done selflessly helps you grow spiritually and lets you become generous in realizing others behaviour. This bond of altruistic love makes a man more graceful and the concept of large family gets solidarity.

In the meantime Aru, realizes that Kasturi is not a 'bad woman' as she had thought about her, but a very straightforward, practical woman who not only helps car wash boy Lokesh to get a chance in music director's office but also is a friend to an auto rikshaw driver as reported by Nagi, her maid. Even she is liked by Seema her youngest

sister. It again raises a question in her mind that why am I so intolerant, so selfish? This act of questioning one's conscience and trying to get proper answer to it is the act of self realization, the act of spiritual growth in which a man comes out of his self made shell of ego and looks around himself and finds out the reasons for other's behaviour which were strange to him by this time and goes forward in the direction of accepting them as they are. So Aru grows in the novel and we, ourselves, grow while reading it.

Aru continues to help Gracy as her father is in trouble regarding his mother and society. They want him to remarry but he thinks about the future of the child and Aru helps him socially, and legally. The contact with the girl arouses the feelings of a mother and she decides to adopt a child which had been a difficult thought for her. This selfless act of caring helps her to take a very long awaited decision of her life with confidence and satisfaction.

The novel also discusses the age long issue of a daughter and son in Indian families. Aru recollects that her grandmother Kalyani's mother Monorama had rejected her because she was a daughter and Kalyani was again rejected by her husband because she had lost her son. On the other hand Aru thinks of her parents that how they loved the three sisters and took care of them. She also thinks of the letter Kalyani had received from her school teacher Yamunabai about her unhappiness at not having a son. Yamunabai had written :

"What we really want is that we should not be forgotten. That our lives should not be completely wiped out as if we have never been. Very few of us can do great deeds which will be remembered for all time. But most of us will live in our children. Does it make a difference wheter it's a son or a daughter who remembers you, Manu? You will live in your daughter, as much as you would in a son. The family name is something we have created ourselves, it has not meaning. Look at me, I have no children, but all of you, my students, are like my daughters, no, your are my daughters" (216)

So, we find, that this broader concept of family is the central theme of the novel. This letter gives Aru real strength to adopt a child. She thinks, 'Girl or boy, adopted or natural child - what does it matter? The child will be mine, she will be ours, Rohit's and mine.' (217) Thus, life is all from particular to general. It is all about being happy in other's happiness. This is the real satisfaction of life.

Then Aru faces the most difficult moment of her life when she comes back home with Rohit having a New Year's Eve dinner in her mother-in-law's house and is given the news of Seema's rape. Seema had gone away with Nikhil her cousin and was gang raped by his friends. Aru feels perplexed and looses control over her mind. At this time she is helped by Kasturi, that Kasturi who was a 'bad woman' to her. She not only looks after Seema, asks Rohit to call a doctor and takes care of Aru also. So, this is life. A man gets maturity with time. Time is the greatest teacher of life. Time changed the views of Aru

for Kasturi and she now realizes the 'beautiful woman' inside her as she grows with time. Kasturi is added to her family after Gracy and she goes forward, more boldly, towards the adoption of a new member for her family.

When the baby girl is brought to their family Aru's mother-in-law (who had initially opposed the idea of adoption) names her Kalyani Gauri. On the day of naming ceremony almost all the characters of the novel come to greet her and she and Rohit find themselves busy in managing the needs of the child. When she is given a bottle of milk to feed, the novelist makes the meaning of love and family clear by saying, "Finally, the baby begins drinking and there is blessed silence. She is very hungry, at first she takes huge gulps, scarcely stopping to breathe. But in a while she settles down to a steady rhythm of drinking, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on Aru's face, her tiny hands, clenched into fists, digging into Aru's body, her plump little legs in constant motion. Aru looks down at her, her heart turns over and she thinks jubilantly - so this is it, this is it." (294) The feeling of being a mother fills her with completeness and she enjoys her family life.

Thus we see that through the character of Aru, Shashi Deshpande, the novelist, makes it clear that man's evolution is bound up with his conscious effort. As man is an unfinished being, he needs to grow into a regenerate being and permit the currents of universal family life to flow through him. In this way they can become ideal self and a model of inspiration for others. Giving solutions to the contemporary problems of terrorism and women's abuse in the society, the novelist gives the message that when mankind awakes to the truth (through constant observation, questioning and comprehension) universal brotherhood will follow. One who is able to love all, considers this universe his own family and certainly in this situation, he will not look upon human beings as though they were irresponsible things, other's liabilities. Such a man will boldly work for a society in which man can be free and fearless, a subject not an object. He will oppose terror and cruelty and stand by the outcast and the refugee. Thus he will become the voice of those who have not voice and will be able to give meaning to his life.

Notes

1. Redhakrishnan S., Essays on Religion, Science and Culture, Orient Paper Backs, 2008, p.47.
2. Deshpande Shashi, Shadow Play, Aleph Book Company, 2013.