

Review

The Portrayal of Relationships in Gauri Deshpande's 'The Lackadaisical sweeper'

Aparna Mahajan

Department of English C.S.M's Arts and Commerce College, Chakan
E mail : aparnavm@gmail.com, Cell no: 9822059678

Accepted 5 December, 2013

This article aims to study and interpret the background of the interpersonal relationships focusing on the female protagonists in the collection of Gauri Deshpande's short stories titled "The Lackadaisical sweeper.' Gauri Deshpande has surveyed a variety of shades in man woman relationships, their thoughts, frustrations and the truth lying at the background of all this. Gauri is a renowned and distinguished author and a poet in Marathi and English literature. Her untraditional manner of presenting the situation and the relationships, her frank and bold yet sensitive narration of the stories attract the readers. Here an effort has been made by Aparna Mahajan to explore the intricacies of the short stories, taking the feminist approach as the touchstone. It is also an effort to analyze the content and the technical aspects of the book. The context, setting, characters, plot, literary devices, and themes give insight into the author's perspective and bias.

Key words: Interpersonal relationships, female protagonists, Gauri Deshpande's short stories.

INTRODUCTION

Gauri Deshpande, an eminent and one of the very popular authors in Marathi literature, has written English short stories and the collection of short stories is titled 'The Lackadaisical sweeper'. This collection contains a few stories written originally in English and a couple of stories translated from Marathi. In all her writings, the portrayal of characters has fascinating shades. The male and female characters possess something unexpected from the ordinary way of life. The protagonist women characters stand different from the usual woman category types. They have special place in the hearts of all her readers. Gauri sees her women not as types but as an individual. Her style of writing is not aggressive but certainly very strong, frank and true.

The characters and their interpersonal relationships are so realistic and sensitive that every reader either feels that the author must have experienced this or it is more than astounding to see that she has articulated the feelings and thoughts of women at every phase. She has spoken the innermost thoughts of women's hearts. The book gives us the experience of reading about ourselves. At the same time we want to see how women are represented, what the stories tell us about gender relations and sexual differences. The book reflects the Universalist approach of feminism which deal and discuss the problems of women of different milieu, ages, civilizations and of varying psychic structures. The rule of patriarchy is mirrored as the social order in which man

dominates woman through violent or sometimes in decent manner. There are some points where the readers can not relate themselves. The author has tried to point out such situations in the discussion.

Objectives

The article aims to study

- Woman as a subject and as an object
- To find out the rigid system of gender identity in the stories with feminist approach.
- The patriarchal law which dominates woman through various institutions like family, education and cultural practices which are all designed to favor men.
- To search the variety of shades of man woman relationships, their thoughts and frustrations in the stories.
- Universal element in gender relations
- To examine the fact that irrespective of time, language, place and strata in society all the women reflect similar attitude of suppression and oppression in the male dominated society.

Methodology

The author intends to read the anthology of Gauri Deshpande's short stories.

Also she will go through the other writings of Gauri Deshpande to comprehend the style of her presentation.

It will be her honest effort to revise the feminist critical theories of Elaine Showalter, Juliet Mitchell and Simon de Bourir.

DISCUSSION

Patriarchy or the law of the fathers is the social order in which women are dominated by men. We are used to see the world and human behavior from male perspective. Various institutions in the world such as family, religion, education and culture reflect how men are benefitted with this than a woman. Man, by default becomes the centre of human existence and women get place at the periphery of that circle. The word gender has got unnecessary importance in the social order. Actually it is not a biological construct but a social identity to see a place and a space of a man and a woman in the society. It is distinctly mirrored in Gauri Deshpande's short stories. The portrayal of characters has fascinating shades. The male and female characters possess something unexpected from the ordinary way of life. The protagonist women characters stand different from the usual woman category types. Yet they are to certain level of extent the victims of the patriarchal exploitation.

The women protagonists have special place in the hearts of all her readers. Gauri Deshpande (1997) sees her women not as types but as an individual. Her style of writing is not aggressive but certainly very strong, frank and true. The characters and their interpersonal relationships are so realistic and sensitive that every reader either feels that the author must have experienced this or it is more than astounding to see that she has articulated the feelings and thoughts of women at every phase. She has spoken the innermost thoughts of women's hearts. This feeling of the reader is the criteria of the good literature and Gauri Deshpande achieves this success in her every novel, the poems and the short stories.

As the blurb of the book reads, 'The stories probe the truth about women, men and their relationships, thoughts, frustrations and absurdities.' Outwardly they look un-Indian but the deeper we read them, the more we understand the undercurrents of her stories. It will not be wrong to say that they are universal in every way. They deal with various themes but the main theme is the way of thinking of the Indians living abroad. This background is not comprehensible to all the ordinary middle class families. The mode of her sentences, the intermingling of sentences within the sentences, the zigzag manner of writing makes the reader reread the context. Many a times we, as the readers experience that we stop to think over what exactly she means and again we are pushed in the gush to capture the theme. Giving surprises, unanticipated twists are the soul of Gauri's writing. The stories are narrated in a simple manner, without any pretence. They do not mean to reflect feministic point of view, yet the roots of gender relations and the feminism are present in them as any other basic emotion exists.

'The Lackadaisical sweeper' deals with themes which are bravely bold and untraditional. The settings of the stories vary from place to place. The couples are not traditional ones. There is one level of modernity which sets the standard of thinking. Still there are some age-old issues that peep out through the conversations, at times explicitly or implicitly. In this title story of *The Lackadaisical Sweeper*, two newlywed upper-middle-class wives, one Indian, the other American, stationed in Hong Kong with their businessman-husbands, meet and become friends as they take their daily morning walks. Initially the outward appearance of both these ladies convey the apparent difference between them. Yet they bind and gel well with each other when they share their lives with each other. Seeta's naïveté and submissiveness attitude becomes a cause to break this confidence in an unintentional way. Thinking her husband very close to her she discusses all inside information about her friend's husband to him. Her husband uses this information for grabbing their real estate and to flee them out of the country. The reader is left pondering the sweeper's judgment of Seeta, who may be a virtuous

Indian wife, but is not a good human being. This unquestioning submissiveness to husband's demands, trusting husband to a great extent reflect the woman's mind in general. Gauri Deshpande comments on human nature, social structure, authority, feminism, racism, friendship, love, and compassion using the tools of context, setting, and characters in this story. The protagonist Seeta is a daughter of post independence, liberal parents.. She is modern, planning to go to Hong Kong, yet is a type who wanted to have her name changed after marriage. Her husband, Narain does not change it as he finds the name Seeta, as an epitome of wifely virtue. Here Gauri Deshpande reveals the outward layers of the so called modernity. Narain is a typical husband who decides when to have a baby, and does not mind her going for a walk after he goes for work. Thus he wanted her no more than a domestic slave.

In 'The Debt', the reaction of Indian father and American mother varies when it comes to abort the child that came in the most unwanted moment. Contemptuously she tells her husband, 'In your country, they may think of women as just baby making machines but don't forget I am an American! I will decide when to have a child, if I decide to have a child at all.' The traditional Indian reader will not be able to digest Sajan asking 'How can you say that? Don't I have any right over the baby'? We the readers get a deep dive into the rational thoughts when the story proceeds further telling that the sons have to look after their parents in their old age in Indian culture. The traumatic situation takes place when Sajan has to face the untimely death and his old father receives some money as compensation. The father says, 'It is the duty of children to look after their parents in their old age.' It is heartbreaking to see such help from the son, Sajan. It is more astounding to see Anita changed when she tells her little son whom she wanted to reject, 'Remember Peter, children must look after their parents, "The debt", have to be paid. Thus the twist comes very unexpectedly at the end of the story. This story takes the reader to a platform where all will not be able to relate with it. The symbol of debt implies discrepancy between what is said and what is meant.

'Brand New Pink Nikes', deals with a woman who gets dismayed looking her image in the mirror. Her paunch, blue veined legs, slacking breasts brings her into tears when she reaches her 50s. She knew everyone grew old but her old age came to her unexpectedly which troubles her and she gets it hard to accept. The chance encounter with a lost tourist, his offer to have coffee together brings her old smile and happiness back. This chance element makes her introvert about the present phase of her life.

Gauri reveals the hidden rebellious attitude of a woman who wants to reshape her life in her own accord in her story, 'Map'. The honesty and openness is reflected through the language of the story. The story begins with a sentence 'This is a map of my body'. The woman in the

story is well aware of the fact that the 'me' in his mind has nothing to do with 'me' in my mind. She feels that she has been a puppet to the tunes called by men in her life. She discards all the chains that have bound her hitherto and reshapes the map of life newly. This echoes the psyche of every Indian woman who irrespective of her knowledge of western feminism wants a basic happiness, the way she wants without anybody 'allowing' her to take it. It mirrors the Indian society and the place and psyche of an Indian woman.

In 'Insy Winsy Spider' the mother daughter relationship and the revelation of self is portrayed very effectively. Vishalakshi, the mother has devoted her life to all intellectual activities. She does not have priority to do housekeeping. She does not spend much of her time in cooking and makes simple recipes of potato and DOODHI. She is under impression that she is a kind of a role model for her daughter, Maitreyee, who is in her teen age. To the mother's surprise, one day this daughter announces that she does not want to pursue education henceforward and to get married when she was only 18 years old. Her thought, 'I don't want to do anything else but want to get married and look after my home and family', shocks Vishalakshi. The situation answers any mother's question, put by her initially that 'What are 'we'? When we are 'we?' She realizes her daughter is not like her. She feels how it was true that she is she and not her mother. We, the readers keep thinking what should be the circumstances of this situation? May be one cannot fulfill all the expected roles by the near ones. We are left with a question how should one decide the priority without feeling guilty and at the same time achieve her own dreams.

The subject of 'Dimitri in the afternoon', is very delicate. Ulka, the girl in the story has to go with her husband abroad, to Greece. This situation that a boy settling in abroad, and after marriage the girl has to accompany him there is still regarded as a very fortunate opportunity by majority of Indians. It has become a pattern of the elite and neo rich families in India. No one bothers to dig into the real happiness of the girl. This girl happens to meet a friend in whose company she finds real comfort. This boy is no way good looking. On the contrary, he is very hefty and sturdy. She calls him Dimitri, whose real name is Jack. We are at the point of the story, when they are taking stroll on a sandy beach. They share a soft feeling with each other. We understand they truly get their vibrations matched with each other. While parting he kisses her. 'The kiss was not the prolonged preparatory sort of a kiss which she knew very well. It was entire in itself; an entire and complete communication between two human beings.'

Taking a few feminist approaches as touchstones, these stories reveal interesting interpretations which reflect in the society around us. The household is a basic unit of society where individuals both cooperate and

compete for resources. It is also a primary place in which individuals confront and reproduce societal norms, values, power, and privilege. Gender norms and differences that are expressed within the household are reflected in larger institutions of society. "Gender relations are not confined to the domestic arena — although households constitute an important institutional site on which gender relations are replayed out — but are made, remade and contested in a range of institutional arenas". In other words, this is not simply a story of the household and its members, but about the shaping of gender identities by larger institutions, and the ongoing participation of family members in creating new gender norms. Gauri Deshpande's stories have this thought as a backdrop; the inner feelings and brainstorming thoughts, sometimes unarticulated, make the readers introvert about the reflections of her own life. Women's "inferiority" is used to justify discrimination and abuse in the household and in society at large and power inequity is reflected and reinforced by traditional and modern laws and institutional practices.

The modern women who are educated enough to take their own decisions, can think of their own identity in a society also have certain barricades and have to struggle hard to overcome them in Gauri's short stories. The Ugandan proverb fits in this situation. 'Even if a woman is given a chicken or a goat by her parents, she cannot own it. It belongs to her husband. A wife may work hard and get a chicken. If it lays eggs, they belong to the husband'.

All these stories present myriads of aspects of women's thinking under specific situations. As per Juliet Mitchell's views, patriarchy creates and recreates the psychic conditions for women's subordination which are not the thin veil of false consciousness but the very flesh and blood of female subjectivity. The character sketches of women are the representations of the woman's psyche. Gauri Deshpande, probably wants to make the readers aware of the fact of women's suppression and subjectivity should not be looked upon as a destiny but it is up to the women only to think and to create their path in the given circumstances. Juliet Mitchell (1984) describes the same process in her essay 'Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis'. She says, "Here we are: women. What are our lives to be about? Who are we? Domesticity, personal relations, personal intimacies. Stories..."

Simon De Beauvoir believes that woman's inferiority in society is a result not of natural differences but of differences in the upbringing of man and woman. Male domination is not inherent or fated but conditioned at every stage of development. De Beauvoir says that "Man learns his power." By the same token, woman is not born passive, mediocre, or immanent. Rather, she is socialized to believe that proper women must embody these characteristics and, subtly and not subtly, she is conditioned to believe that denying her true self is the

only way to achieve happiness and gain acceptance. To bring about substantial changes in society, young boys and girls must be educated differently from the outset. Since they are born equal, the possibility exists of their being equal in adulthood as well as in childhood—but it is up to society to change its skewed perspectives.

Elaine Showalter (1979, 1986) believes that the task is to concentrate on women's access to language from which words can be selected on the ideological and cultural determination of expression. Gauri Deshpande's female protagonist Seeta in 'The Lackadaisical sweeper' transparently conveys such notions. Finding a friend on her own was some achievement to her. She was brought up to assume money was made by men in the pursuit of some profession. In her 'A Harmless Girl', the girl narrates how she lived her life. She says, 'I grew up practically non-existent. In my eternal endeavor to live harmlessly, bother-lessly and noiselessly, I learnt to tiptoe, to wear only flat, rubber-soled shoes, to eat and drink not only without making the smallest noise but even without making the smallest movement'. In the 'Afterword', Raj Rao aptly says that these stories show a concern that women's low self esteem is peripheral in many stories.

CONCLUSION

The anthology 'The Lackadaisical sweeper' portrays women protagonists who convey widely differed attitudes. The most interesting part of these stories is, they reveal the under streams of all types of relationships; may it be between friends, mother – daughter, husband - wife or any permutations and combinations of the myriads of the relationships. The gender relations are intricately narrated in the stories. They describe the women and their hearts in a manner that they pierce into the hearts of the readers. Some readers may not approve this outwardly, saying that this does not fit in Indian society and Indian culture. But Gauri Deshpande breaks the boundaries created by society, and takes the readers to the honest world of men and women through her stories.

REFERENCES

- Gauri Deshpande. (1997). 'The Lackadaisical sweeper' Manas publication. Secondary Sources.
 J.S. Mill (1869). "The Subjugation of Women", London. 1
 Juliet Mitchell (1984). 'Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis' ed. "Women: The Longest Revolution. Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis".
 Elaine Showalter (1979). "Towards a Feminist Poetics" ed. "Women Writing about Women" 1979

Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness"
ed. "The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women,
Literature and Theory. Ed Elaine Showalter, London:
Virago 1986