



FEMININE SENSIBILITY AND FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND SHADOWS

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ABSTRACT

In simple words, feminism can be defined as a movement which is focused at the liberation of female, giving them equal opportunity, and a voice to speak out for their own rights. The works of Shashi Deshpande depict the rapid evolution of the new Indian female, the advancement of her novels and different character portrayals reflect apprehend the rapid social and cultural changes which have been taking place in modern India as a result of fast economic development and expansion. In one of her finest novels Roots and Shadows, published in 1982, portrays an unforgettable Indian woman character Indu. She is a strong, intelligent, educated urban female who speak out, introspect and present her individuality without caring the traditional and conventional norms of the society. This paper aims at studying the feminist tradition in Deshpande's works and analyses female consciousness as a living inspiration with special reference to the novel Roots and Shadows.

Key Words: Female Consciousness, Patriarchy, Submissive, Identity, Sexual Harassment.

INTRODUCTION:

Roots and Shadows is a well knit story of familial issues and crisis arising from them. It focuses on the long silence that has been suppressed with unheard doubts and worries. Indu represents the Indian middle-class working woman in modern society who initially tries to speak out against the traditional pre-set norms but gradually compromises with the existing reality. Deshpande's writings underline conventional norms which are expected to change but could not be changed and every time it turns into a new form of social demand. Shashi



Deshpande has secured herself a prestigious place among the contemporary Indian women novelists. As Lisa Tattle gives the definition of feminism:

The term feminism, taken from the Latin word 'Femina' (Woman), originally meant having the qualities of females. It is originated in the perception that there is something wrong with the treatment of the females by the society.¹

Deshpande has tried to convey to the society that the need of the hour is not a sudden revolt but a gradual change in the opinion of the society for which each individual has to put more or less effort to bridge the gap between the old and the new generation. She tries to capture the social reality as it is experienced by women and elaborate the real picture of Indian extended family, particularly the place of women in this traditional structure.

Indu, the protagonist of the novel gets back to her ancestral home from where she had decided so many years ago to get married to a man of her own choice against the wishes of her family. She basically comes back to her parent's home to find out her roots but she gets the shadows instead. She thinks about her life, her career, her love, her own marriage etc. but after the interactions with different family members, she decides to go back to her husband and tries to find out the peace in her own home. There are two types of women characters are portrayed in the novel. Indu's character has been portrayed against the women who belong to older generation. Through these characters, the novelist has very skillfully juxtaposed two generations of women who represent two opposite mind set in Indian mentality. One generation mind set is represented by Akka, Sumitra Kaki, Sunanda Atya, Narmada etc, and the other is represented by Indu only. To the older generation women's life and their family have different definitions as a woman's life is nothing 'But to get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand children.'² And in their opinion, an ideal woman is 'a woman who sheds her 'I' who loses her identity in her husband's.'³ Whereas Indu tries to establish her own identity and listen to the voice of her conscience but unfortunately all her efforts get fail in front of patriarchy.

Indu always aspires to become independent, liberal and complete in her but gets so many barriers coming in her way. As a child, she was always taught to be unquestioning, obedient and submissive. In fact she was not allowed to express what she actually wanted. To her great surprise and wonder, even after her love marriage she comes to know that her husband not only expects her to be submissive but also takes her silence for granted. She sacrifices her desires and wishes for her husband in the name of love. When she realizes this nature of her husband, she comes to know that it was not the love but an adjustment as she never wants to argue with her husband. As she married a man of her own choice, she never wants to give any chance to her parents to blame her choice and for the step she had taken:



The hideous ghost of my own cowardice confronted me as I thought of this... that I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure, I had to show them that my marriage, that I, was a success... And so I went on lying even to myself.⁴

Here the novelist showed narrative skill and minutely highlight the situation in which young modern female sandwiched between tradition and modernity and always finds herself in a confused state of mind. The thrusting upon attitude by the society in general and the behaviour family members in particular make her more aggressive. Indu tries hard to understand the life in reality and her womanhood but finds her unable to do so. From the beginning of the novel, Indu seems a rebel character. She raises her voice against the suffocating authority old matriarch Akka and the oppressive atmosphere of the family where a female has no option but to submit and accept the circumstances as it is. She remarks:

As a child, they told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. 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.⁵

Indu started hating the womanhood since the day she was made aware of being a woman by the elder women in the family. She was told not to touch anything and going into kitchen and sacred places during these four days. She was called dirty instead of telling her about this biological functions of the body is completely natural. When her cousin Naren suggests her to write about women experiences in journalistic mode, she gets depressed and recalls her childhood experiences:

My womanhood... I had never thought of it until the knowledge had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day I had grown up. You're a woman now... You can have babies yourself... I, a woman?... I was only a child. And then, she had gone on to tell me, badly, crudely. How I could have a baby. And I, who had all the child's unselfconsciousness about my own body, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it... And don't forget, she (Kaki) had ended, 'for four days now, you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything.⁶

She also remembers about her sexual harassment in her own family by her uncle. She started considering her womanhood as a curse and develops a hatred for her own female body. She recalls:



I was learning to ride the bicycle... my uncle had offered to help me. I had accepted the help gladly, until I had felt his 'helping hand' giving me the age old messages of male to female. At fifteen, you're woman enough to have an instinctive knowledge of male hunger, and child enough to panic at being the object of it.⁷

The novelist shows her concern with the social and cultural construction of gender and Indu's protest against the treatment of women as sexual object. She tries to articulate not only a thematic understanding but also effectively communicates an intense feminine sensibility. Akka left all her legacy for Indu, her joint family members try to persuade her in their own ways to get that money. Novelist has depicted the minute details of a large Maharastrian Brahmin joint family and multitude female characters, their hopes, fear, jealousy, disappointments and anguish.

Patriarchal social set up in traditional Indian society makes women the victims of family tradition and social sector. The fine example of this ill-treatment is Indu's Akka who is widow and now living in her brother's house. She was ill treated by her in-laws family members. Indu decides to cut off all paternal family ties to break out the confining cage of subordinate womanhood. She observed old generation women whose actions have been blind folded so that they should not see any other options but to surrender in front of patriarchy. In fact she very well knows about her own short comings of a complete female in the eyes of these conventional women who have their own standards of judging people:

Nothing about me... my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money... none of these would impress her. To her I was just a children's woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren... They were still for them, only this was their success a woman could have. I had almost forgotten this breed of women since I had left home.⁸

The novelist has tried to show both sides of the coin. On the one hand, Indu's character has been portrayed as a rebel and unconventional and on the other hand, her cousin Mini possesses in her character all the traditional feminine qualities since her childhood. She does not have any aim in her life except to get married and have children. She devotes herself to her family members. She has been conditioned to be obedient, silent and submissive since her childhood. She never ever tries to cross the boundary line of rules and regulations set by her family for females. She seems to be well aware of the real duties of a girl at a very early age. This is the reason, when Indu asks about her wish of her own marriage. She did not welcome the proposal of marriage wholeheartedly but gives a mute consent considering the problems of her family. When her parents get unable to collect expected dowry for her marriage, she fills with guilt-guilt of being girl, guilt for being a burden on her parents and guilt of

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remaining unmarried. She had been interviewed and rejected several times by groom and his family thus she decides to get married at the earliest in order to save her parents from the social pressure. She remarks:

*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 finally if everything was fine, there was the dowry. You know nothing of this, Indu. You're lucky. You escaped all this.*⁹

Indu shows her disapproval regarding then, marriage proposal which came for Mini and request her uncle to look for a better match but he reject the idea and says: 'May be the boys is a little ugly, may be a little stupid... but everything else is fine... what else could I ask for?'¹⁰ The novelist throws light on how an Indian girl accept a marriage proposal of a man who is little stupid and ugly, just because of social pressure and less dowry. Such females accept their partners with their flaws and tries to live upon their desires and demands by moulding themselves. Those men set the norms for them which dictate the feminine qualities to be performed by women. Although these feminine qualities are imposed on them yet they find it difficult to free themselves from its bondage. Indu thinks:

*What choice do I have, Indu? She asked me, resuming her snipping... Millions of girls have asked this question millions of times in this country. Surely it was time they stopped asking it. What choice do I have? Surely it is this. This fact I can choose, that differentiates me from animals. But years of blind folding can obscure your vision so that you can no more see the choices. Years of shacking can hamper your movement so that you can no more move out of your cage of no choices.*¹¹

In the walks towards emancipation and individualism, the contemporary Indian woman has to struggle against the conventional norms and narrow mindedness of the society. As Simone 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.*¹²

Thus a minute study of Shashi Deshpande's novel *Roots and Shadows* projects her deep concern for the despairing conditions of the Indian women in the male dominated society. Her understanding of feminine sensibility makes her different from other contemporary Indian English women novelists. Her women characters are portrayed in the light of their hopes, fears aspirations and frustrations that are very well aware of their strength and power

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but somehow find themselves helpless by the opposition and pressure of patriarchal mind set-up and society.

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