

A Study of Feminist Consciousness in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract:

This research paper is an attempt to study the dilemma and anxieties of the fair-sex and bring fourth that what women tolerate and experience, how they adjust and compromise and how they suffer in the patriarchal society. In Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*, the feeling of advocating the once neglected and marginalized voice of women is the chief thematic concern. The present paper is an attempt to interpret and record a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realized her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with the male world and the society in general.

Keywords: Feminine sensibility, patriarchal society, marital relationship and gender discrimination.

During the twentieth century woman's voice became an inevitable part of the domain of literature. Before this time woman was considered an inferior being to man who was fit to do only household chores and had no potential to participate in literary or other activities. The renaissance of the Indian woman began with the independence. The modern woman has become more aware of her potential; she is mentally and physically equipped to take stride with the fast changing values of life. Hence the renaissance of Indian woman continues its slow travel which has found its ground with feminist movement started from the West.

In India, as in other parts of the world literature was for centuries a male-dominated domain. It was not regarded as necessary part of a woman's life. Either through lack of education or through lack of encouragement, women were kept away from the pains and pleasures of literary labors. The great philosophers who have immensely

contributed to the existed values of life paradoxically treated woman as an object to be used by man: She is God's second mistake, said Nietzsche. To Aristotle, 'she is an inferior man'. The female is female by virtue of certain lack of qualities. Machiavelli chooses to identify woman with fortune: Fortune is a woman, and if you wish to master her, you must strike and beat her. In Indian Vedic age Manu, the law giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, clearly assigns woman a subordinate position to man:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth upon her husband, her husband being dead upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon her near kinsmen of her husband, if she has no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself she likes.(3)

All the definitions about women's conduct, behaviour and existence were given by men. These aphorisms of the great philosophers indicate the status of women in male chauvinistic society. The old conventional notions of male dominated society were so rude, unbearable, suppressive, oppressive and depressive that women's

discourse takes a shape of movement. Their consciousness seeks to analyze and understand the material conditions through which gender has been constructed within specific languages and bodies of literature. And its result is that the strong weave of feminism in 1960s and 1970s took place for women's liberation.

In the field of Indian English fiction, there is plethora of women writers who have established their own tradition. They have insisted of showing the real predicament of women in the male-dominated society. After the Independence many women novelists of quality have begun to enriching Indian fiction in English. Of these writers Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal. Santha Rama Rau, Miss Attia Husain, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Rao and Shashi Deshpande are unquestionably the most outstanding. These writers make people realize that love making and domesticity are by no means the sole concern of women. They have so much to do with the rough and tumble of life as men. Feminism as such has to attempt a new definition of woman's role in the wider social frame.

Shashi Deshpande shot into limelight in 1977 with her shorter fiction. She is one of the

widely read post-independence Indian English writers who wrote consciously of the issues that concern the educated middle class women in Indian middle class society. Shashi Deshpande is a born storyteller who begun her literary career as a short story writer and later proved her sustained creativity with novel form that established her as a prominent writer.

Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of woman-their struggle in the context of modern Indian society. She mainly dwells on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness and alienation of sensitive woman pitted against an ill-matched marriage and hostile circumstances around her. As G.S. Amur remarks:

Woman's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all as human beings is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer and this appear in all her important stories.(4)

Shashi Deshpande exhibits the Indian Shades of feminism and she makes it very clear that here is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sets the male as the cause of all troubles. Rather her

writing deals with the inner mind of women. *Roots and Shadows* was Deshpande's first novel. It won the Thirumati Rangammal prize in 1984. The novel projects the inner world and thoughts of Indu, the protagonist. She is a revolutionary woman who is seen to be acting against dominance right from her childhood. Indu refuses to be cowed down by Akka, the rich family tyrant who dominated her ancestral home. After marriage, she is totally unwilling to become a puppet in the hands of her husband, Jayant. At the time of Akka's death, Indu visits her ancestral home. At this time, she questions and rethinks her life, her journalistic career, her marriage and her illusion of hard-won-independence. She meets Naren, her cousin and feels that he understands her problems and views with him. But at last she decides to return to Jayant. However, she returns with a complete new self.

In *Roots and Shadows* Deshpande's concern with the social and cultural construction of gender, her open protest against the treatment of women as sexual object, her defiance of the stereotyped roles assigned to women, her bold effort to project the prejudiced attitude of the society towards women are obvious. She articulates not only the thematic and technical maturity but also effectively communicates an intensely apprehended feminine

sensibility. She has apparently injected a new consciousness offering varied interpretation of imperishable Indian values and heightening our cultural heritage. Ramesh Kumar Gupta remarks, "Shashi Deshpande concerns with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and understanding of the mysteries of life and protagonist's place in it" (6). Though Indu achieves 'Personhood' yet does not neglect the family or the society:

Roots and Shadows (1983) is Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel. Indu, the protagonist represents the educated middle class Indian woman. The story of the novel is about the struggle of the protagonist who has a lot of hurdles to cross and achieve freedom. Being smothered in an oppressive male - dominated and tradition -bound society, she attempts to explore her inner-self to assert her individuality. . . Indu, a rebel often wished to be free and unrestrained. Thus she is presented as model against women belonging to the older generation. (7)

Indu comes back to her parental home after a gap of eleven years, which is occasioned by her cousin Mini's marriage being performed in

the traditional manner in their ancestral home. She has left home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loved. She represents the new generation and reviews everything with reason and new vision. She endeavours to listen only to the voice of her conscience and has the power to revolt. But unfortunately she fails in all her efforts miserably due to the "impact of culture and tradition or fear of stigma or timidity or all these combined together" (8). She comes back on being called by Akka, the domineering matriarch, as she is on her death bed. Akka has made her the sole heiress to her property and the household atmosphere becomes charged with resentment by the members of the family from being excluded from the will. Deshpande has exhibited very comprehensively the details of a large Maharastrian Brahmin household and the myriad women characters, their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments and anguish. In a book review of *Roots and Shadows*, C.W. Watson has opined:

The novel which was published in 1983 succeeds magnificently in its haunting description of the decline of a once prosperous middle class family in south India. Much of the material of modern Indian writing, especially Indian writing in English is drawn from their social milieu. One has only

to think of recent novels of Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhuri, but where the strength of this novel lies is in the marvelous evocation of character and mood.(9)

Deshpande has paid special attention on the dilemmas faced by the girls of new generation in this novel. Indu, Mini and Akka belong to this series of girl children. Mini possesses in her character all the traditional feminine qualities since her childhood. Devoid of any fixed aim in her life she devotes herself to her family members. Her obedience, silence and submission never allow her to cross the boundary line of rules and regulation set by the family for girls. As she is brought up under strict supervision, guidance and restriction, she becomes acquainted with the real duties of a girl at an early age. This is the reason, Indu, her cousin, recalls Mini as a child. Indu remarks:

A woman's life they had told me contained no choices. And all my life, especially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The women had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered . . . have they been born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime to disuse? And yet Mini, who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with the grace and

composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength. (*Roots and Shadows*, 10)

Mini's father, Anant, was aware that with his weak financial position, he would not be able to get his daughter married. Finally, he agreed to marry Mini to a distant relative of Akka, who was not a suitable match for her. Mini's lackadaisical face made Indu understand that she found the match incongruous. But in order to save her father from further complexities of her marriage, she poses a semblance of agreement and decides not to show her disagreement. Indu, on perceiving the displeasure in Mini towards her own marriage, requests her uncle to look for a better match. Anant rejects her idea:

May be the boy is little ugly, may be a little stupid, but everything else is fine. The family is good, it's known to us, they have money and she'll be quite comfortable. And Akka had promised she would pay for their wedding expenses as well as the dowry if this came through. What else could I ask for? (*Roots and Shadows*, 51)

This statement truly reflects the stereotype tradition in selection of groom. A girl's wishes and desires are never considered. No choices are allowed to women in their lives. There is a shadow of male dominance over every aspect and

facet of their lives which thwarts their progress. They experience claustrophobia and their wishes are buried in the depth of their hearts and are never allowed to come out or to be fulfilled. Mini has to get married to a man who is not of her choice and she is not even asked her opinion about him. As a woman Indu too is left with no choice. Her life is so acutely circumscribed that she can't take quick decisions. As a matter of fact Mini did not welcome the proposal of marriage whole heartedly but gave her mute consent considering the problems faced by her father. Her parents' growing concern to settle her marriage fills in her the guilt for being a girl, guilt for remaining unmarried, guilt for being a burden on her family. She also feels humiliated when people rejected her on the ground of her physical appearance or the matter of her dressing. After being interviewed and rejected several times, she loses all her buoyancy and enthusiasm, and her only wish is to get married in order to save her parents from the imbroglio of groom search. She says:

Any man Indu? Yes any man. Any man who says, "yes" you don't know what it has been like. Watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhav Kaka running around after eligible men. (*Roots and Shadows*, 126)

Mini describes to Indu the efforts made by her Kakas and Kakis as well as her parents to wheedle and lure the boy and his family. Every time they rejected her, she felt down, cast and blamed herself for putting her parents in distress.

Among the myriad women characters, the old tyrannical matriarch Akka deserves special mention. She is rich and childless and stays in her brother's house after her husband's death. Only after her death, Indu comes to know about Akka's life from Narmada Atya. Akka was married at the age of twelve and her husband was tall, bulky and well past thirty. She was sent to live with her husband at the age of thirteen only. She made two attempts to run away from her husband's house. Her mother-in-law whipped her and kept her starved by locking her up in a room for three days. Then she was sent back to her husband's room. Narmada Atya narrates the story of panic-stricken Akka trying to escape from brutal behavior of her husband and mother-in-law :

But I heard that twice she tried to run away . . . a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law I heard whipped her as well. And then sent back to her husband's room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying "lock me up again, lock me up. But there was no escape from a

husband then, I remember her telling me before my own marriage was consummated. Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those jewels and saris. (*Roots and Shadows*, 70)

Those days sex was a kind of punishment for child brides against which they could do nothing and continued to suffer in silence, Akka's husband was a wealthy man and kept a mistress. She as a married woman was expected to bear children; she had many miscarriages due to the uncomfortable life she led. Her mother-in-law made her life miserable for her inability to give birth to a living child. The chain of traditional marriage is heavy and the escape routes are not available for a wife, who often seeks consolation and refuge in oppression, masochism or mental slavery often leading to her physical decay or death. She is supposed to bear her exploitation and suffering with willing fortitude. Akka, too, has to endure and submit to insult, injuries and humiliation with a stoic patience without any complain.

Indu went ahead with education and went for an inter-caste marriage with Jayant who was of her choice. Like her mother she was segregated from the family for transgressing the traditional mode of settling marriage. Deshpande has given us the glimpse of the rigid

system of marriage in India which is decided not on the basis of compatibility but on the basis of caste, religion and dowry. Simon de Beauvoir rightly remarks:

The true woman is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed instincts for coquetry, docility are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man. (11)

Indu, like Jaya in *That Long Silence*, is interested in creative writing - a means to articulate her feminine voice to forge moment in art that are arresting the original. But Jayant does not approve her writing. He betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. He fails to be her 'alter ego'. Whatever Indu does, it is only to please Jayant, and to please him is her way of life:

Now I dress the way I want. As I please. As I please? No that's not true. When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress I think of Jayant when I undress I think of him. Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him? And I can't blame him. . . . It's the way I want it to be. (*Roots and Shadows*, 49)

Deshpande also puts forth the issue of marriage to indicate the injustice impose on women. Marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman. The two sexes are different from each other

though one has the necessity of the other. This necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them. Women have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality.

As a woman Indu is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. She has to reach out beyond herself towards the social milieu only through her husband. But the husband is impervious and indifferent to her emotional urges. Instead it is always the woman who has to cater to the needs of his inner urges and drives. A woman has to merge herself into others, experiencing a loss of boundaries. Her identity is lost and she has to live according to her husband's will and wishes. Jayant betrays Indu's hope and aspirations for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. Instead she finds that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant's masculinity- by becoming his wife. She feels a sense of existential anguish and insecurity. Through Indu, Deshpande voices her view of marriage:

It's a trap . . . that's what marriage is, a trap? or a cage? May be the comic strip version of marriage . . . a cage with two trapped animals gearing hatred at each other . . . isn't so wrong after all. All it's not

a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself. (*Roots and Shadows*, 61-62)

Women's experience is primarily defined through interpersonal usually domestic and familial relationships - serving the needs of others. Her identity exists largely on being for others.

Indu ultimately realizes that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots far behind in the family, in Jayant, and in Naren, with whom she develops an adulterous relationship is a mere shadow to her. Naren has no permanent place in her memory. Hence she decides to go back to Jayant whom she feels totally innocent. It is she who is to be blamed - for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of the heaven. She had forgotten the roots feeding on only dreams and shadows. She has failed in love. She has escaped from familial responsibilities of the home, chasing after the uncrystallizing shadows. She realizes that marriage has stunted and hampered her individuality because she saw it as a trap not a bond and the home where the family feels comfort, she saw it as a cage. Now she realizes that all those were mere illusions not reality and all struggle of her life was an act of futility.

Deshpande employs withdrawal as a tool for both introspection and self-realization for

her protagonists. Her protagonists withdraw not into a world of fantasy but into a world away from the suffocating circumstances of their life. Unable to adjust to their social demands on them her female characters attempt a temporary psychological as well as sociological withdrawal. They probe into their inner psyche and attempt to understand their personality. As Seema Jena says, "...the technique of withdrawal becomes a means by which a woman rediscovers her personality and digs up her hidden potential and learn not to repress her talents".(12) To Indu, the idea of withdrawal for self-realization is very significant and she realizes, "I wonder if I will leave him one day and live myself. The only way in which I can be my whole self again" (*Roots and Shadows*,89) The desire for withdrawal cannot be understood or appreciated by everyone and hence Indu has to take cover behind pretence. "I had to pretend, to cover my reaction, act out of the pleasant willingness that grated on me" (*Roots and Shadows*, 89). Going back home and doing the type of writing that she wants to do is a decision that comes to Indu only after a lot of looking inwards and soul-searching.

Deshpande is not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of women but also tries to suggest a solution. She thinks that

women's miseries can end if she can discover her roots and shed the shadows. Indu decides to go back to Jayant but no longer wants to make marriage a restricting bond. She is determined how to assert her individuality as a partaker in the endless cycle of life. She has recognized the miracle of life

If not this stump, there is another. If not this tree, there will be others. Other trees will grow, other flowers will bloom, other fragrances will pervade other airs...I felt as if I was watching life itself...endless, limitless, formless and full of grace. (*Roots and Shadows*, 184)

The novel ends with a positive note that carries a hope of a new dawn. The novel depicts the permanent mark carved on the psyche of woman by traditions, norms and conventions of the male dominated society which prohibits them from exhibiting their true self. The mode and style of their development inculcates in them submissiveness, silence and passiveness which keep a strong hold on their psyche. Even modern educated women consciously drape themselves with their trait and find themselves in a fix. Shashi Deshpande belongs to the last phase i.e. Female phase of feminist writing. She has stressed the harmonious co-operation between

man and woman. Thus Shashi Deshpande conveys the message that the modern Indian woman should learn to conquer their fear and assert themselves as individual. The novel comes to an end with a note of compromise rather than revolt and revenge which is the basic attribute of Indian feminism.

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