



THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL CONTEXT AND INDIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The self is constructed by a multitude of forces. Of these the first is the family which may or may not be conducive to the growth of the individual, especially if the child is a girl child whose initiation into adulthood may work differently than that of the male. The family is a place of relationships, hostilities, estrangements, refuge and rejection. It is, in itself, a puzzle, its pieces fall apart before our very eyes.

Keywords : *Hostilities, Estrangements, Refuge and Rejection etc.*

Introduction :

The family understood as a socio-cultural structure involving human relationships needs to admit not only the presence of cooperation but conflict as well within it. As a construct it is moulded by the social and cultural norms within which it is located and therefore an attempt to interpret the implications of conflict within the family would also necessitate an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the lived lives of people and the ongoing dominant cultural politics at play and which, to a great extent, determine and shape the course of individual lives. Kamla Bhasin in *Understanding Gender* would have us believe that the family is

a place of bargaining and contestation, where power is negotiated ... family is a complex matrix of relationships in which there is ongoing negotiation, subject to constraints set by gender, age, type of relationship and 'undisputed traditions'. Gender interactions within the family ... contain elements of co-operation and conflict.¹

The family is often regulated and disciplined through a continuous and all pervading sense of power the source of which may be attributed to various factors such as gender, age, type of relationship and so on.

Power has manifold implications and an attempt to contain power within a uniform singular definition would be rather difficult. In a naïve sense, power implies the exercise of force or control over individuals or groups in the society by other individuals or groups within it. When exercised within the restrictions of law, power is considered to be legal and just. Contemporary cultural theory derives its most influential theorisations on power from the writings of one of the most prominent anti-essentialist and poststructuralist thinkers, Michel Foucault. In his works such as *The History of Sexuality* (1979) and *Power/Knowledge* (1980) Foucault argues

that power is not associated with straightforward domination but operates through discourses which are institutionalised and in the process constituting and controlling subjects. The institutionalised discourses are associated with a common belief system which is disseminated through various practices and often display a hegemonising tendency. It is interesting to note how the “capillary microtechniques” (Foucault, “What is an Author?” 1618) of any given social order diffuses power and distributes it throughout social relations. As Chris Barker observes, “bodies are ‘subject to’ the regulatory power of discourse by which they become ‘subjects for’ themselves and others”².

The family generally refers to domestic space inhabited by both male and female members where the positioning of the individual members rely on the cultural pattern and social structure that is practised in general. Therefore, though the family as a domestic space often gives us the picture of a feminine terrain and construes images of female communities at ease with their experience of domesticity, in reality however, a probe into the familial space reveals quite an unlikely picture. Family may be a refuge for its members but at the same time it may also be a site of resistance and contestation, “a place of gender retreat or struggle, a paradoxical symbol of safety and threat, inclusion and exclusion, peace and violence” (Childs 176). An examination of the negative associations in relation to the family would reveal that such scope for threat, violence, exclusion are covertly contained within the family which may be attributed to the peculiar workings of the familial ideologies generally manipulated by the larger cultural discourses that shape and provide a structural frame to the family within a particular society. Coming to familial ideology, it may be argued that society and culture and therefore, the family, viewed as a social and cultural construct, often assumes the voice of the stronger class of the society in chalking out its area of functioning. The voice of patriarchy that usually determines the nature of the family, demarcates a diminishing space for the female co-habitants, for institutional discourses permeate cultural and social meanings that are associated with the notion of the female as the weaker sex, figure of lack, inferior in comparison to the superior male Other and thus, in need of confinement in terms of space not only domestic but also social. As such cultural and social injunctions justify the male exercise of authority and consequently, power becomes an exclusively male attribute. Foucault’s assertion that power is not possessed but exercised becomes pertinent in this context and analyses of the operations of power and the consequent effect on the spatial positioning of all the members within a family becomes relevant.

The Indian family provides an important case study in the sense that it appears to be a construct which heavily relies on the traditionally institutionalised discourses for its socio-cultural acceptability. Within the family, it is the overall effect of the strategic positions occupied by the dominant class or gender which has an effect that is manifested by the position of those who are dominated. Power works through relationships and interdependences and through a hegemonising mechanism very often leads to a crisis of space within familial relations resulting in dissidence and conflict. It would be pertinent to keep in mind, after Foucault, that “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Rabinow 252). The Indian family largely follows a traditional structure which has been predominantly patriarchal in its underlying philosophy which privileges the male over the female and the former occupies the position of the dominant category in most cases. Jasbir Jain in *Writing Women Across Cultures* remarks, “women as dependents constituted the ‘family’ and had no direct interaction with power and authority” (12) and it may be thus assumed that there is spatial restriction imposed upon women as a class and that they have comparatively

lesser mobility and accessibility to all other accompanying opportunities in their experience of living. As Barker states, “space is a construction and material manifestation of social relations that reveals cultural assumptions and practices” (353). He understands social space as a dynamic, multitudinous and ever changing social construction constituted in and through social relations of power. Social space may imply any spatial terrain that has a potential to provide a platform to the individual for micro as well as macro interaction. “(Social) space is a (social) product ... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power ...” (Lefebvre 26). Understood thus, home may be considered as one of most significant social spaces bestowing meaning to individual action and interaction in relation to the power proportions that are inherent within it. Silverstone in *Television and Everyday Life* (1994) remarks: “Home ... is a manifestation of an investment of meaning in space ... It is constructed through social relations which are both internal and external and constantly shifting in their power relations”³.

In her novels Shashi Deshpande articulates the familial politics which operates within the institution to show that like any other social institution the family too, has its sites of power structure. And therefore, the exploration of the fictional rendition of family in the novels of Deshpande as a site of power politics and conflict is desirable. This chapter continues to study the family as a social and cultural construct which is again the template on which the dominant ideology in the form of patriarchal norms is inscribed. Seen as a site for the complex interplay of social relations and power, family as a socio-cultural space generates different meanings for individuals who inhabit it in terms of gender, age and the hierarchical status one belongs to. Conflict arises when an individual proposes to transcend the determined spatial locus that has been demarcated by the prevalent normative socio-cultural values and “the lack of space, both physical space and emotional space, takes a heavy toll on those who have to live in such oppressive confinements” (Prasad 45). Deshpande raises such issues in her novels pertaining to the family which more often than not perpetrates and sustains inequalities. She remarks in *Writing From the Margin* “... the family is not a divine, sacred institution, but one created by humans for the benefit of all society; and, therefore, it should be built, not on the sacrifice of some, but on the co-operation and compromises of all its members” (84). This chapter includes a study of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988) and *Small Remedies* (2000) examine conflict within familial relations, marriage in particular, which would reveal the inequities that exist between the members in relation to power exercised and spatial positioning within the family in general. In all these novels patriarchy is examined as the center of social and familial power structure and the impact of such structures on the emotional and intellectual health and to a lesser extent, the physical health of the female protagonists. Thus, as a novelist Deshpande needs to be liberated from the confining limits of feminism, and as Jasbir Jain observes, critical focus needs to be directed to an analysis of

the psychological inputs, the poetics of loss, her use of myth, the narrative strategies she employs ... her relationship with the traditions towards this end, the categories that need to be explored are the institutions of family and marriage as patriarchy has constructed them and how, under stress, they are beginning to crack. (Gendered Realities⁴

The Dark Holds No Terrors focuses on marriage as a social institution and also as an important constituent of the family which is at the same time culturally inscribed. The central character in this novel Sarita (Saru), a successful doctor by profession is married to Manohar, a college lecturer who comparatively

appears not as much successful as his wife. Saru's profession and its accompanying responsibilities provide her mobility in a manner that appears to defy the traditional codes of domesticity and private life demarcated for woman. While frequenting the public path, Saru is caught in a quagmire of marital conflict which is created as Manohar, her husband seems rather uncomfortable and disturbed by the fact that his "wife earns not only the butter but the bread as well" (35). The narrative engages the stream of consciousness technique in narrating the predicament of Saru and it gives us vital insight into the Hindu worldview, as Bhalla states:

*the writer examines, for the first time in literary history of Indian women's writing in English, the issue of marital rape ... The symbiotic relation of man-woman is cast in strict stereotypical boundaries of dominance and subservience. Any change in the dynamics of power balance, a change encouraged by the evolving economic, social framework of modern India and discouraged by tradition, myth and legend informing that framework, destroys the relationship.*⁵

Critical reflections on the novels of Deshpande with specific emphasis on the concept of power and space as presented in it will provide new insight to family as a social and cultural unit. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* portrays a disturbed marriage with conflict in husband-wife relationship besides other familial relations which provide vital insight into an understanding of the mechanics of familial relationships. However, most of the time focus is on the disturbed marriage and the suffering that Sarita has to endure within her marriage which in fact is only the tip of the iceberg. Critics are often inclined to read this novel with a feminist stance concentrating primarily on Sarita's character while analysing the crevice that appears in her marriage relating it usually to her egoist nature. Premila Paul (1998) for instance contends in her essay on *The Dark Holds No Terrors* that the conflict which Saru faces in the novel, within her marriage as well her within her paternal family, may be attributed to the fact that "Saru is highly self-willed because of her outsized ego and innate love of power over others" (31) and that:

*the life that they begin eventually becomes a power race of two egoistic people in which she overtakes him effortlessly ... her respect for him wanes when she recognizes him to be a failure. The career becomes an indispensable crutch for Saru as it gives her so much importance and power over others.*⁶

In a deeper analysis it would be revealed that the existential dilemma, in which Sarita finds herself, is largely due to the patriarchal temper of the society which provides an encoded structure to a woman's life and which is essentially domestic in character. Seen thus, the conflict in the Saru-Manohar relationship maybe taken to emerge from the conflict between two persons – a conflict arising out of disparity in spatial proportions that does not seem to conform to the social and cultural givens of familial experience. Sarita's desire to transgress the marginal space and enter into the central space of familial terrain by virtue of her independent career appears to disturb the rather delicate balance of the husband-wife relationship. Problems in her life owing to her action arise only because the family does not provide an equitable distribution of space and thus any deviation from the given codes emerge as potential grounds for conflict. Deshpande's incorporation of these issues in her narrative provides her with the superstructure through which she can reach at the base of culture and social practices which define them.

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