



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.3.,2016 (July-Sept.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'ROOTS AND SHADOWS': A TRAGIC TALE OF THE FEMALE PLIGHT AND PREDICAMENT

Dr. TUKARAM S. SAWANT

Associate Professor

Tuljaram Chaturchand College of Arts, Science and Commerce,
Baramati, Tal. Baramati, Dist. Pune, Baramati, Maharashtra.



Dr. TUKARAM S. SAWANT

ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a well-known Indian Woman novelist in English, started her literary career with the publication of her first story in 1970. Her first novel, 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', came out in 1980. Her novel, 'That Long Silence', won her the 'Sahitya Academy Award' and 'Nanjangad Thirumlamaba Award'. She was also awarded Padma Shri in 2009 for her significant contribution to Indian English novel. Her novels are deeply rooted in Indian context. She sincerely writes of what she sees and finds around her. As a woman novelist, she is mainly concerned with the projection of sorrows and sufferings, plight and predicament, pain and agony, anguish and frustration, suppression and exploitation of Indian women in Indian patriarchy. Her woman-oriented novels deal with the theme of human relationships with the woman at the centre of these relationships, and with the woman's struggle for justice and liberty, self-assertion and self-realization in a callous and malignant male-dominated contemporary Indian society. Her women are helpless creatures who live in an inexplicable and oppressive silence accepting their lives as their destiny, and who suffer a lot on account of issues such as gender-discrimination, male-ego and male-domination deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. She, an Indian feminist, raises a voice of protest against their suppression, subjugation and exploitation. She strives to seek new ways of dealing with their issues and problems. She considers the woman an individual equal to man in all respects. The present article is an attempt to explore the tragic lot of middle-class Indian women in her novel, 'Roots and Shadows'.

Key Words: exploitation, gender-discrimination, marginalized, plight, predicament, subjugation, victimized.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Academy Award winning Indian woman novelist in English, has been basically concerned with the projection of sorrows and sufferings, plight and predicament of educated, middle-class, urban Indian women caught in the trap of a contemporary Indian patriarchal society in her novels. She

takes her readers into the world of the inner psyche and consciousness of her women protagonists with their strengths and weaknesses, fears and anxieties, dreams and aspirations. Her major concern is with the realistic projection of a tragic and pathetic condition of Indian women with their feminine traits and virtues, their strengths and weaknesses. She has portrayed pictures of women who have been facing different types of problems. Her female characters are the typical Indian creatures who suffer silently and ungrudgingly in Indian patriarchal society. She is worried about a tragic and pathetic condition of women, victimized creatures imprisoned within the four walls of their parental homes as well as their marital homes. She gives a deep insight into the inner psyche and consciousness of Indian women with their pain, agony and dilemmas. She, a moderate Indian feminist, raises her feminine voice of protest against subjugation, suppression, oppression and exploitation of women in the name of gender-discrimination. She wants her women to be strong and confident to deal with their problems on their own. Her basic intention is to create awareness among Indian women and to make them realize their hidden strength and talent. She wants them to move towards self-awareness, self-identity, self-realization and self-assertion with courage, confidence and determination in a male-dominated Indian society.

Indian society belongs to the man since time immemorial. The woman has been totally controlled and dominated by the males. She is expected to submit herself obediently and passively to the authority of a man. She has been given a secondary and inferior position in her family and society. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earlier days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence". (Beauvoir 171). She has been reduced to the status of a plaything and a machine, a lifeless object used only to fulfil a man's sexual desire. She has been treated as a commodity, a property and a possession. Man always wants her to be the object, to be the means of enjoyment. He also wants her to follow him with his ideas, values and dreams blindly and mechanically. According to Eva Figes, the woman is a passive and helpless creature which is forced to respect the male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species. (Figs 125). She opines that she has been assigned the task of the reproduction of the human species. She has been looked down upon as a child-bearing machine. She has been facing humiliation, injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation and exploitation in the world of males. It is unfortunate she cannot share the world in equality as the world belongs to the males. She has always been a mute and silent sufferer totally dependent on her male counterpart.

She is not regarded as a free and independent individual. She has no existence apart from her male-counter-part. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being". (Beauvoir 16). She is simply what a man sees, defines and decrees. She is just what a man wants her to be. She is defined and understood only with reference to a man. Beauvoir has pin-pointed some fundamental questions related to the female world. The questions are: "How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome?" (Beauvoir 29). It is very difficult to answer these questions in Indian patriarchy. Jessica Benjamin observes: "The anchoring of this structure so deep in the psyche is what gives domination its appearance of inevitability, makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects - both empowered and mutually respectful - is impossible". (Benjamin 85-86). An Indian woman, a meek and obedient member of a male-dominated society, a puppet that follows five paces behind her man, an inanimate object suffering on account of prejudice, conventions and traditions, is expected to be silent, tolerant and patient, and yet gentle and gracious, caring and loving, kind and considerate right from the ancient days. Though, like a man, she is born free, she is caught in chains in one way or the other. She is miles away from freedom from male-domination and male-centric and male-controlled traditional, social and conventional beliefs and norms.

The woman does not have her own dreams and aspirations, her values and opinions. She is destined to passively and helplessly submit to her husband's desires, dreams and aspirations. This is her inevitable and

unavoidable tragedy. She does not have her own identity. Indira Kulkshreshtha opines: "Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a wife and a mother; it means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own". (Kulkshreshtha 1987). She is not allowed to enjoy the status and dignity of being an individual who is equal to a man. She sees herself in her husband's shadow, lives as her husband wants her to leave, and behaves as her husband wants her to behave. She follows her husband willingly and ungrudgingly. She accepts her husband as a sheltering tree. Though, she suffers a lot on account of the male-ego and male-domination, she considers herself incomplete, almost nothing without her husband. We should salute her silence, endurance, tolerance and sacrifice. The present article intends to highlight a tragic and pathetic condition of middle-class Indian women represented by the female characters in the novel, 'Roots and Shadows'.

The novel explores the inner self, psyche and consciousness of Indu, the woman protagonist, who is a member of an orthodox Brahmin joint family that imposes many restrictions on its female members and denies freedom to them. It gives us a realistic picture of typical Indian women with their sorrows and sufferings, problems and dilemmas, suppression and exploitation. It is an inner cry of the woman who is striving for her liberation and self-realization. The family, which is at the centre of the novel, is controlled and dominated by Akka, a widow with no child of her own. It has been drilled in Indu's mind that, being a female, she has to be obedient and unquestioning, meek and submissive. She is of the view that Akka is an obstacle in her way leading her to achieve her goal, the goal of attaining freedom and completeness. She, therefore, rebels against Akka, her dominating authority, her conventional world with rigid rules, norms and values, and the oppressive atmosphere in the family where women have no choice but to submit, to surrender and to accept their lot silently and ungrudgingly, and marries Jayant, a man of different caste but of her choice, and leaves her ancestral home.

Though Indu marries to attain freedom, recognition and acceptance as an independent member of her society, she unknowingly becomes a typical Indian wife. Her life and her thoughts begin to move around her husband. She thinks of her husband when she dresses herself; she thinks of him when she undresses herself; she thinks of him when she looks in the mirror; she thinks of his wants, his dreams, and his way of life. She forgets her 'self' and her 'identity'. She sheds her 'I' into her husband's. She shapes, moulds and changes herself according to her husband's needs and desires. She understands that her attachment to Jayant is quite disturbing and her total surrender to him quite frightening. However, she believes that to live without a husband is the greatest calamity in her life. The irony of her life is that though she is not completely happy with her husband, she cannot live without him. She realizes that she, as a human creature, is incomplete, almost nothing without her husband. This is the attitude that is basically responsible for her sorrows and sufferings. It is because of this attitude that in the course of her marital life she becomes fluid with no shape, no form, no desire, and no aspiration of her own. She has dreamt of a happy and complete marital life with Jayant, but unfortunately her calculations go wrong and very soon she gets frustrated and disillusioned in her marital life.

She gets a chance to set herself free from the cage, her marital home when she is called back to her ancestral home during Akka's illness. After Akka's death, she becomes the guardian property and family. She knows that the female members of the family, Narmada-itya, Sunanda-itya, Padmini and her mother, Sumitra-kaki, Kamala-kaki with her three daughters, even Saroja, experience pain, agony, suppression and suffocation in a male-dominated and tradition-bound family. At her ancestral home, she learns a lot from Vithal, an orphaned student always busy with his books and studies. He says to Indu that he has to concentrate on his studies with all the pinpricks in the family as he is an outsider, and that he has no other choice. His statement 'I have no choice' makes Indu think about her life with her husband. She, who has the potentiality to stand out sharp and clear as Indu, an individual, admits: "For had I not, so very often, felt myself just a mouthing, grimacing puppet, dully saying the lines I had to, feeling, actually, nothing? Had I not felt myself flat, one-dimensional, just a blurred figure merging into the background?" (Deshpande 143). It is the marriage that has made her a mute puppet. Her life is filled with deceptions and betrayals. She realizes that like any other

man, her husband expects her to conform to his views and ideas. Her dream of being a complete and independent individual does not come true. Deceived and disillusioned, she accepts a conventional way of the Indian wife.

Indu is portrayed as a woman who is caught between age-old traditions that deprive the woman of liberty on one side and her desire to enjoy liberty on the other. She knows that she is bound by the restraints of orthodox norms and conventions of Indian patriarchy. Right from the beginning, she has been trained only to submit and to accept. She has been repeatedly told that the woman has no choice and she is born without wills. Her grand-mother had always been a timid and subdued woman, only a shadow of her husband. She feels pity for the women who patiently clear up the mess with their bare hands after each meal, and even for women like Kaki eating from the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. She calls them stupid fools not knowing what they really want. She thinks over the question: "What do I want? . . . What a large, what a cosmic question that is. I will have to live the whole of my life to know what it is that I want . . . How can I live without knowing what I want? I must know. To live without fear . . . fear of being unloved, misunderstood, displeasing, without the fear of failure". (Deshpande 174). She is surprised to realize that an Indian woman lives without knowing what she wants and desires.

Vithal's mother is one of the examples of a meek, silent and suffering wife who has been a victim of the sadistic anger of her husband. Indu learns from Old Uncle: "Vithal's father . . . a sour, grim man who rarely spoke and never smiled, there was a streak of cruelty in him that came out in his relations with his meek, silent wife. The boy, as a child, had been a frequent spectator of scenes in which the father had worked out his sadistic anger on the mother for the merest trifles. And then one day, when the man was out on the job, the mother just disappeared. She had not even bothered to cook a meal for the child. When the man returned after a three day job, he found the boy starving. The mother never returned. And neither the boy nor the father ever mentioned her name again. Now the man started on the boy. Not physical cruelty . . . it was as if that instinct had fled with the wife . . . but cruelty of a different kind". (Deshpande 138). Her disappearance does not matter her husband.

Indu contemptuously calls an Indian woman, a martyr, a heroine, just a stupid fool carrying a world of darkness in herself, a pure female animal, a subordinate creature of the world filled with ignorance, prejudice and superstitions, or a typical breed interested in getting married, bearing children, having sons and then grandchildren. She does not have an independent identity of her own. She is known and recognized by her relationship with others. Indu remarks: "These women . . . they are called Kaku and Kaki, Atya and Vahini, Aiji and Mami, as if they have to be recognized by a relationship, because they have no independent identity of their own at all. And, in the process, their own names are forgotten. How does it feel not even to have a name of your own? There are women who are proud of having their names changed by their husbands during their wedding ceremonies. To surrender your name so lightly . . . But what's in a name? I'm Indu, Indu, Indu. After a while, the name becomes meaningless, like any other word after constant repetition". (Deshpande 117).

The woman's pattern of life is fixed and monotonous. Her husband and children, her home and household activities, her cooking and cleaning, her meals, her *pujas* and fasts, her rites and rituals are at the centre of her life. Decision-making has no place at all in her pattern of living. She is trained to adjust and adapt herself with circumstances and decisions made by her male-counterparts. About Sunanda-Atya, a typical woman, Indu says: "She was the eternal female . . . cunning, greedy, devious and unscrupulous . . . As a child she had learnt that, being a female, she could neither assert, nor demand or proclaim". (Deshpande 132). Though herself a woman, Indu has a kind of distaste for the female function, the function of feeding a child, the function that gives a feeling of motherhood. She is shivered to see Sunanda-Atya sitting down with the child on her lap, opening her buttons and pushing a flaccid nipple into his mouth; and the child taking a long shuddering breath and sucking with loud noises. How can Indu perform this female function without a child of her own? Indian married women like Indu are considered incomplete without a child.

Indu has heard a lot about Saroja, Naren's mother. She remembers Kaka who said: "I remember her very distinctly, a little thing like you, but very quiet. And when she sang . . . God, what a voice she had!"

(Deshpande 50). But unfortunately, she has no freedom even to learn what she likes loves. Indu exclaims excitedly and impatiently: "I've heard that and of how she wanted to learn music and how Akka put her foot down. 'What - learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like those women? Are we that kind of a family? Isn't it enough for you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two *aarti* songs? What more does a girl from a descent family need to have?" (Deshpande 50). Kaka always felt that it was incorrect not to allow her to learn music, but he was too helpless to do anything but to feel sorry for her. Is it not strange and ironical that in a patriarchal set-up like ours her desire to learn music is suppressed by a woman? A woman becomes an obstacle in the way of a woman. It is the woman who decides the destiny of a woman. And that is why Indu does not blame her husband, who, according to her, has not compelled and pressurised her to live her life the way he wants. It is the way that she herself wants to be. It is the woman who confines herself in the cage willingly. We are, therefore, tempted to say that the woman, to a large extent, is responsible for her plight and predicament.

Indu is uneasy to learn that Mini's parents are in a hurry to give Mini away in a marriage. She does not want Kaka to marry Mini to the man who does not match her. She wants him to wait for a better chance. Kaka says: "But tell me, Indu, what am I to do? . . . Another chance? We had to wait long enough for this one. Padmini is past twenty four now. And there's her horoscope, and the problem of finding a family with a status of ours. And when everything clicks, there's the dowry hurdle. What am I to do? Let the girl stay unmarried? It's all right so long as I'm alive. When I'm gone, can you see her brothers looking after her? May be the boy is a little ugly, may be a little stupid . . . but everything else is fine. The family is good, it's known to us, and they have money. She'll be quite comfortable." (Deshpande 51). Indu has never seen her Kaka so earnest, so helpless, and so worried about his daughter. She feels sorry both for him who pours out the agony of a middle-class Indian father whose grown-up daughter is still unmarried.

Mini is prepared to marry any man as 'to marry' seems to be the only purpose of her life. To Indu's surprise, she is interested in marriage and not in man. She says: "Oh, what does it matter who it is". (Deshpande 31). Indu learns from Kaka: "He's passed his S. S. C., went one year to college . . . or maybe he didn't really pass. What does that matter? He doesn't need a job. They have plenty. He can live in comfort like a lord on what they have. And what's the use of these degrees? Can they guarantee a job?" (Deshpande 50). Kaka prefers property to education, which, according to him, does not guarantee jobs. Mini, too, does not bother about education, job, land, property and all these things. She says: 'I'm past twenty four. I have to get married. What else is there to think about? . . . What choice do I have? . . . Of course I'm marrying him because there's nothing else I can do. I'm no good at studies . . . There's only one thing I'm really good at . . . looking after a house". (Deshpande 125). She knows that she has to get married so that she can get home, her own home. She is ready to marry any man, any man who is ready to marry her.

She underlines the plight of an unmarried girl when 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, and then, sending the horoscope and having it come back with the message, 'It doesn't match'. And if the horoscopes matched, there was the meeting to be arranged . . . and all those people coming and staring and asking all kinds of questions. And if we heard they were old-fashioned people, I would dress up in an old-fashioned manner and they would say, 'She's not modern enough'. And if I dressed up well because someone said the boy wanted a smart wife, they would say, 'She's too fashionable for us', or too short, or too tall, or too dark, or something, and Kaka trying to laugh and talk to those people . . . and I, feeling as if I had committed a great crime by being born a girl . . . and if finally, everything was fine, there was the dowry. You know nothing of this, Indu. You're lucky. You escaped all this . . . And now when someone has agreed, can I refuse just because the man isn't . . . Oh, I don't know. And I don't care. He'll look after me. And no one can say to me, 'How old are you? And not married yet! What a pity!' I'm tired, Indu. I don't care what kind of a man he is. Once we are married, and he becomes my husband, none of his flaws will matter". (Deshpande 126). It is unfortunate that most Indian girls are to go through this process as they do not

have their own choice of selecting their life partner. They have to accept everything including their husband silently, passively and ungrudgingly only because they are the female members of society.

Indu is greatly shocked to hear a tragic story of Akka's marital life from Narmada Atya. She, who has a bitter sense of hatred for Akka, changes her attitude to her. She remembers Atya's words: "She was just twelve when she got married. And he was well past thirty . . . Six months after her marriage, she 'grew up' and went to her husband's home. What she had to endure there, no one knows. She never told anyone . . . But I heard that twice she tried to run away . . . a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days, and starved her as well, and then, sent her 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 . . . He had a weakness for women . . . And Akka could never give birth to a living child . . . But every time she had a miscarriage, her mother-in-law blamed her for it and made life hell for her. And then, when Akka had been married for more than fifteen or twenty years, he took up with one woman . . . I heard he was crazy about her . . . And then, one day, he had a stroke . . . Akka looked after him . . . He couldn't speak; I remember . . . He was trying to say something. One day Akka found out what it was he was trying to say . . . He wanted her, that woman, his mistress . . . And then Akka said, 'If that's what you want, you can go on wanting. She won't come here. I won't let her . . . Listen to me. It's my turn now. I've listened to you long enough. She came here twice. I threw her out. You'll never see her again". (Deshpande 69-71). Since a man is made by circumstances, Akka has been made strong by the suffocating environment in her marital family.

The story of Akka's marital life speaks a lot about her tragedy, her physical and sexual harassment, her mental torture, her silently enduring her life, her husband's weakness for women, social sanction given to him to take liberty in enjoying extra-marital relationship, her inner strength to accept and face life as it is, her capacity to adjust herself to the entire adverse situation, her looking after her husband during his illness, almost about each and every aspect of feminine sensibility. Akka is one of the victims of a child-marriage and marital-violence. She has been given inhuman and beastlike treatment by her husband and her mother-in-law. She has spent almost every night crying in her marital home. However, being a typical Indian woman, she proves herself a dutiful wife by looking after her bed-ridden husband. She proves her domineering character by not allowing his mistress to meet him. On hearing this story, Indu realizes that her knowledge of Akka is inadequate and incomplete. She feels guilty for having judged her without knowing anything about her.

Indu has a deep sense of hatred for unclean womanhood. She has never thought of her womanhood until the knowledge has been thrust unexpectedly, brutally and gracelessly on her the day she has grown up. Kaki has told her that she is a woman now and she can have babies herself. She also asks her not to forget that she is unclean for three days now and that she can't touch anyone or anything. She now understands that being unclean for three days in a month; she is barred from the *puja* room. She has, thus, been introduced to a beautiful world of being a woman for the first time with the words 'You are unclean'. She thinks to herself: "I, a woman? My mind had flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. I was only a child. And then, she had gone on to tell me, baldly, crudely, how I could have a baby. And I had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it". (Deshpande 79). She knows that it is the child that opens the door of motherhood for a married woman like her. Her family members are eager to see her with her own child. She does not reveal the truth that "Jayant, son of a perfectionist mother, shies away from the thought of a child of her own, that I, motherless and yet never unloved, quail at the thought of becoming a mother for fear of being disillusioned . . . And so, Jayant and I, tell each other . . . not now, we can't afford it, we don't have a reliable servant, I can't get leave . . . The truth is, I will have no child that is not wholly welcome".(Deshpande 38). A typical Indian woman has a strong desire to have her own child with a belief that her life will be incomplete without having one. To get married, to have a husband and to have a child, especially a male child is the very dream of an Indian woman.

References

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New Delhi; H. M. Parshley. (Trans. and ed.), Penguin Books Ltd, 1972

Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. Virago, London. 1990.

Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*. New Delhi; Orient Longman Ltd, 1983.

Figs, Eva. *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society*. London; Macmillan, 1986.

Kulkshreshtha, Indira. *That Long Silence: Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. 1987.
