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PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S "ROOTS AND SHADOWS"

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ABSTRACT

In modern India, the status of women has been raised in the eyes of law, but they are still far from equal to men in every sphere of life. In practice, they continue to suffer discrimination, harassment, humiliation and exploitation in and outside home. Shashi Deshpande, is an award-winning Indian novelist. She is the second daughter of famous Kannada dramatist and writer Sriranga. She was born in Karnataka and educated in Bombay and Bangalore. Deshpande has degrees in Economics and Law. Shashi Deshpande emerged on the Indian fictional scene in the 1970s. She has created a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English. She excels in projecting a realistic picture of the middle class educated woman who, although financially independent, is still facing the problems of adjustment between idealism and pragmatism. She is almost incomparable for her portrayal of Indian middle class women with their turmoils, convulsions, frustrations. Her novels are mainly based on the lives of women and their problems particularly in the Indian context. For this reason she has been labelled a 'feminist'. She explored the realities behind the silence of women. She raised her voice against torment on women and also created mass awareness in the matter through her writings. The novels of Shashi Deshpande are about women's self-quest and struggle to free themselves from the restrictions imposed by society, culture and nature. The present paper tries to explore the issues like marginalization and predicament of women. The prime objective of the present study is to focus on predicament of women in Indian society as portrayed in the Sashi Deshpande's Roots and Shadows.

Key words: Marginalization, discrimination, predicament, exploitation.

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In modern India, the status of women has been raised in the eyes of law, but they are still far from equal to men in every sphere of life. In practice, they continue to suffer discrimination, harassment, humiliation and exploitation in and outside home. 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.

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 patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence”. (Beauvoir 171).

Theoretically, women might have been given more freedom but in practice, they still suffer many hardships, inhuman dignities and unworthy treatment everywhere. Within the home, she is still not treated at par with her male counterpart. Barring a few urban educated families, a baby girl is never welcomed with as much happiness as a baby boy. Sometimes, the birth of a girl is regarded as a bad omen. They are not treated as equals to men, and not given due respect in the family. The power to govern the home and the authority still rests in the hands of male head of the household. The dominant father model still persists in most of the middle and lower class families. Leaving aside a few, in the so-called modern families wives have not become equal partners to their husbands even if they are well-educated or more educated than their husbands. Most of the decisions of the household, from purchasing daily household items to decide about the education and marriage of their children, are taken by father/husband. There is no significant change in the attitude of the males even in the families where females are working outside the home. Women as daughters or wives have to seek permission from their fathers/husbands for going outside home or for receiving higher education. 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.

According to Eva Figs,

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)

In some families, it is seen that husbands do not allow their wives of the same caliber and education to take up any job assignment of the same status outside the home. In rural India, where in theory women are equated with goddess, but in actual practice, they are treated as drudges. The problems of inferiority, inequality, dependence and the exploitation experienced by women have not much changed in the villages, where most of the India lives, even after 65 years of independence.

According to Sudhir Kakkar,

Indian women have to adhere to the image of a good and ideal woman – ‘pativrata’, subordinating her life to her husband’s happiness. The ‘pativrata’ conduct is not a mere matter of sexual fidelity, but an issue of great importance in all patriarchal societies. (Kakkar 66).

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. 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.

A close study of Shashi Deshpande’s novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian women who feel smothered and fettered in a tradition-bound, male dominated society. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations, who are aware of their strengths and

limitations; but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mindset. She highlights their inferior position and the subsequent degradation in a male-dominated society. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of gender discrimination first as daughter and later as wives. Although she has a small volume of literary works to her credit, her works have drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women. Shashi Deshpande's sincere concern for women and her craft as a novelist is reflected strongly in all her novels.

*Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande's second published novel was written earlier than *The Dark Holds No Terrors* but published later in 1983, it is a much acclaimed of Shashi Deshpande's novels. It is about a female protagonist Indu who is an educated lady and represents middle class. Indu is a journalist and a writer. The novel deals with the theme of female subjugation. It depicts the way how Indu sets out on her journey of self-realisation and eventually sheds her inhibitions. Thus she moves on to the path of liberation. The novel entails the journey of Indu who attains her feminist identity by crossing over the impediments posited before her by the patriarchy.

*Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande's first novel won the Thirumathi Rangammal prize in 1984. The novel projects the inner world and thoughts of Indu. She is a revolutionary woman. She is seen to be acting against dominance right from her childhood. At her ancestral home, she hated obedience and passivity as a girl child. After the death of her mother, she was brought up by her aunts as her father left home. Indu refuses to be cowed down by Akka, the rich family tyrant who dominated this family. Here, we see that feminism not only raises a voice against male dominance, but also against women who cherish the values of patriarchy. As a revolt, she married Jayant who belongs to other caste and breaks traditions. After years, she went to her ancestral home at the time of her Akka's death. To her great astonishment, Akka has left all her property to her. For Indu, it is the time of questioning, of rethinking her life, her journalistic career, her marriage and her hard-won independence. She meets Naren, her cousin and feels that he understands her more than Jayant. She shared her problems and everything with him. But at last she returned to Jayant with a complete new self.

She is not satisfied with her marital life; something is there which is stifling her; something that chokes their life; something grave that really exudes death signal for their nuptial life and their marriage seems to be on the rocks. After marriage she continues with her work of journalism as she does not want to be a passive entity doing nothing at home rather she, as the world is changing, wants to move forward in life so that she should not be a mere parasite on others rather be independent. But ironically enough she has to write only those things which she never wanted to. She has to manage her household expenses. She does not like the idea of writing the things she never believed in. But she keeps writing all the sham work even against her scruples. She steps into the shoes of those who only go for the kind of writing which has sound marketing value. She once interviews a lady who seems quite good to her but she is flummoxed to arrive at her truth. She bickers with the editor. But she is more pained at heart when Jayant whom she confides what has happened, turns quite hostile to her saying: "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." (RAS 27)

Indu feels that by marrying Jayant her identity has been lost. She is not able to identify her own self. She does all the things which Jayant wishes. She has adapted herself according to the traditional values of being an ideal woman.

Jayant is shocked when Indu talks of her female craving for physical union. Indu is at times quite passionate in the act of love making. Jayant could not digest the fact that a woman can be so enthusiastic in love making. Jayant represents a typical patriarchal man who is alarmed at the female sexual needs. For Indian society deems women as meek and passive. It is unbearable fact that a woman can be vociferous in the articulation of her sexual needs as sex is thought to be a taboo for Indian women.

The theme of marriage as a vehicle of female subjugation is very significant theme in Deshpande's novels and is one of the predominant themes in this novel also. Deshpande is realist to the core and snatches the semblance of fulfillment and the mask of romance that

envelopes it away. She knows marriage is about commitment; a harmony which is not feasible to find in the modern society. It is an institution which has been the prime and potent weapon of patriarchy to maintain control and dominate women.

Deshpande has universalised women's subjugation. It is not only Indu who is being victim in marriage but her cousin too. Mini her cousin finds it difficult to get a groom for herself. Indu comes to know that women have no choice, they are rather victimised members of society. But whereas Indu is a modern lady who challenges traditions, Mini on the contrary succumbs to them. Mini has no choice in marriage. A woman is not given any chance to have her own will. It is a male dominated society whereby finding a groom for a daughter is the most uphill task. In Indian society, a woman cannot be married without dowry and here the insurmountable problems for the parents commence. A poor father who cannot even maintain his house and pay for its taxes, how would he arrange a hefty dowry for her daughter in order to get her married? It becomes all the more a convoluted process if would be bride is not pretty like a movie star; more dowry has to be arranged to assuage the lust of the groom and his family who crave for more and more. Many of parents are over and ears in debt and many commit suicide every day as they are unable to repay the debt they had borrowed. The situation is aggravating with every passing day. Deshpande being very realist has painted before the readers the same plight of the parents and their daughters. Indu does not believe in the romanticism that marriage offers. Marriage on the other hand is a vehicle of patriarchy to subjugate women and their free spirit. Not only Indu feels uncomfortable but many other characters in the novel are the victims in marriage.

Akka was a very traditional and dominating figure. She always towered over not only her but on all the members of the family. "Since the day Akka has come back, a rich childless widow, to her brother's house, she has maintained an absolute control over her brother's children." (RAS 30) All the family members including Kaka shudder at her voice, "Kaka, even after becoming a grandfather, could be reduced to a red faced stuttering schoolboy by Akka's venomous tongue."(RAS 30)

Even Akka's life was full of trials and hardships. She was married at the age of twelve to a man who was thirty. He was a, "bulky man with large coarse features." (RAS 70) What she endured in her in laws' house was unknown. She tried in vain to escape from her husband twice. But her mother in law, "whipped her for that and locked her up for three days. Starved her as well." (RAS 70) She was sent to her husband again who was very harsh with her who was just a kid of thirteen years at that time and she was so scared that she cried and said, "Lock me up again, lock me up." (RAS 70) Her husband was a womaniser. A scared child could never appease his lust. So he had always a mistress or two. Akka was unable to bear a child. And her mother-in-law always blamed her for this. All the female characters in the novel are the victims of patriarchy. Through this novel, Shashi Deshpande is not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of women but also tries to suggest a solution.

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