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Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*: Novel of Women's Inner Struggle

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is a foremost woman novelist in the Indian Literary Horizon with ten novels, four books for children, over eighty short stories and a screen play to her credit. She has won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her fifth novel, *That Long Silence* in 1989. She has been awarded Padmashri in 2009. As one of the epoch-making writer of the contemporary Indian writing in English, Shashi Deshpande is the confident voice, who explores individual and universal feminine psyche she has gained repute as a grave writer with marvelous potential. Almost all her protagonists are women who are sophisticated and exposed to western ideas. Contemporary women stand on the verge of social change in an enviable position. They are extremely aware of the prejudice heaped on them unlike their counterparts a generation ago. In fact, Shashi Deshpande does not consider women as inferior beings and so that they must remain inactive and dutiful. This awakening of the female's consciousness as represented by Shashi Deshpande in her novels justifies the extent of articulation of a woman's point of view, which needs to be evaluated from a new viewpoint.

Key Words: Feminism, prejudice, inactive, dutiful, consciousness, articulation

In all ages women are always considered inferior and incapable of any serious thinking, irrespective of religion, country, race, and the period in which they live. More or less the same perception and sex-stereotyping is seen in every literature. A woman is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent home-maker with multifarious roles in the family. As wife and mother, service, sacrifice, submissiveness and tolerance and services of adjustments she makes admired quality in her life faithfully and obediently. Her individual self has very little recognition in the patriarchal society and so self-effacement is her way of life.

After the emergence of feminist movement in the 1960s stimulated serious

interest in the writings of women. They challenged and wrestled against male-bias and sought to indentify distinct qualities of the female voice in literature to define a female literary tradition. There has been a continued convention of women writers like Shashi Deshpande who in their diverse mode of writings denied established patriarchal norms.

Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who are concerned with the problems of women and their quest for identity. She is a well-known figure in the field of Indian English Literature. Her novels expose her deep insight into the dilemma of Indian women who feel restricted and chained in a tradition-bound male dominated society. She sets her women characters in the light of their optimisms, worries, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and limitations and find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned tremendously by the patriarchal mind-set. Shashi Deshpande's sincere concern for women and her craft as a novelist is mirrored strongly in all her novels. It can be strictly said that Deshpande is not against the institution of marriage, as her female protagonists endeavour to make their marriages work in their effort to lead a meaningful existence. Shashi Deshpande's novels contain a lot of material for feminist thought: women's sexuality, the gender roles, self-discovery, etc. But she can be called a 'feminist' only in specific sense. In an interview given to Lakshmi Holstrong, she said:

I have no doubt at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean. But not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism (Holmstrong 14).

According to Deshpande, no amount of theorizing will solve women's problems, especially in the Indian context. She has further remarked:

But to me feminism is not a matter of theory. It is difficult to apply Kate Millett or Simon De Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India.... I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it (Holmstrong, 26).

This is highly sensible approach, found in almost all her novels especially in *Roots and Shadows* which deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with the family, with the male world and the society in general. In the end she comes to the realization that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere to it that alone can bring harmony in life. Indu who is the central character of Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* represents the new women who start aspiring to become independent women. Though she lives in a joint family which is dominated by patriarchy, she tries her best to brush aside several man-made customs and rites and also superstitions which generally create a great hurdle in the path of progress of the women. In her family, old uncle, Kaka, Atya and some other members always help her and give her high position in the family. But Kaka, the senior and a mother surrogate becomes a great obstacle in her path for achieving her goal of independence. Akka, who looks like Doris Lessing's Martha and Baby Kochamma in *God of Small Things*, always represents some unwanted hurdles in her path. As a result Indu has to bear the brunt of the suffocation and persecution made by Akka. Right from the childhood, Indu is always suggested by Akka that she is a woman and so she has no choice but to submit to her lot. But Indu is a rebel from the very core of her heart. She says in a very angry mood:

As a girl they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked.
Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with
grace because you are a girl, they had said, it is the only way, they said for a
female to live and survive (*Roots and Shadows*, 158).

The entire story moves around Indu, a middle class young girl, who was born in an orthodox Brahmin family. The family was controlled by Akka. The story starts with the protagonist's return to her ancestral house. The parental home helps her to understand the meaning and motto of human life. It is the house where she realizes what her roots are—as an independent woman and a writer, and what her shades are – a daughter, a mother, and a commercial writer. She rebels against Akka's orthodox world and her rigid values. She marries Jayant against Akka's constraints. To achieve freedom, she seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage predictable in the parental family. She assumes to attain her freedom in a new role of a wife. Her wish to achieve a complete womanhood is explicitly seen in these lines:

This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not known it ... I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone (34).

Roots and Shadows can be called a novel which explores the inner struggle of Indu, who represents a set of modern women who are educated and are very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and individuality. As O.P. Bhatnagar says:

The novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family with the male world and society in general (20).

With creating a new atmosphere, Indu marries Jayant, though a man of different caste but of her own choice. She leaves her parental home. Jayant provides her a feeling of strength and certainty. She imagines that her marriage with Jayant would permit her to realize the need to belong, wanted, needed and loved as she longed the freedom to express her true self to the world. Akka's warning is not regarded seriously by Indu because Akka had no good opinion of inter-caste marriage: "Such marriages never work. Different castes different languages... it's all right for a while. Then they realize." (68)

It is to be noted that Indu, the heroine of this novel always cares for her husband. She only thought about what he wanted, what he liked and what would please him. It was as if they were on two different planes and she chose her plane according to him. It puzzled her to realize that she who had considered herself to become independent, so intelligent, and so clever, she who had been all set out to reform Indian womanhood had fallen into the trap waiting for her. Indu felt that basically she was like the women in her family for she too had lost her identity like them. Very soon she realizes the fruits of her decision. Both of them wanted to achieve complete happiness, but her marriage with Jayant subdues her femininity and her human demands. She is dissatisfied physically and spiritually with her husband, who takes her for granted and suppresses her to submit. Her love-marriage degenerates into a mere psychological affair and senses that she has abused her body's sanctity, satisfaction or happiness. The irony of the situation is that Indu is not happy with Jayant, but at the same time, she cannot live without him. She speaks about her incompleteness:

This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant. I had not known it... that there was, somewhere outside me a part

of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone. (31)

She felt ashamed of her feelings for her husband, for now she realized she could never be complete in herself. Loving another human being brought only pain to oneself for one becomes totally dependent. She had always wanted to assert herself, grow and flourish regardless what was destroyed in the bargain. Indu even thought of leaving Jayant and living alone for that seemed to be the only way of becoming her own self. After marriage, Indu realizes that it is because of Jayant that her life is meaningful in one view and also meaningless in another view. She tries her best to please her husband with the feeling of having lost her independent identity. She observes the lives of her aunts and other women that how they had submitted themselves to the concept of the ideal women by performing all the time self-effacing notions and rituals. Indu understands very well that she can never fit into the ideal woman compartment, and so she could never think of performing self-effacing rituals, which justified her existence in relation with a man. But in course of her self-examination, she realizes that she is not very different from her orthodox female counterparts, for she was unconsciously and consciously trying to mould, change and shape herself according to Jayant's desires. However, Jayant, in spite of his superficially western style of life, performs like an average Indian male. Indu realizes that her marriage was something shameful in total commitment. She asserts: "It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off when I'm like that, he turns away from me; I've learnt my lesson now. And so I pretend. I'm passive and unresponsive." (83) Now she considers marriage and love as a big boring journey, a deception and process of making one humble and reliant on. She resorts to its deception by having face of a happy married life. Indu's chief sacrifice is her ambition of being a writer on her own. She loses her curiosity in writing creative article when she is forced to suppress facts, and presents a glossy picture to the readers. Her husband almost commands and restricts her to compromise and not to resign her job. He explains: "That's life! What can one person do against the whole system! No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile gestures. We need the money, don't we? Don't forget, we have a long way to go." (17)

To a woman like Indu these feelings are different to stomach. It is a kind of defeat and surrender, for the truth is that in the politics of a family, one can see their request for money and power. Indu is now an autonomous being, capable of thorough trial and error, and now she is heading to find her own way to salvation. Indu's musings on life and her problems also

reveal the truth that she has been running after shadows (illusions) in search of happiness, and that the source of her happiness is roots (tradition). She has been told since her childhood about her role as a female. She has rebelled against this traditional role of becoming like one of her predecessors at home. She tries to prove to the world that she is first and foremost an individual who is capable of making her own decisions, and achieving success. It is a fear of suppression by the patriarchal society that makes her fight turn aggressive and assert herself: "I would be most emphatically myself, Indu" (143).

Indu is always in a confused state of mind. She is willing to wound but afraid to strike. She firmly declares, "Now I would go back, and see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty". And in the next breath she confesses. "Nevertheless, I know I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me" (205). This is ridiculous. The woman who resolves to start a new life based on honesty, next moment evokes the vow by her unwillingness to share the regret with Jayant. On the one hand, she is so attached to her parental house that the house and the voice, the sounds, the smells and the members of the house have become a part and parcel of her life; and on the other hand, the house turns out to be a "caged place", "a trap" and this family a large amorphous group of people with conflicting interests.

Shashi Deshpande has very exquisitely, pin-pointed the inner struggles and sufferings of the new class of Indian women through the character of Indu who has raised many basic questions regarding modern women who are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the west. There was a time when the Indian woman was hailed as a 'Pativrata' a 'Sati' and someone who has to be protected by a man, but now she is a changed person who is aware of the stirrings of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality, her place and her role in the family and society. Indu represents such women and now the question before society is whether to reject and condemn her or to encourage and co-operate with her in her efforts to establish a new image.

Thus, it is quite clear that the central theme of Deshpande's novels is interpersonal relationships and human emotions. It is also revealed that in her novels gender discrimination is a burning topic in the modern discourse of feminism. Deshpande makes her protagonists choose security through reconciliation. The ethos of the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat out of harmony and understanding between two opposite ideals and conflicting visions.

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