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WOMEN'S PREDICAMENT 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. During recent decades, a galaxy of Indian women novelists has started writing about Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. Such women novelists writing in India are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayandara Sahgal, Attia Hossain, Shashi Deshpande, P.P.Jabuala, Namita Gokhale. Above all Shashi Deshpande shows a vision of femininity in her novel. She has dealt graphically with problems that confront a middle class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. But hers is not the radical and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the matrix of all menace. Shashi Deshpande 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. This paper attempts to define Shashi Deshpande's work 'Roots and Shadows' as a feminist discourse and also details of women's predicament in this work.

Key words: Discrimination – harassment- humiliation - exploitation - torment on women - self-quest - struggle - restrictions

Introduction

Talking about the protagonist of Indian women novelists S.P.Swain says,

"Their heroines are all agog to retain their individuality in the teeth of disintegrating and divisive forces that threaten their identity"

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a study of a ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman's existing life. Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means

of selfish, gratification, to minister to his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill the life. Feminism strives to undo this distorted image of woman whose crisis for freedom and equality have gone unheard in a patriarchal social structure.

Feminist writing aims at the advocacy of the once neglected and marginalized voice of woman to be pitted against phallo centricism of the received literary tradition. Olive So Heine's women and labor Virginia Woolf's 'A room of one's own' and Simon De

Beauvoir's Second Sex. Showalter sees the following phases in the history of woman's writing:

Feminine phase: Women writing, imitating male norms
Feminist phase: Radical and separatist positions
Female phase: Focused on female experience and female writing
What immediately draws our attention is relevant to feminism and to the Indian context.

However, the Indian society is patriarchal and the whole representation is genderized so much, so that women are graded second class citizens by their sex. Shashi Deshpande's first novel 'Roots and Shadows' has won the Thirumathi Rangammal prize in 1984. The novel projects the inner world and thoughts of Indu. She is a revolutionary woman, 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.

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.

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 Jeyant who belongs to the 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 Jeyant. She shared her problems and views with him. But at last, she returned to Jeyant with a complete new self.

Shashi Deshpande unveils Indian women in proper light and shade. Indian women in her novels can be divided into three groups:

1. Those that follow tradition as a virtue,
2. Those that realize the futility of conventions and yet are not able to come out. And
3. Those that are independent.

Through the character of Indu the novelist has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service, but Jayant doesn't approve of it. Indu's self – alienation increases as she becomes aware of the conflicting demands made on her by her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity, and her ambition to become a creative writer. Thus, Indu perceives herself as an object, not a subject; all of one's own physical and sexual impulses and interest are presumed not to exist independently. She now wants to become 'a true woman' and throw off the mask of an ideal woman.

This is seen in Indu's feeling of isolation which finds an expression in the words Women are left with no choice in their lives. There is shadow of male dominance over every aspect and faced of their lives which towards their progress. As a woman, Indu hardly left with any choice. Her life is acutely circumscribed. She says, "A woman's life, they had told me contains no choices and all my life especially in this house, I had seen the truth of this".

Marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman. The two sexes are different from each other though each one has the necessity of the other. But 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 equal footing. Simone de Beauvoir opines: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. It has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them.

A man is socially an independent and complete individual the girl seems absolutely passive; she is married, given in marriage by her parents. In marrying, she takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his class; she joins his family, she becomes his 'half' and She gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required. No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him security in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definite fulfilment of his existence". (Beauvoir 445-451). She gives her husband almost everything. She, however, has a secondary role to play in a marital relationship. The functions assigned to her after her marriage are to satisfy her husband's sexual needs, to provide children to her family, and to take care of her husband, her children and her household.

Marriage even today has retained its traditional form in one way or the other. It is of greater benefit to a woman than to a man. For her, it is the only means of her integration into her community. However, it is also the beginning of her greater sacrifices in the form of her name, person, self, identity, freedom, virginity, dreams and aspirations. She, as we find in the case of Padmini, in *Roots and Shadows*, is more eager for it than a man is because she considers marriage a passport of complete happiness and freedom. But she comes to her senses when she realizes that it is something that enslaves her. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness – there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness – but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine". (Beauvoir 496). She is thought to be incapable of making her living on her own. She is trained to prefer marriage to a career, and to accept her husband who, as per conventions and traditions, is above her in each and every respect.

Most marriages fail on account of one reason or the other. They are fraught with one or the other kind of disease or malady. Shashi Deshpande is essentially concerned about the issues and problems related to marital relationships. She attempts to find out basic causes responsible for the unhappy and failed marriages. The tragedy of marriage, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is that it mutilates the woman and dooms her to repetition and routine, and that "it is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim. Just as he wants her to be at once warm and cool in bed, he requires her to be wholly his and yet no burden; he wishes her to establish in a fixed place on earth and to leave him free, to assume the monotonous daily round and not to bore him, to be always at hand and never importunate; he wants to have her all to himself and not to belong to her; to live as one of a couple and to remain alone. Thus she is betrayed from the day he marries her". (Beauvoir 496).

Nature has really played a trick on the woman by making her tolerate everything in the name of gender-distinction and marriage. It has also

played a trick on her by making her dream of seeking happiness only through a man. It is but natural for her to aspire for natural companionship, physical, mental and emotional satisfaction, social status and respect and also material comforts, but she is far away from the realization of her dreams and aspirations. Who are to be blamed for the failure of marriage? Simone de Beauvoir opines: "Individuals are not to be blamed for the failure of marriage; it is the institution of marriage itself". (Beauvoir 497). It fails on account of male-ego, male-domination and a patriarchal attitude of the male to the female. The woman herself and circumstances, too, are responsible for its failure

A woman like Indu is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. The husband is impervious to her emotional urges. Instead, it is she who has to cater to the needs of his urges and drives. Patriarchy makes woman merge herself into others and neglect her own self. Her identity is lost and she has to live according to her husband's needs. Jeyant betrays Indu neither hopes for harmony and integration for peace and happiness nor is he a sheltering tree to her. Womanhood restricts woman and puts her on the periphery. Indu loathes womanhood, which is trust upon a girl for its association with the idea of uncleanness. In order to assert her right to an independent existence, she longs to escape from the burden and responsibilities of womanhood. In an act of unreflecting defiance against patriarchy, she believes that the woman should deprive herself of the satisfaction that comes from bearing a child. She does not believe in mothering.

Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman but Indu plays the role of an ideal housewife but it restricts her development. She is even denied the scope of giving free play to her artistic potential. Thus marriage leads her to aimless days, infinitely repeated life that slips away gently towards death, without questioning its purpose. Indu recognizes her displacement and marginalization as a woman. The authoritative and dominating male does not only suppress the female voice but also brought silence, dullness and repulsion to the houses women live in. women can neither express them nor choose for themselves. They can neither love nor hate but be

content with the gift of silence. In silence Indu pines for love almost frantically: "I want to be loved, I want to be happy".

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)

As members of the subordinate sex, women are characterized by obedience and submission. Indu says that as a child. She was asked to be obedient and unquestioning and as a girl she was told to be meek and submissive. Many sexual and gender roles are imposed upon women in a patriarchal, male-bastion culture. Such relative identity or rather 'received role models' dishearten and problem also Indu's self-perception. Such a world reduces woman to mere thing or a mindless body because her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed. Shashi Deshpande also expresses the male prejudice against female children. Indu's father had parted her 15-day old baby with the family he hated and despised. He had not even come to see her until she was more than a year old. Through this novel, Shashi Deshpande is not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of women but also tries to suggest a solution. Only a woman can break the age old traditions and beliefs binding her feet with falter. Indu ultimately decide to do what she wants to. She decides to resign from the job and do the kind of writing she had dreamt of doing.

Conclusion

Many sexual and gender roles are imposed up on women in a patriarchal male-bastion culture. Such relative identity or rather "received role models" dishearten and problematical Indu's self-perception. Such a world reduces woman to mere thing or mindless body because her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed. Shashi Deshpande also expresses the male prejudice against female children. Indu's father had parted her 15- day old

baby with the family he hated and despised . He had not even come to see her until she was more than a year old. Thus this paper reflects not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of women but also tries to suggest a solution . Only a woman can break the age old traditions and beliefs binding her feet with falter. Indu ultimately decide to do what she wants to. She decides to resign from the job and do the kind of writing she had dreamt of doing.

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.

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