Domestic Relations in Shashi Deshpande’s Short Stories

Madhuri Bite

In the modern society the place of mother and the place of daughter have been rapidly changing. They have their own realms to wander. They have their own problems. Formerly education was not given to women in the Indian society. But as the time changed efforts have been made by various personalities to include women onto the process of education. Since then she has been experiencing a new world with new problems to face. Modernity at large has shattered the faith of a common man in the family life. There are many reasons for this but vast scale spread of education may not be neglected. Unfortunately only rights have been learnt by the learners, and they seem to have forgotten to learn about their duties. And hence problems seem to have been appearing in the society.

Formerly mothers were lovable, ready to sacrifice everything for their children, family. As women were less educated or illiterate they didn’t know the world beyond their husband, children, household duties and familial responsibilities. But as the time changed the so called image of mother has been broken. Because of the education women become aware of their own rights, desires, ambitions, needs. She has given priority to economic independence, career, self-respect and self identity. It affects the every relationship. Even the sacred relationship of mother and daughter is not escaped from it. Such reflections are found in the writing of Shashi Deshpande. She has highlighted the changing relationships amongst the members of the family. Especially the changing relationship of mother and daughter is seen in her short stories. Shashi Deshapnde deals with the middleclass Maharashtrian woman and her problems. “Her stories depict a picture of women and their exploitation in a conventional male dominated society.”

Sita, Savitri have been treated as ideals of loyalty in the Indian society. The society does not accept a woman as a person. It seems that the society does not allow any women to live without the labels like a mother, daughter, sister, wife, mother-in-law, and daughter-in-law. While playing these roles woman has forgotten herself as a human being. Shashi Deshpande portrays the picture of this woman she deals with the problems of women like loneliness, quest for identity, sexual violence. Perhaps she compares the past with the present conditions of women in her short stories.

There is a focus on the theme of mother-daughter relationship in her short stories. Protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are well educated, economically independent, career oriented middle class women with independent views. But they have a clash with their mothers. Because mothers are traditional, oppressed and tied with social norms. They follow these social norms. The relationship of mother and daughter is laid on hatred not on love. Mother is not a lovable, traditional mother for the daughter. Deshpande portrays a conflict between the daughter and the mother. It is quite natural that such conflict does exist. The daughter is considered as a responsibility of mother. Mother tries to restrict the behavior of the daughter in many respects for her better future. While showing the daughter-mother relationship Shashi Deshpande concentrates on the traditional view of mother. Deshpande wants to present the woman as an individual than as in any role. “Deshpande’s portrayal of the mother also seems to be a reaction to the idealized depiction of the mother and motherhood in mythology and other Indian literature. She wants to depict woman as an individual rather than as cast in a particular mould or role.” Her protagonists are closer to their fathers than to their mothers. “Fathers are perceived as lenient by the daughters who feels who feel oppressed by their mother strictures. The patriarchy
of fathers remains hidden as the women act on their behalf to condition the daughters. Since theirs is a remote control, the conflict between mother and daughter becomes direct. This is reflected in almost all the mother-daughter relationships in her work.” The following stories are taken for the study under this theme, ‘Why A Robin?’, ‘The Awakening’, ‘My Beloved Charioteer’, ‘It Was Dark’, ‘And Then…?’, ‘The Cruelty Game’, ‘Madhu’.

In the story “Why A Robin?” mother is successful in establishing the warm relationship with her daughter. The story runs around the three characters mother, daughter and father. The daughter is close to her father than her mother. Though the woman and her husband never quarrel there is a kind of emptiness in their relationship. The mother-daughter relationship in “Why A Robin?” depends on fulfillment of the child’s wishes, needs and requirements.

Mother in this story feels that her existence in the home is neglected. Daughter feels that mother is incapable to help her in many things and she is quite sure that her father will help her in every problem. When mother is failed to help her in writing an essay on robin, the girl turns her back to mother and goes to her father. The daughter says, “I’ll ask Papa. He’s sure to know, he’ll help me.”(46). Instead of helping the girl in writing a composition on robin mother insists on writing an essay on peacock.

Deshpande, in the story symbolically presents the conflict between the old and the new through the peacock and robin. This shows that a woman-mother does not want to come out of the orbit world.

Mother in the story feels guilty because she is a failure as a wife, a companion, as a mother. There is emptiness in the relationship of her husband and wife. Even with her daughter she is helpless because she cannot cope with her fits of excitement, her questions, her rage, her tantrums, her ideas. The woman is totally ignored by both-the daughter and the husband. She is unable to communicate successfully with both of them. Lack of good communication creates a gap between relations. The woman thinks that her daughter and husband are two locked rooms which she cannot enter in. she does not have the key to open these rooms. She feels outsider in her own house. The discussion of the daughter and father about the robin goes above and around her, leaving her untouched. The woman sacrifices her identity and all her needs, desires and ambitions for her family. She thinks that she will have to live whole life to say what she wants and even then she is unable to frame it in words. She realizes that she has no wants because she has whittled them out of fear. It seems that while thinking this the woman searches for her self-identity. She says, “I think I do not have by self abnegation. Instead, I have dwindled. Without wants, there is no ‘I’. That is why they so often look at e without seeing me.”(50). She becomes aware of the thing that she has forgotten her “self”.

With the attainment of puberty mother provides the necessary comfort to the daughter. For the first time daughter denies the help of her father. Mother feels joyous and exalted as she has found the key to open the daughter’s heart. She tells daughter that she also has undergone the same experience. The daughter asks mother to show her peacock’s feather the next morning. Mother thinks that the gap between them is building up. The daughter decides to ask her teacher why we can’t write an essay on robin. Daughter and mother share the same thoughts and share the same experience. Both try to take steps to understand each other.

Attainment of womanhood bridges the gap between the mother and daughter. The feeling of the same sufferings helps them to come together.

In“My Beloved Charioteer” Shashi Deshpande portraits three generations, exploring mother and daughter. The relationship of the grandmother and grand-daughter Priti is based on love, care, understanding. But the relationship of the mother Arti and the daughter Priti is not on
the same base. The mother-daughter relationship in this story develops at the end as both understand each-other’s needs, requirements. Both need each-other’s emotional support.

In the story the old widow is living her lonely life peacefully. But she is unable to make her widow daughter to live happily in the same situation. Arti, the widow daughter of the woman is lost in her own grief in such an extent that she neglects the needs of her daughter, Priti. The other finds comfort in her grand-daughter Priti. Priti is a ray of hope in her meaningless life. Mother can’t see grief-stricken Arti. She tries her best to bring her back to the happiness but is a failure. She hopes that Arti will talk and laugh again one day. The mother wants to share the sufferings, sorrows of her daughter but can not. Mother is hurt by calling of Arti herself a widow. It hurts mother that Arti can find her comfort from her dead father and not from her living mother. Mother thinks that the fault is hers if her daughter hates the people who are happy. The incident of breaking the glass on her late fathers photograph comes like an opportunity to mother. Arti always has loved her father than mother. But now mother introduces Arti to her father’s latent traits of character. The mother tells Arti that she was always dominated by her husband. At the end mother is happy because she makes her daughter to look at her. She does not bother whether there will be change in attitude of Arti towards her. She is satisfied because the locked door of the communication is opened.

Arti comes to know that her mother is “a victim of gender based oppression and patriarchal socialization.” At last the mother is successful to bring back her daughter to this living world again. Mother feels that the daughter is with her now, giving her new strength for new battle. Arti becomes the beloved charioteer of her mother.

The story “It Was Dark” is woven around the three characters, mother, daughter and father. The mother in this story is a strong woman. She protects the future of her daughter and decides to change conservative views about the rape. Mother decides to help her daughter to come out of this ditch. Without mothers help daughter would not have been able to live happy life again.

The fourteen years girl is kidnapped and raped by an unknown man. After her coming back to home everything is changed for her and her parents too. The girl is shocked and is nervous. She is suffering on social and psychological level. Her mother is completely shaken after knowing the reality. She is very much fearful about the future of her daughter. The doctor has told them about the possibility of pregnancy. Mother is unable to face this reality and cries out for help.

The incident of the rape of the daughter takes back the mother to her past. When she was eleven years old and had seen what her suitor has willed her to see. Since then she has “the fear of violence which continued even after marriage”. Even after the marriage sometimes sex can be a rape. Both mother and daughter share the same experience. The difference between the experience of the both is that in daughter’s case it comes before marriage. But the feelings of being humiliate, physical and psychological violence is the same.

In a panic mother suddenly goes to the daughters room where she lies motionless, staring at the ceiling. She asks so any questions to daughter about that man and what did he do? The only cold response to all these questions is, “It Was Dark.”(131). Mother for a moment stared at daughter and suddenly pulls back the curtains from the window and sunlight poured into the room, fills the room with brightness. Now daughter moves her eyes from ceiling to a glimmering, moving circle of light on another part of ceiling. It symbolizes that the darkness in the mind of girl is wiping out and soon her life will again fill up with the brightness i.e. happiness. At last the moves her eyes from there to her mother. Mother feels happy and satisfied.
because at last she has made her daughter to look at her. The strong efforts and determination of mother brings daughter back to life.

The story ends on an optimistic tone. The mother assures her daughter that everything will become normal again. She decides to fight against the conservative norms for her daughter. “Symbolically the mother refuses to submit before the dark forces of conventional morality that deconstructive and instrumental in marginalizing a woman, in this case her daughter.”

In another story “And Then…?” mother is not totally sacrificing mother. The daughter and the son are everything for her. But for the children she is not everything and she is well known about this fact. In her own son’s home she feels like an outsider. The woman seeks comfort in her granddaughter’s Deepali’s company. But she warns herself that “she is not mine. My husband, I had said and he went away leaving me alone. My Vishwa I had thought and now I am just a burden and a responsibility to him. My Anju, I had cried out and she walked away from me without compunction or pity.”(173).

Mother makes all possible efforts to prevent Anju from going abroad. She doesn’t want to live lonely life. She remembers the first day of Anju’s school. She was crying and saying to her mother to don’t leave her alone. Mother thinks that now it’s her time to plead. She says, “don’t go away, don’t leave me alone and go away, don’t leave me alone here, I am frightened…” (174). Finally she uses her dead husband as a powerful weapon but fails. Mother calls Anju ‘selfish’. Anju feels that it is better to be selfish rather than to become like her mother. She thinks it’s her life and she will live it as she wants. The daughter goes away leaving the old mother behind alone. Mother was always there for her children’s needs but when she needs them they become selfish and think only about themselves.

There is a grief of loneliness in the mind of a mother, and, perhaps from that point of view she does not allow Anju to go abroad. It seems that the mother is seeking for support and a person to look after her in her old age. A scholar of short stories of Shashi Deshpande Abha Shukla Kaushik states, “Deshpande takes a more realistic view of motherhood exposing not only the excitement and wonder of being a mother but also the frustrations and dissappontents.”

“The Cruelty Game” is a story about a young widow Pramila and her fatherless child Sharu. In the story there is a picture of the cruelty of children and the mother-daughter relationship. There are needs, expectations of a child from parents. In the story conservative approach of society about remarriage of a widow weakens the relationship of mother and daughter.

After the death of Sharu’s father Pramila decides to go to Bombay, to take up a job and to remarry her husband’s friend Jagdish. No one in the family has the sympathy for Pramila and Sharu. Children I the family too are used to tease Sharu till she turns into tears. When Sharu comes to know that her mother is remarrying Jagdish uncle, she is unable to accept the fact. All children in the home tease her that her widowed other is remarrying. Sharu can not bear this. It made Sharu to feel that her mother’s decision is wrong. She is not ready to go with her mother. Sharu clings to her grandmothers legs at the end. Pramila being Sharu’s mother understands her feelings.

Shashi Deshpande, through the story puts forth the problem of widowhood, the problem of widow’s life. Through the character of Pramila Deshpande gives a solution to this problem. The solution of remarriage of widow with economic independence

Sharu and other children through their behavior with Pramila show conservative approach. In this story unlike the other stories mother has been shown in a non-traditional role.
However, the tension between the mother and the daughter exists in this story as found in most of the stories of Deshpande.

Mother in the story “The Awakening” is an aggressive woman. Alka is a protagonist of the story. Her mother thinks that the position of girl is secondary and the position of boy is primary. She always gives priority to her son. Alka makes fun of the omni-present existence of mothers. She says, “God made mothers because he couldn’t be everywhere himself. What nonsense! There are mothers and mothers and mothers. Mine is a woman with a heavy, sullen face and a tongue like a serrated knife.”(114-115).

There is a quarrel between the other and the daughter. Though Alka is a brilliant girl her mother wants her to work as a typist and earn some money for her family instead of going to college. But Alka wants to take higher education and a job of good salary. This is the cause of quarrel between Alka and her mother. The sudden death of Alka’s father creates many problems for Alka. She has no alternative than to take up a job as a typist for helping her family. After the death of the father Alka gets angry with him. There are only incomplete duties behind him. She thinks his life and death both are failure.

The story ends on an optimistic note. After reading the letter from father’s briefcase Alka starts crying. In the letter father confesses his guilt to force Alka to take up the job. He has the faith in the brilliance and abilities of Alka. And he is also sure that Alka will become successful in her life. The letter awakens the feeling of responsibility and her ability to achieve her aim. “The letter restores her faith and gives her courage to continue working not only to share her father’s burdens and responsibilities but also to realize her own dreams.”

There are four characters in the story “Madhu”. Madhu is a young girl. It seems that there is a gap of natural and mutual understanding between the mother and the daughter. Lalita Madhu’s mother feels unable to understand her daughter. Madhu is a careless, casual, impertinent, impatient, and intolerant of her parents. Madhu’s father too complaints about her behavior. Lalita speaks reluctantly about Madhu. At the birth of Madhu Lalita was very happy because she thought Madhu will become her friend. They both will do any things together. But now the only thing they do together is fight. Lalita tells the narrator that Madhu doesn’t tell her anything even the names of her friends. She feels funny as her daughter treats her like a stranger. Mother is displeased with both of her children. She thinks parents give everything to their children and expect only care and affection from them. But children even don’t give them that. Children never think of them. (96). On the other hand Madhu has the complaint that her mother never understands her.

Behavior of Madhu is suddenly changed when her father is hospitalized. She behaves very obediently and maturely. In her father’s illness she realizes her duties and responsibilities. She cares and loves her father so much that she is ready to sacrifice anything for him. She believes in “I’ll sacrifice something I like very much, and may be I’ll get the other thing.”(99). So she sacrifices her long, beautiful hair which she has very much proud on, to get her father. Her mother unknown to the reason is very grief-stricken by seeing Madhu with very short hair. She feels very sad that Madhu has cut off her hair without asking her.

Madhu is a representative of the new generation and Lalita is of old generation. Madhu (i.e. the new generation) has her own ways to care and love her parents. But her parents (i.e. the old generation) fail to understand her. The lack of mutual understanding and generation gap weakens the relationship of mother and daughter.
Shashi Deshpande portrays a realistic and authentic picture of woman in her stories. “These characters are not just mothers, daughters or even women; first they are human beings living in different circumstances, conditions and personalities.”

Shashi Deshpande deals in the above stories with the daughter and mother relationship. Often she compares the present with the past and shows that even in the modern context there has been no change in the relationship. She sometimes sarcastically comments on the situation. There are seven stories and they deal exclusively with the daughter-mother relationship.

Works Cited: