

Shashi Deshpande's *Ships that Pass:* A Metaphor of Life

- Rooble Verma & Manoj Verma

Abstract: *Ships That Pass* tells the story of Tara and Shaan, near strangers to each other after fourteen years of being married, and Tara's sister, Radhika, recently engaged, almost on an impulse, to Ghanshyam someone she barely knows. Even as Radhika tries to understand how a once ideal marriage has come undone, and struggles with her own feelings for an older man, a doctor (Ram Mohan), tragedy strikes: Tara dies in mysterious circumstances and Shaan is arrested for murdering her. A metaphor of life this subtle novel throws light on the bitter fact that however hard one tries to stick to relationships the relations are like ships that pass each other in the night and that more often than not they have almost nothing to do with each other.

Keywords: Metaphor, ships, sea, life, marriage, relations, pass.

Shashi Deshpande has carved a special place for herself in the literary world for her understanding and capturing the minuteness, intricacies and intrigues of family relationships in Indian society. Her literary focus never misses the clashes between traditional values and new changes in Indian society. Her works highlight the role of middle class new women in India. The element of Indianness is never missing from her writings whether it is characters, the relationships, the setting and above all conflicts arising out of relationships. Her latest novel *Ships that Pass* is yet another novel in which the established relationships are at stake and the new relationships are formed amidst crises. *Ships that Pass* is an outcome of the author's liking for writing stories of crime and mystery. Her interest in people and the great mystery of the human mind made her pen many crime stories published as serials in magazines. She reveals this fact in her own words: "*Ships that Pass*, was serialized in *Eve's Weekly* in 1980, again had less of detection and was more about people and their mysterious selves" (*Ships that Pass* viii). Shashi Deshpande has always done justice to the portrayal of characters and once she gets convinced with the story she produces a beautiful literary piece. In the interview, she says,

"People/characters first come to me. They develop in my mind. In that sense, I know the person I am going to write about. The plot then develops. The plot actually works out through the development of the person, his/her reaction to other people in the society. Other than that when I start writing I do not have a ready plot, In fact, the end is a surprise to me also, many times." (*Indian Review of Books*)

Thus, the prologue of the novel sets the tone for what lies ahead in the novel and the interest of the readers gets enlivened. The story of the novel begins with Radhika, a young maharashtrian girl of 21 years enjoying

moments of youth with her two friends namely Supriya, a law student and Rashmi, a medical student. Radhika, a BA student, was uncertain about her future career plans unlike her two friends who were very much sure about what they have to do in future. Rashmi would marry her senior medical student Deepak after her internship and Supriya would join her father's law firm as a lawyer. Suggestions kept pouring from everywhere and everyone as to what she should do after her graduation but Radhika has her own thoughts and plans. Amidst this uncertainty suddenly she came up with a plan and decided to marry because according to her ; "One of the certainties of life was marriage... So why not get married first and get that part of my life over with and behind me? There would then, be just one uncertainty left-my career (p.9) With these thoughts she put forward her views before her mother and her elder brother Dinkar and "There was dead silence... caught them unawares, taken them wholly by surprise." (p.10) but finally search for right kind of boy began.

It was not too late that Radhika received a good news that she has been accepted by the boy's family. The boy's name is Ghanshyam. Immediately after receiving the news Radhika started making plans about her future; "Things were falling in place. Now, the rest of my plan would follow. I could almost see our wedding happening. The ceremony and the two of us..." (p.17) Things were going her way in a dream like situation as she went out with Ghanshyam and spent time with him. While she was in the dream world her BA result was declared and she passed in second class. With the result Radhika found herself in divided minds regarding her future. She thought; "I still had to make up my mind about what I wanted to do next. I had no intention of settling down and becoming a housewife, waiting for my husband to come home in the evening and take me out. So what next? (p.20) When Radhika's mother says that decision about her future "depends on them" (p.20) Radhika revolts as she didn't want to give the reigns of her future in the hands of her in-laws and husband and says; "People I didn't even know would decide what I could do with my life: I stared at Aai in disbelief? (p.20) Her thoughts about marriage as the solution to any future uncertainties were gradually shattering. She was not able to decide whether she should go out with Ghanshyam to celebrate her good result or with her friends Rashmi and Supriya with whom she had planned to go out. What she wants is not very clear to her. Whether she wanted to marry and settle down or become a teacher was in an utter confused state of mind; "Why was I so confused and-well, not unhappy, but edgy? Something was not right. Was it Ghanshyam? Or marriage? " (p.21) But one thing was sure that she did not want to give the control of her life in the hands of others and when Ghanshyam starts putting conditions of what she can do and what she can't after the marriage, Radhika's dreams of marriage as the solution to all problems gradually shatter. She says;

"I cursed myself. What had I got myself into? How could I possibly live the rest of my life with a man whom I couldn't talk to openly and honestly? What a fool I'd been to think that marriage was the

solution, the answer to everything. I'd felt so sure of myself then, it had seemed so logical, so sensible. Suddenly, I found myself full of doubts..." (p.23)

Until now Radhika thought that marriage brings all happiness and is remedy to all problems. She thinks about the ideal marriages of her parents, her brother and of course the marriage of her sister Tara with Shaan. Her sister's marriage to her is the most romantic and sought after marriage one could dream of. But she was not sure about her own plans about marriage. Amidst all sorts of confusion she received a letter from her brother-in-law Shaan requesting her to come to their place as Tara was not feeling well and is unwilling to even see the doctor. After reading the letter Radhika made up her mind to go to her sister. She turned down everyone's suggestion of staying back and not to go to her sister as it is high time to spend time with Ghanshyam with whom she has to spend rest of her life. Radhika leaves various ships of relationship in the vast ocean of life to connect herself with those who need her most at this hour of time. We come across a new and firm Radhika who has developed a new personality:

I left, lighthearted at the thought of getting away from my dilemma for a while. Put it off, delay, procrastinate has always been my motto. Tomorrow is another day. I would think of becoming Mrs. Ghanshyam later. For now, I was going to visit Akka in all the glory of a newly-engaged girl, a girl engaged to a man as eligible as Ghanshyam... May be now this time, I would be able to let the ghost of a beautiful, successful, adored-by-the-world sister rest in peace. (p.27)

In her first meeting with Shaan Radhika came to know that Tara has not been keeping well and has developed a sort of psychiatric problem after the death of her daughter Geetu. This made Radhika feel very bad as Tara was too young to face such a great turmoil in her life. While in Tara's house Radhika comes across a young doctor who visits Tara quite often not as a doctor but as a friend and well wisher. Ram Mohan's (alias Raman) visits and company left indelible impression in the mind of Radhika. Her mind was preoccupied with the thoughts of Raman and she started asking questions to herself;

Why would Ram Mohan talk to me about his wife? What was I to him? Just Akka's younger sister, that's what I was. There was no reason why I should know more about him. I thought of the curiosity with which I had look around his house, hoping to know something about him, looking for clues to his past life. (p.86)

Presence of Ram Mohan in Tara's life filled Radhika's mind with many thoughts as to why Raman is so important to Tara? Why Raman is in the house even in the absence of Shaan and Shaan doesn't object to that? What is the role of Ram in their lives? While Radhika felt that waves of emotions were sweeping her away she controlled herself and said "Anyway, what did that matter? Stupid girl, I chided myself. He comes here to see Akka, you just happen to be here, that's all. We have nothing to do with each other. Ships that pass each other in the night, that's what

were are. That's what we all are to each other." (p.86)

When Radhika found herself disturbed with the thought of moving too fast on the path of marriage even without knowing Ghanshyam fully, the right advice came from her sister who told that "I got married too soon, I was just nineteen, imagine that" (p.90) She further advised her; "beware, Radhu, don't let it happen to you. Keep yourself alive. When you marry, whoever you marry-or is it whomever-keep yourself intact. There's always a real you inside. Don't drown that real you in a man, in the family" (p.91) Marriage is a very crucial decision, it is a ship of hope and expectations but one needs to be careful in choosing the right partner. Tara supports Radhika to come to the final decision regarding Ghanshyam and she says; "We'll talk to Dinu and put an end to the Ghanshyam story. Never, never marry a man who doesn't seem right to you. And when you find the right man, never let him go." (p.91) But unfortunately before Tara could speak to her brother about closing the chapter of Radhika with Ghanshyam she died under mysterious circumstances. Shaan was held responsible for the death of Tara and was arrested. Even those who trusted Shaan earlier started suspecting him and his affair with the woman called Rohini for the death of Tara. Tara's death brings a harsh reality of life that how relationships start tumbling once one of the persons dies or goes away in that relationship who has been the pillar of that particular relationship. Shaan, who was the most liked man, becomes the centre of all hatred. Even Radhika who believed so much in the relationship and love between Shaan and Tara drifts away like an unnoticed ship that crosses another in the vast ocean. She says; "Akka was dead, that I had lost Shaan as well. He had been as much of a brother to me as Dada, but now, it was over. There could never be anything between us after this." (p.103) Amidst this disbelief Tara's mother is not ready to accept that Shaan is the culprit and she says; "I know him. I've known him since he was a baby. He would never do such a thing. There must be some mistake." (p.103) But, how quickly relations change their intensity can be seen in the reaction of Shaan's father, his brother and his sister-in-law at the time of funeral as Radhika tells; "Shaan's father, his brother and his wife, had come in time for the funeral, but they stayed away from us, they did not even look at us. People who had been our neighbours and good friends for years. Dada decided that he and I would move out of Shaan's house; yes, it was Shaan's house now, no longer Akka's" (p.106) Like Tara's mother there was another person who didn't believe that Shaan would ever kill anyone, it was Shaan's girlfriend Rohini who said that: "He hasn't done it, she said, her manner composed, her voice dry. She killed herself, he told me she would do it one day, he was frightened for her. (p.107) Her trust in Shaan kept flowing when she said to Radhika "You may not, bit I do. I know he didn't do it. I know him well enough to be sure of that." (p.107) This tragedy breaks many beliefs about life. Radhika was not able to believe that life can be so brutal and she yields to the pain of the death of her sister and even says; "Can any one of us eve be all right again? (p.108)

When the news of Tara's death reached Ghanshyam's family "they were reluctant to be associated with a family caught up in such a terrible scandal"(p.110) eventually they broke the engagement between Ghanshyam and Radhika. Radhika felt relieved when she heard the news of her broken engagement and says "One weight was off my mind" (p.110). After this break up Radhika's brother wanted her to go back to her home and to her mother but Radhika is not ready to follow her brother's suggestion, instead she wants to stay back with Raman at his home. Listening to the wish of Radhika her brother gets concerned and says; "People will talk if you stay in his house. We can't afford to let that happen. You already have a broke engagement behind you. I'm thinking of you, Radhu." (p.111) but Radhika is ready to revolt so she replies' "Who cares what people will say? Look at what we're struggling with. Akka dead, Shaan in jail, and Abhi... Does it matter what people say?" (p.111) Finally Radhika wins and stays back with Raman. Raman is trying desperately to save Shaan as he still believes that Shaan is not the killer. With this belief both Raman and Radhika search the deserted home of Shaan and Tara to find out some evidence to save Shaan in the court of law. Eventually they got a written note of Tara which Raman wanted to prove as suicide note of Tara and was enough to prove Shaan innocent. This note was enough for the police to release Shaan unconditionally. Shaan left for Bombay to meet his son Abhi without speaking any words to anyone. After meeting Abhi he left with a promise that he would ring him regularly.

Everything seemed to be in order but Radhika's heart was still beating heavily to speak to Raman and she finally spoke to him and expressed her love for Raman. Very soon Ram Mohan and she got married. Even after marriage there were certain questions which never left Radhika's mind rest in peace. She asks questions like; "why had Shaan kept silent, why had he said nothing, why did he not defend himself? Did he, too, know something he didn't want to speak of? About Akka? She needed psychiatric help, he had said to Ram Mohan."(p.133) Her mind was full of questions which definitely would burst her mind so she decided to follow the words of Ram Mohan who said to her; "Forget all that happened. You're supposed to be good at amnesia, aren't you?" (p.134) Radhika has got a perfect match in Ram Mohan and she has understood the real meaning of marriage. At the end of the novel she epitomizes her opinion about marriage and relationship when she says:

"One thing I'm sure of is that, as long as we're together, I don't care where we are. With this man, I know I can be myself. I'd thought, after Shaan and Akka, that I had lost faith in love. But no, I haven't. I believe in love- if friendship is part of it. Like it is with us. And since we began living together, I wake up in the mornings with a sense of anticipation; each day is a new beginning. Why didn't anyone tell me marriage could be like this?" (p.136)

Thus, Shashi Deshpande remarkably ends the novel with a sense of realization that life is not a dream, it is all about living it in the wake of

reality. *Ships that Pass* turn out to be a true metaphor for life of all the characters in the novel and everyone realizes that one can never be sure about the success of relationship unless we live with that relationship for some duration of time. This novel shows that all relationships are like ships of hope; we do not know which ship would yield goods for us and which would only pass leaving behind the train of despair and sadness.

References :

- Deshpande, Shashi. *Ships That Pass*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2012.
- Holm, Chandra. "A Writer of Substance," Interview, *Indian Review of Books*, 16 May-15 June, 2000, pp.5-9.
- Joshi, P.G. *Shashi Deshpande's Fiction: A Study in Women Empowerment and Postcolonial Discourse*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2003.
- King, Adele. "Feminist Criticism and Indian Women Writers." *The Bombay Literary Review*, 1, 1989, pp.42-49.



An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies

Labyrinth

Published Quarterly in JAN/APR/JUL/OCT

Call for Papers

ISSN 0976-0814

Labyrinth welcomes the submission of unpublished Research Papers, Creative writings, Review of books, including both scholarly and literary works of relevance to the journal's prime area of interest along with the **Certificate that the article /paper submitted is original and unpublished**. Every article is evaluated anonymously by a minimum of three referees. Only full paper (details mentioned below) as a **single MS-Word file** as email attachment would be considered. The Contributors and Subscribers are requested to mention their **Address for Correspondence** clearly along with the Contact Number. Papers should be submitted to -

dr.lata.mishra@gmail.com | & | nndas69@yahoo.co.in

The journal publishes research articles or creative writings of its MEMBERS ONLY.

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION:

April Issue (Vol.4/No.2) : 20/01/2013

July Issue (Vol.4/No.3) : 01/05/2013

SUBSCRIPTION RATES (Institutions & Individuals):

INDIA : ₹ 1350/- (FOUR Issues)

FOREIGN : US\$ 125/- (FOUR Issues)

MODE OF PAYMENT:

INDIA: e-Money Transfer : [In favour of **LATA MISHRA, A/C No. 32456798831**, IFS CODE: SBIN0030137, BANK: SBI (BRANCH CODE: 30137), KAMPOO, LASHKAR, GWALIOR (M.P) INDIA, MICR CODE: 474-002 027-KAM.

FOREIGN: Western Union Money Transfer in favour of **Lata Mishra**.