

Filial Bonds in Metropolitan Backgrounds: A Study of Bhisham Sahani's *The Boss Came to Dinner*

Abstract

Metropolitan life is fast becoming the current reality in India. Life in an Indian metropolis is hectic; and does not allow familial and cultural aspects to be wholesome and congenial. Relational bonds weaken, and an attitude of unconcern fills the minds of the residents in these huge urban spaces. The desire for success blinds an individual to his/her responsibilities. Bhisham Sahani's short story *The Boss came to Dinner* clearly reflects the changed familial conditions in postmodern India.

Keywords: Family, The Elderly Members, Filial Ingratitude.

Introduction

Relationships are taking a backseat in urban spaces in postmodern India. The elderly members in a family often feel helpless, involved and unwanted within the family set up.

The aim of the study is to examine the treatment given to the elderly members in a family and to determine the nature of filial bonds in postmodern India.

Hypothesis

It is suggested that perhaps the fast pace of life and the obsessive drive for success creates gaps in the attitudes of children towards their parents and other elderly dependents.

Review of Literature

A lot of sociological work has been conducted on this subject yet there is a noticeable gap. Literature is the mirror of life and so this paper proposes to touch the sensitive area of filial bonds and their deterioration in postmodern India.

Metropolitan life has more or less become a rich source for modern and postmodern Indian English writers who are interested in looking into the human condition, with a view to highlighting various aspects of Indian life and culture, which appear to have undergone a huge transformation.

Nothing misses the Argus-eyed Indian short story writers, who keenly focus their gaze on the travails of common humanity. The family system in India has witnessed a sea change and strong and secure bonds of kinship now appear to be things of the past.

Bhisham Sahani's short story *The Boss Came to Dinner* is a brilliant portrayal of the way in which life in metropolitan cities becomes so compelling and fast, that in order to keep pace with it, an individual often overrides the strongest of human bonds.

Anthropologists and sociologists have waxed eloquent on the secure foundations of the Indian family system and a large portion of ancient and modern literature has been devoted to this subject. The family is the first natural surroundings in which life begins, takes root and attains fruition. It is against the secure backdrop of the family that an individual seeks to evolve into his ultimate nature.

The one vital relationship which is so essential for all human beings is the parent-child relationship. The ideals associated with this relationship are many; and parents are naturally expected to live up to the ideals. The parent enjoys the enviable position of the provider and sustainer of the family, and children can always look up to the parent to provide the necessary degree of warmth and acceptance which is so vital for the child's proper growth and development.

Bhisham Sahani's short story *The Boss Came to Dinner* portrays the stark realities of filial bonds in the context of metropolitan life. The mother has always been eulogized in the highest words in almost every culture:

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Women are mothers and wives first. They are the custodians of family honour. They are the matri shakti, therefore they must be honoured and protected. (Desai and Thakkar, 184)

Bhisham Sahani's *The Boss Came to Dinner* is the story of Mr. Shamnath and his family who live a busy life in an Indian metropolis. Mr. Shamnath invites his boss home for dinner, and both he and his wife begin to excitedly plan the details of the arrangements they would make in order to ensure that his visit to their home is a huge success. The implicit idea in all this is to somehow please the boss to an extent where a promotion would be forthcoming. By about five o' clock in the evening, most of the arrangements had been made and the couple was all set to receive the boss and his wife. The Shamnath couple faces an unexpected problem, when they suddenly remember that Mr. Shamnath's old mother who lives with them would stand out like a sore thumb in the midst of the company. However, they quickly decide that she would have to be locked up in her room, so as not to embarrass the guests by her undignified presence. What is clearly discernible in the dialogue between Mr. Shamnath and his wife is that it is they themselves who will feel embarrassed to acknowledge the old mother because of her provincial background. The old and helpless mother is sternly warned not to fall asleep as she was likely to snore if she feels asleep, and that would cause unbearable humiliation to the Shamnath couple:

And mother, I will receive the guests in the drawing room; till then you stay in the verandah, you will quietly slip into the drawing room through the bathroom. (292-93)

For an instant mother looked at her son, then she said faintly:

"All right son". "One thing more mother. Do not go to sleep early, as you do. Your snores carry far". "I can't help it son", she said ashamed. "I have difficulty in breathing since my last illness". (292-93)

Shamnath is totally oblivious to the fact that his mother is old and infirm, and is in dire need of affection from him. He has one driving need; the desire to please the boss and to achieve the goal of bagging a promotion. As the story progresses, the reader realizes that Shamnath will bully and badger his mother into accepting all his unreasonable demands, and the helpless old mother has to give in to his demands at every step. Little does he realize the agitation and helplessness of his mother, on the contrary he himself remains anxious. Shamnath confides to his wife:

Shamnath turned to his wife and said in English, "Mother is a problem! There is no end to her oddities. If something goes wrong and the boss is offended, you know what will happen". (293)

In the Indian cultural ethos, the image of the mother stands out in full distinction. The land of one's birth is the motherland, and the rivers which make the flow of life possible are all regarded as mothers, yet Shamnath totally disregards the fact that his mother needs to be treated with due respect. However, his

guilt ridden mind recognizes the endless sacrifices his mother had made to make his education possible. The Indian mother is an eternal symbol of sacrifice and suffering. She takes on her children's weight of guilt and allows them to flow through life with ease and ability. Shamnath's control over his mother is so complete that he dictates to her the clothes that she should wear for the occasion. He even carelessly commands that she should wear bangles. The hapless mother anxiously replies:

I have no bangles, son, you know that. I had to sell all my jewellery for your education".

All right, all right! Why do you make a song about it mother?" he said. "Why carry on about it? Just say that you don't have any. Why bring in the question of my education? The jewellery was sold to good purpose wasn't it? I'm not a loafer am I? I'll pay you back double what you spent on me". (294)

There is considerable psychological distress in parents whose children do not accord them the love and respect due to them in their old age. Often the affected parent has to dwell in a position of logical reasoning in order to arrive at a positive decision. Such a parent often feels intimidated by the emotional disorder reflected in the behavior of the offspring. Mr. Shamnath is materialistic and success oriented, and his over-indulgent mother unconsciously fosters such behavior. It is easy to see how constantly the mother must have indulged her son's life:

"So you are going to get a lift in the office son." "Its not so easy mother. You don't understand. If only I could please the boss... there are others too, all wanting to get promoted. Its all a rat-race mother. But I'll have a better chance." "In that case, I'll make one for him, I'll...I'll somehow manage it son." (299)

In a land that reveres the old, the elderly parents are often left in the cold by their children and their families. It is not uncommon in the metropolises of India that uncaring family members take away the limited riches of the old parents and then proceed to treat them as unwanted burdens. However, this kind of abusive behavior is not confined to the metropolises alone, though the living conditions in the metropolises accentuate such behaviours. As Shaw opines:

The most critical test of this relationship comes when parents become old and disabled. As long as both parents are alive, the problem is not acute because they support one another. But it becomes acute when one parent passes away. (Shaw, 5)

In metropolitan cities, the shortage of space and the resultant lack of privacy is one of the primary reasons for callous behavior of children towards aged parents. Society is no longer parent oriented and the rising trend is that more and more elderly people prefer to move out of their homes to places that cater to their needs.

Her frail body looked even more small against Shamnath's heavy frame. Tears came to her eyes. Wiping them she said, "Son send me to Hardwar. I've been asking you for a long time."

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Shamnath's face darkened. He let go of her. "What did you say mother?" Again the same thing?" He was getting angrier. "So you want to discredit me before others so that the son cannot give shelter even to his own mother?" (298)

Conclusion

Greed and the desire for self-advancement are inherent parts of an individual's psyche, the seeds of which can be detected in early childhood. Indulgent parents, blinded by affection for their children often overlook such tendencies in their children, catering enthusiastically to every whim. In the process, they unwittingly invite their own doom. As life becomes more and more complex in the huge metropolitan

Remarking

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cities, parents get edged out of the priorities of an individual. The short story *The Boss Came to Dinner* is a subtle though brilliant portrayal of the plight of the helpless and elderly parents.

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