

Human relationship in Shashi Deshpande's novel "Moving On"

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's *Moving On* (Penguin, 2004) is about a father who delights in the human body, its mysteries, its passion, and the knowledge that it contains and conceals. And a mother who wields the power of her love mercilessly. And Manjari Ahuja, the daughter, who after her husband's death, is made to feel the truth behind the various relationships. Shashi Deshpande's novel is about the secret lives of men and women who love, hate, plot and debate, and thereby she, using the metaphor of 'body', gives realistic presentation to the various relationships. Once again she is not content with the objective but is subjective by delineating the interior landscapes of her men and women characters, and unlike others who, to use R K Gupta's words "have been content to record and document.

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Introduction

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It is a story that begins with a woman's discovery of her father's (Baba's) diary. It is through Baba's diary that Manjari unlocks the past rescuing old memories and recasting events and responses. The ensuing struggle to reconcile nostalgia with reality and the fire of the body with the desire for companionship reaches to an unforeseen resolution, twisting and turning through complex emotional landscapes in relation. The story is about Manjari and her other male and female relations entwined and knitted intricately into hers. As she says: 'My story'—how can there be such a thing as my story when other people's lives are so knitted into it? I cannot pick out one stitch and say, this story is mine, take another and say, this is Baba's story, then one more and say, this is Mai's ... All our lives so entwined, so knitted together that I will never be able to separate them. (270)

Baba, Manjari's father, lays bare his father's past and his relations with and feelings about his wife Mai (Vasu) and his feelings towards Manjari and others in his neatly recorded events in his diary. His father belonged to a very well-to-do Brahmin family. His "father returned with not just a BA degree, but something else that threw all the family plans into complete disarray: he came back a Gandhian"(4).

Despite family opposition he married an orphan Harijan girl brought up by his own political guru, the man who had initiated him into Gandhism. There was a complete severance between

him and his family. Baba says, "My father too excised his past. He not only gave up his family, he even cast off his family name"(6). But she died soon after, and the second time the girl was a Brahmin. To them Baba and Gayatri were born. An entry in the diary runs thus:

A wife, two children, a good job—I suppose my father was settling down to enjoy these things when disaster struck again. My mother died. ...it was acute perforative appendicitis.(8-9) From then onwards he rarely laughed or even smiled. But he was a very caring father for both—Baba and Gayatri. Not much is told to us as Baba writes in his diary: I was young, I did not pay much attention to the story of his past. I was young, intent on my studies, concentrating on getting admission to a medical college. (6)

But it is just the past of his father which emphasizes the relation of Baba with his elder sister Gayatri. In the novel Baba's relation with his elder sister Gayatri holds significance as both were motherless. It was Gayatri's caring nature and attachment with Baba that he could never really feel the pang of being motherless.

The two grew up together, but with the passage of time some other events took shape. They lived in Bombay where they were joined by their father's Boss's sons—two brothers Ramakrishna and Balakrishna, inevitably shortened to RK and BK. The two brothers lived in Bangalore and came to Bombay for their holidays once a year. The elder, RK, joined the Civil Service and being both older and more reserved was, to Baba at least, a distant figure. And then one day RK proposed to marry Gayatri. In Baba's eyes RK was a very estimable young man, with a promising future; Gayatri would be both comfortable and happy as his wife. But his father was unhappy about the fact that Gayatri's education would be interrupted. She was a clever girl, she had passed her Matriculation with very good marks and his father had had hopes for her. RK assured that she could join a college in Bangalore and continue her education, but it was Gayatri herself who opted out of further education. She could not possibly combine her studies with her responsibilities at home. RK was going to be the centre of her life henceforth. Gayatri was very happy after her marriage. RK was never any

problem for her and Gayatri had the temperament for happiness. The ease between them and their absolute intimacy was as if they had known each other for many lifetimes. It was a good and successful marriage—a marriage between not just two bodies but two souls. They could never have an issue but that did not bring any gloom to their relations. Baba's diary says: "Their relationship was complete even without children. Few marriages are like that"(12).

Gayatri was very concerned about Baba's marriage. Gayatri told his brother about many suitable girls but he kept rejecting and then finally he agreed to marry but with a girl of his choice by chance. How he happened to meet her is a coincidence. He met her at the hospital and when she left the hospital he pursued her. She had come to attend to her brother Laxman who had been hospitalized as he was badly injured in a fracas. His eyes picked her out of the large milling crowd in Casualty, and Baba didn't let her go out of his life. Gayatri was suspicious at first. After she convinced herself after a meeting with Mai and her family, she agreed. They had been closer than most brothers and sisters are, but after Mai's death, scarred perhaps by the manner of her dying, Baba withdrew from all companionship. This relation took a back seat. In fact, even before this, Baba had turned away from everyone, including Mai herself. The brother and sister both lost a beloved partner midstream. Why is it that Baba gave up entirely, while Gayatri managed to keep going? Actually, Gayatri's and RK's was a much longer partnership, for they got married when she was just seventeen. But more than this, "theirs was an unusual companionship"(159). Gayatri survived because she was social and helpful and could be selfless for others.

It was RK and Gayatri who made the house what it was for Manjari and others, they who made the holidays what they were. It was Gayatri's and RK's planning which was the foundation on which these carefree days were built.

But then things change. Once termites were found to nibble at a particular place and Gayatri knew the propensity of termites to destroy better than he did. Gayatri could probably have restrained herself from selling it off, but then a "strange inexplicable phenomenon forced RK and Gayatri to sell the house. Stones of all shapes and sizes kept pelting the house, some hitting the walls and windows, some falling harmlessly in the yard"(138). Soon after, the house was demolished and the site sold. The relationship which holds greatest significance is that between Baba and Mai (Vasu). It is through Baba's diary that the novelist lays bare to our gaze the relation between Baba and Mai. Baba wrote in his diary:

And then I met Vasu. I must admit that it was the perfection of her tiny dainty body, her exquisite face, that drew me to her so immediately.... It was an emotion stronger than any I had felt until then.(107)

After marriage Baba found that Mai was not very responsive to his physical love. He was mistaken in his estimation of the real self of Mai. He writes: "Rashly, I convinced myself that I had enough love for both of us"(108), and then he later regrets his failure to convey his message physically.

Their's was on the whole a balanced relation. According to Manjari or Jiji, it occurs to her that he gave in when it was something that didn't matter much to him. When it came to things he cared about, he had his way. He was as good as Mai at getting his way, because he never openly stated his wishes. So usually he had got what he wanted. Manjari says:

Now, if I tote up Baba's and Mai's likes and dislikes, I see how

few of his wishes Baba gave up. Mr Bones, of course, stayed on in the passage because Baba liked him there. And there were the bones that came in his pockets and turned up in odd places at home, something that horrified Mai. But she learnt to accept it finally.(29) When RK died, BK's ties to this place snapped. He made over his plot to his son Raja, who built a house for himself and lived in it with his wife and son. And Vasu, who wouldn't have left Bombay or anything, was in such a hurry to get out that she herself did nothing but let home and its affairs in Bombay to be wound up by others. When Manjari came home after getting Raja's message, she saw a censorious, joyless Baba; a miserly man, the state of his clothes, frayed and shabby, showing her he had bought nothing new for years. And she thought of the Baba she knew, humorous, tolerant, ready to be happy, a man who enjoyed spending money.

After Mai's death he is completely lost. To gain some kind of contact with Mai he turned to books on philosophy, the Upanishads, the Gita,> spiritualism, the occult, astronomy, the "Tibetan Book of the Dead".> He began to search for her again as the vacuum in his life couldn't be filled by anyone else except Mai. He had faith in the body but the same was found to be entirely wanting. There was a complete loss of faith. He wanted to reunite in some way with Mai, and wanted to know "Where do the dead go?"(34).

Baba knew Mai well at the physical level but had failed miserably at the spiritual level. His philosophy born of the body had denied him a philosophy born of spirit or soul. For him "Vasu would never be a comforting presence for me. Our relationship was flawed"(58).

Laxman was one of the causes of distance between the two. Baba was dead against her meeting Laxman but she would say she had gone to meet her mother. Under pressure from Baba and his opposition over Laxman finally made her leave Laxman completely. Laxman was part of the underworld and hence the quarrels between them.

Companionship between Baba and Mai had reached to the minimal. Baba writes in his Diary: No, there was no place for anger in our lives. There was just this—this nothing. We stopped communicating; in fact, there was nothing left for us to say to each other. (202) So the relation between Baba and Mai had taken too much of the route through body. He concedes that he tried to reach her through body, and had failed miserably. Mai died and his only faith or belief too was completely shattered, and so the relations between the two were flawed from the very beginning.

Yet another relationship is between Manjari and Shyam, which is one of tragic love. Manjari fell in love with Shyam, a Sindhi boy. Mai was against Shyam as he was a Sindhi, and Baba too was against him as it would lead to her leaving her medical career. He had even warned her that if she married she would repent all her life. Despite this she married Shyam. She got married and her marriage was attended by Medha, Bharat, Gayatri, Kamala, Baba and Mai. Although thereafter she had to undergo many privations still she calls the consummation of her marriage as the most beautiful experience. Once Malu asked her about her experience and she said, "I could only have said what I honestly thought: Dirty! My god, it's the most beautiful experience in life—if you love each other, that is"(267). This is ample proof of the fact that the two loved each other very much. Despite opposition from her family she is very happy to get Shyam, although Manjari and Shyam had to pay rent like any other tenant to Shyam's parents. They had later shifted to one

of Shyam's boss's places called Ocean Vista on the sea beach. Here the two were very happy and contented.

For her Ocean Vista was a place of reconciliation as well. Baba came to visit her soon after they moved. And then the next time Mai came along with Baba. After they left she cried bitterly.

But things take a strange turn. She had come home to deliver her baby and it is here that Shyam comes, and Malu gets pregnant after she is allegedly raped by Shyam. Shyam is told about it by Manjari but when Mai comes to know about it, she gives the Khabardar final ultimatum to leave either her parents or Shyam forever. Then one day Shyam came and took Anand with him for an outing together. Manjari was afraid whether he would bring Anand back and is a little panicky, when he comes back and tells her he would never come again and it is she who will have to come to him. The two don't meet and she is unable to decide, and was afraid if he had left her forever. He had never left her but had simply distanced himself from her as he was rendered jobless and was in utter frustration. Then later she comes to know that he is drowned. Somehow Malu's child is delivered safely in a suburban house of Laxman, but she dies. It is this girl-child of Malu which is adopted by Manjari and named Sachi.

Another relation is between Manjari and BK's son Raja. Despite his mother's opposition, Raja had married Rukku. After she died he took to hard drinking. But later he tries to control this habit. He loves Manjari and wants her to marry him. He tells her, if she married him, all her problems would be solved. But she tells him she doesn't have any problems. She tells her many times that she will not marry him. He tells her that he likes being married. He later brings in the children as well; and tells her how good it will be for his Pawan and for her Anand and Sachi to have a family. Raja is always eager to help her and support her in every way, but she always refuses his help.

She tries to reassure Raja that she has more money than she required as she gets royalty from her father's book for first year students. She can live an easy and austere life the way she likes and does not want to marry Raja. She clearly tells this to Raja. She cannot give any solid reason to Raja as she herself is not very sure what the reason is. Then later the thought comes to her mind: Marriage for security? I asked Raja. And why not?(215).

When she lives all alone somebody breaks in into her house during the day and she is frightened why someone did so during the day. Then later somebody had tried to molest her and perhaps rape her, but had to run away as she gave a tough fight. And then some anonymous calls come to her asking if she wanted to sell the house. She thinks, "Was that his purpose—to scare me into selling the house?"(89). Raman, a student, is made to reside in the upper room for her safety. But a physical relation between the two develops. She calls it an 'arrangement', which she thinks has nothing to do with morality, as she is alone and the relation is mutually satisfying. Later when she was going round the school where Raja had got her a job, she has a different opinion of him. She believed in self-reliance and that is why she was in no mood to take any help from him, but now she was a little more mature. But then circumstances change. Raja becomes lame in an accident, and Manjari is very sympathetic towards him. She gives him a lift in her car to his place. But whether they get married is not clear from the way the novel ends. For her the best word for Raja is not 'alter ego' but "doppelganger".

Another relation that is worth discussing is between Baba and Manjari. The relation between the two is the way relation between a caring father and daughter should be. She says that it was Baba's illness due to cancer that was like a mutual friend, which formed a link between him and Manjari. It helped them to find a routine, since his treatment demanded an adherence to a strict schedule. In the few months they were together, they got back to some kind of relationship. And then he died.

She thought their partnership had been dissolved, but once again she had to be his partner, "his 'bhidu' as he called her, filling her with pride"(22). Baba writes in his diary about her relation with his daughter: "The truth is that we have become strangers to each other, my daughter and I. ...It seems to me we humans are fated to be strangers to one another" (56).

Relationship as we see between RK and Gayatri is one of great love, care and companionship to the extent that for Gayatri everything ended with RK's death. It was because RK continued to be part of her life. Theirs was a companionship that could take in all the things that happened to them, even death.

She was a very good and caring wife and was capable of encompassing other relations like that with Jiji and Malu. The two had been as much her children as they were ours. She had bathed them, fed them, put them to sleep, she had loved them almost the way we had done; it was a tragedy for her too. She had loved them almost the way everyone had done; it was a tragedy for her too. But she gave no indication of her suffering; she never spoke of her feelings. Gayatri was a good woman. It was not a saccharine goodness, though; she could be abrasive and her quick flashes of temper were famous, much dreaded by Manjari as a child. Even RK was wary of them. But as Baba says that Gayatri knew how to love and even better, she knew how to express her love. Baba holds a very high opinion about the kind of relationship that RK and Gayatri had. Baba tells Louisa that "but there is something that makes two people who come together have a relationship in which they bring out the best in each other. Like Gayatri and RK"(57).

Another relation worth mentioning is the relation between BK and Kamala were quite normal and cool in the beginning. They were a happy couple. But many years later, when Manjari visited her and BK, the house inside was unrecognizable. But it was the tension in the house that shocked her, the hostility among the three who lived in it and the angry silence that hovered over it which frightened her. Hemi, their daughter who is abnormal is the cause of it all. In the beginning they could not understand, but later as the fact about her abnormality dawned upon them, their life became miserable. It's quite clear for them that Hemi is not normal. The sweet-faced girl has become a tall gaunt woman, dressed all day in heap shapeless cotton kaftans which she bought from the roadside. Kamala thinks it's still not too late, that they can, even now, get Hemi married and all will be well. And overnight Hemi will be transformed from eccentric woman to happy wife and mother.

Kamala had tense relation with her son Raja who had broken her heart when he married Rukku, a Tamil girl older than him, instead of the girl Kamala had chosen for him. Kamala even makes desperate attempts to bridge the growing gap between Raja and his father BK—a very common thing in most of the households. But later Raja becomes sympathetic towards his father, protective of him. Largely their relations become very

strained and certainly for this they are not to be blamed, as it was destined to be.

Bharat and Laxman are Mai's brothers. Bharat married Medha, and Laxman married Mangal. Nothing much can be said about the relationship between Bharat and Medha except that, in Manjari's words, "And Medha too, a small-town girl, quickly learnt the rules of the game and adapted herself to Bharat's needs keeping pace with him, later taking the lead in their climb up the social ladder"(171). But the relationship between Laxman and Mangal is very dramatic. It is a love marriage. Laxman had eloped with Mangal when he was twenty-two. Mangal had turned against her own father who was a respectable doctor. For Manjari it was hard for her to reconcile the affectionate uncle she knew to the man who was supposed to have instigated violence, organized murders, taken over property and also was violent to his own wife—everything, except the last, done cold-bloodedly for his own gain. These were two faces of the same man, totally unbelievable. He was part of the Bombay underworld and would commit crimes for money and power—he was very unscrupulous and cruel. Manjari recalls later a late night visit of Mangal's to their home. A distraught, sobbing Mangal who fell on Mai's shoulder with an anguished cry of 'Vasutai!' the moment the door opened. Manjari had gone out when the doorbell rang and stood watching the frightening spectacle until Baba saw Manjari and said curtly, "Go to bed"(174). Which she did, but not before she'd seen a huge bruise on one side of Mangal's face, a rent in her blouse, the sleeve almost completely torn off. Laxman who was threatening and violent towards the world had now become the same to his better half. Their relations had gone totally haywire and beyond repair. Later he had been murdered by some paid killers. But Mai was dead by then. Rumours began circulating that Mangal was linked to her husband Laxman's murder. Rumours said that it was Mangal who had paid the killers, that she had been acting in concert with a rival who had become her lover. Eventually the rumours died down and "Laxman's death became just one more act in the unending drama of gang warfare"(175-76).

In a nutshell, Shashi Deshpande has woven the tragic versions of the various relationships through Manjari Ahuja's relations with Baba, Shyam, Raman and Raja, intertwined with that of Baba-Mai, Gayatri-RK, Kamla-BK, Laxman-Mangal and Bharat-Medha. This novel is about the secret lives of men and women who love, hate, plot and debate with an intensity that reveals the interior landscapes of the numerous human relationships.

References

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