

Shashi Deshpande and Her Question of Ethics : A Critique

Dr. Ravindra Kumar Singh

Head, Deptt. of English &

American studies

K. K. P. G College, Etawah (U. P.)

e.mail: ravdee@gmail.com

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Every important novelist has been deeply concerned with the relationship between novel and morality. Henry James, a great imaginative novelist and critic 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. In his prefaces, too, he brilliantly examined the entire question critically. He pointed out how it was a moot question that bothered his artistic imagination. By coupling this question with the artistic sense, James introduced “*modern moral consciousness into the Victorian arena*” (*Novel, 114*). After James, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster also grappled 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. That is why, Henry James observed in his characteristic way:

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be

constituted of such elements is, to my vision to have purpose enough.
(*Selected Literary Criticism, 96*)

This statement clearly shows that the question of morality is a very vital question as the rich moral complexity is imbued with the aesthetic experience itself.

Keywords: Henry James, Shashi Deshpande, Virginia Woolf, *The Art of Fiction*

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. One is reminded of Henry James who has categorically written in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*:

There is I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connection than that of the perfect dependence of the moral sense of the work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. the question comes back thus, obviously, to be kind that the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to grow with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connection of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 54)

It goes without saying that Shashi Deshpande also deals with this issue in the same way because she 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 "within that speaks to us of those things and upright and wrong". She further points out: "But what has remained constant through time and space has been the human consciousness of something that exists beyond this mundane existence, beyond mere survival" (page 103). Thus, it becomes clear that the novelist's primary concern is to give verbal formulation to this voice in order to understand the intricate relationship between what is right and what is wrong.

Shashi Deshpande is of the view that great literature has a clear moral base 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.” John Gardner further observes: “Moral fiction communicates meanings discovered by the proves of the Fiction’s creations.” (p. 106). What is important in the case of Shashi Deshpande is that morality is never “the purpose of literature. It is the guide, the marker, the lights that shows where the runway is” (p. 107). This brings another problem to the fore. Human existence is surrounded by various complex issues. Some of our motives remain incomprehensible even to ourselves. The novelist’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. Shashi Deshpande is quite categorical in saying that “the point of great literature is that, even if it presents, truthfully and with great conviction, the difficulty of humans to live a moral life, it never justifies a moral wrong.” 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 commitment is the part of the morality of literature. In other words, morality lies in being true to one's belief. For example, Jane Austen is a moralist because her integrity as an author is beyond doubt. She has deep faith in what she is saying and this determines her moral vision. Henry James is a moralist because he believes that an inseparable link exists between art and life, life and morality, art and morality. James seems to suggest that the creative artist's moral sense does not depend upon the ethical codes and prejudices which largely determine the social and moral view of life of an ordinary human being. For a great artist, life is always subjected to a fresh and innovative view. His point of interest lies not only in the flowing stream of experience but also in the dark recesses of human mind out of which a spectrum of morality evolves.

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 write 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.

II

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 Direct* and in 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 of *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 Bhasak 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 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 Seceit* these encounters are the prolonged ones and very much physical. In *Small Remedies* we have three stories running parallel to each other. Though

the stories of Leela and Savitri Bai Indorekar are observed and recorded through Madhu's eyes, it is Savitri Bai's character/story which looms large and expresses the subtle nuances of human nature. Married into a conservative family she could not forget her first love that is music. Music is the sole purpose of life for her. To achieve it she runs from the marital home with Ghulam Saab. In fact, the whole question of ambiguous marital relationship outside the boundary of marriage becomes a source of constant mental tension for both the partners. Shashi Deshpande, in fact, deals with the ambiguity of this relationship in order to see that such a marriage, if based upon the marriage of true minds, is more satisfying and fruitful than a marriage which is based on mere formal social sanction. But time and again, the question is repeated that Ghulam Saab did not marry Savitri Bai. It was Ghulam Saab who left Bai and went away: "In any case, they never married, so it was not difficult for him to walk away. Why didn't they marry? If they had been married, they could have acknowledged their child openly. And he was a muslim, it was possible for him to marry Bai, even though he had another wife living. For Bai, too, marriage would have been a boon. It would have given her the status of a married woman, saved her from malicious gossip". (*Small Remedies* pp. 278-279). 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:

But I don't think they married, not even in secret. Nowhere in all the gossip about them, in all that is written about her, is there any hint of a marriage. Bai continued to remain a woman who was living separate from her husband, a woman living with a man she was not married to. Was it Bai herself who didn't press for it, Bai who didn't want it? After all, marriage was not so important for the man, his reputation would not suffer much from the fact that they are living together without it. but if Bai had wanted marriage, if she had insisted on it, would Ghulam Saab have held back? So, was it Bai who didn't want to commit herself to yet another man, to yet another relationship, knowing she could not give much of herself to him? Was there more honesty in this? (*Small Remedies*, p. 279)

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. Her story is set about 50 years in the past and as of now she is old but at the top of her career. Her defiance of the moral code and conduct in the past is no more noticeable in the contemporary society. At the most she emerges out to be a truly emancipated woman who listened to her heart at the most proper time; who achieved a new height in the society by establishing herself as a great singer for which she had to go through her share of hardships. She had to sacrifice much in life - even her daughter – in this ruthless process of self-actualization. She is able to carve a niche for herself in the contemporary society by actually defying it at some point of time in her

past life. However, the other two 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.

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. In the process of knowing her parents she is able to piece together her life that was till date, in her father's words "ramshackled". 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 ---- 1. She is very young. 2. 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 a 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 mother (referred as Mai), Malu (her younger sister) and Baba (her father). 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-centered 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 which in no family at all according to her. Not that she does not love Shyam anymore but the fact is that life's practicalities overcome their passion for each other. 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. Malu who always wanted to be "Jiji sarkhi" (like her elder sister Manjari) turns hostile towards her. 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 take 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. It is almost like a revelation when she journeys through her past looking at the incidents from a different angle in a new light only after her bodily needs are satiated. 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. Till date she was putting up with Sachi's irritable temper for she considered it her responsibility to play mother to Shyam and Malu's daughter but now she wants to understand her, to talk to her, to listen to her. In this context it is important to quote the novelist's comments on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Shashi Deshpande observes:

The author had to be true to himself, to the character, even if it meant that she strayed from the moral path, this, however, does not deny the existence of this path. The tragedy is that the characters stray, the tragedy is that they fall from grace that they fail to get to the moral world, although they know it exists. (Writing from the Margin and Other Essays. 107)

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 subterfuge": the deceit. She has expressed her concern over the cheating aspect of an extra-marital affair:

I don't necessarily feel that it has to be an affair. Some relationships may move on to that but I think that would make a marriage an uneasy one. To me more than anything else it's the cheating aspect of these affairs that trouble me. (In the interview entitled "Women's Journey from Self-effacement to Self-actualization")

Devyani around whose life, love and passion the novel *In the Country of Deceit* revolves is a spinster. Just like all the protagonists in Deshpande's novels, Devyani had to go through a lot to be financially independent finally. 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:

..... I know that Jane Austen believed in marriage, that her heroines got their men at the end. But she believed in marriage with the right person. Why did she remain a spinster otherwise? Let me tell you one more thing she said: "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection". (*In the Country of Deceit*, 28)

Savi and Devyani demolish their old house and Savi designs a modern house which is built as 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*, page 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:

I saw it again, the man, his arms raised high, his face to the sky, energy surging through his body.Why was it haunting me? It was the extremeness of the gesture, its flamboyance, may be, declaring a small moment of supreme happiness, announcing the pinnacle of achievement. I want that, I thought, I want a needlepoint of extreme happiness, I want a moment in my life which will make me feel. I am touching the sky. (*In the Country of Deceit*, -24)

This also explains her resolute no to marriage proposal at this point of time. 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*, 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)

This time they spend leisurely unlike all their previous "arrangements". She observes:

This is what marriage means : knowing that the years lie ahead of you, a long stretch of time waiting for you to occupy together. Taking time for granted, disjointed conversation about trifles, casual intimacies. This is what I want. I don't want clandestine meetings, drama, constant fears. (*In the Country of Deceit*, 191)

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)

As for Ashok's feelings for Devyani, he says:

"I've never thought of you as a body to enjoy, to have sex with

Loving your body is part of my love for you, only a part" (*In the Country of Deceit*, 234)

These words remind of Manjari's idea of love: "How can you love and not speak of it, how can you love and not crave to be together, how can you not touch each other?" (*Moving on* 99)

And then it all came to end very unceremoniously, Ashok getting transferred to Bangalore. The letter addressed to Ashok that she never sends expresses her tormented psyche over what happened and what is going to happen:

Sometimes I blame you for all this. Why did you come to me? Why did you not leave me alone? But again I think- if you had if we had never met, I would never have got all this.....this..... what do I call it? Joy? Yes, I would never have known the joy, the experience of loving, of being loved, of becoming one with another human being. I wonder whether this union is what we long for all our lives. And you and I were lucky to have it. but we can't go on, that is the truth, however precious this is to us, we can't go on. (*In the Country of Deceit* 237-238)

Though Ashok wants her to say that they will meet again but Devyani is very clear in her mind. She 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)

This explains Shashi Deshpande’s vision into the working of the minds of her characters. Throughout the novel Devyani is not so unhappy about her 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*, 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*, 111)

The questions that Shashi Deshpande poses in her fiction are much larger than gender concerns. The question of morality, specially, is treated on a very large level in her novels. It actually emerges out to be a genuine human concern. Her novels speak a lot about human beings and the complexity of their predicament in a given social structure:

.....if we humans are the greatest marvels in creation, we are also the greatest mysteries to ourselves..... Yet, the enigma of our own selves remains unfathomable. The ego, the libido, the unconscious-how little they explain! Such tiny dots on a vast uncharted map. The truth is that each one of us is a universe more complicated than the limitless universe we inhabit. (*Moving On*, P. 111)

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