

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS EXPOSE THE MORAL AND SPIRITUAL
BREAKDOWN OF MODERN SOCIETY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ROOTS AND
SHADOWS

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande's novels are very interesting and they educate the society. She puts forth her ideas through her narration. The life of women of early twentieth century acts as an eye opener through which life is learnt by the modern middle class educated women. The Researcher tries to emphasize the troubles and inconsistencies within societies through Shashi Deshpande's novels for all to think and act.

Keywords: Education, trouble, middle class, feminism, identity, predicament, depression.

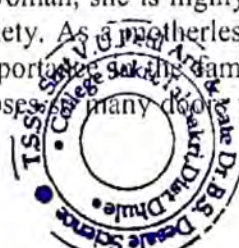
Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. She has been labeled as a feminist mainly because of the concerns she has thrown through her writing. She reflects on the problems of the middle class Indian women and their inner conflict and quest for identity. Her works rooted in the culture in which she lives, remain sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences. Her feminism rooted in the native environment tends to be humanistic and optimistic in its outlook. Her feminism is born out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature. Geetha Gangadharan asked her, whether she would like to call herself a feminist, Deshpande replied to her "Yes I would, I am a Feminist in this sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior or inferior; we are to halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone De Beauvoir that the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women. I think that is my idea of feminism." (Geetha Gangadharan 1998; p.254) Men and women were partners, sharing equal duties in social life and equal rights in politics.

Analysis:

Shashi Deshpande is one of the contemporary writers whose theme of socio-cultural significance. Shashi Deshpande is the daughter of the prominent Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Shriranga was born in Dharwad, Karnataka. Her novels written in English are deeply rooted in Indian culture, whose aim is to present the role of women in the Indian society. The conflicts faced by her protagonists are similar to the one encountered by many women in Indian society. Her works is a thought provoking from a sociological perspective. Shashi Deshpande depicts the grief and depression of girl children, the role of mother and her family members in her life. The position of women from the early 20th century is narrated to facilitate the readers to get a clear perspective about the risk of child marriages, the work of women in the kitchen, the communication gap between husband and wife and its consequences. She has the idea that men are alone not for the suffering of women. The main cause of suppression of women is another woman in a patriarchal society. Shashi Deshpande narrates the search of women for identity in every generation in relation to modern reality. It is quite interesting to read her novels because her protagonists struggle to live with a peace of mind with their life partners but they never lose their hope in the marriage institution.

The woman protagonist in 'Roots and Shadows' is the new woman Indu. The novel opens with the return of Indu and death of Akka. Death of Akka stands metaphorically stands as the end of a tradition, culture. She is an educated young woman, she is highly sensitive. She brushes aside all the age-old beliefs and superstitions in the society. As a motherless child, Atya, Old Uncle, Kaka, and other family members were giving her importance in the family. Indu develops into a vague sense of guilt and feels that her womanhood closes many doors for her. Indu seeks fulfillment in



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education and a career. She works as a journalist for a woman's magazine but gives it up out of disgust for writing only about women and their problems and starts working for another magazine. Indu recollects that she has surrendered herself to her husband Jayant, not for love but to avoid conflict.

Indu was cared and brought up by Narmada Atya and the other members of the joint family. This is a typical joint family, where four generations are staying together. Indu's father, Gopal is a photographer and moves around for his assignments. He rarely comes home to the family to visit Indu; once in a year or sometimes once in two years. Yet she never misses her father as Anant kaka and old Uncle are always there whenever she needs them. She develops an intense Hatred towards Akka for the ruthless power Akka exercised on others. Once Akka scolds her for talking with a boy in her college library. It is due to this incident that Indu decides to leave the family and Akka forever. Indu asks her father to send her to city for further education. Her father always supportive and decided to send her away as per her wish. Indu now stays in a girl's hostel and feels lonely. She has come away in search of individuality and freedom. When she away from her family, she feels lonely and alienated. She longs for love and affection, yet she cannot go back. There is nobody with whom she can share this loneliness. Then she meets Jayant and she knows, this is the man for her. Indu said that, "The day I had met him, a burden, the weight of uncertainty, had fallen of me. There had been absoluteness, a certainty instead. I had known them ... it was this man and none other." (Roots and Shadows p.46) This uncertainty comes to an end. When Indu proposes Jayant, he accepts it and they get married against Akka's wishes as he doesn't belong to the same caste. Only father and kaka are present for the marriage and both of them are happy for Indu. The problem in this relationship is the lack of communication. Jayant totally unaware of her feelings. Indu is uncomfortable to realize that she is so dependent on him emotionally. Indu said that, "This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant 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. (Roots and Shadows P.31)

According to Shashi Deshpande, Indu in 'Roots and Shadows,' and many women in her other novels had their roots in the same place. Shashi Deshpande herself says: "Life as I saw it in a small town as a child, as a growing girl. Life as I saw it in Mumbai as a woman. And I saw it, the sharp, clean line dividing the world of men from the world of women. As a child I could cross over easily from one world into the other. Often I was the bridge. But as I grew up, I realized the bridge wasn't there anymore. I had ceased to be one myself. I was trapped into a world of my own. But, still, for some reason, outside the claustrophobic world of women". (Sarabjit K. Sandhu 1991 P.27-29)

Akka's character is manifest in the way she controls her husband after he is struck by total paralysis. She takes excellent care of her paralyzed husband for two years, but avenges herself of all that she had to undergo by not allowing his mistress, whom he adores, to meet him. Thus, Deshpande makes a strong statement on the arranged marriages, which are outright discriminatory towards women. A husband can have a mistress with impunity for his physical and mental needs, whereas a wife cannot take another man."The childless widow, the deserted wife, the scheming woman. I saw these again with Indu. And now, the knowledge shaped itself into words, ideas...The vulnerability of women. The power of women. The deviousness of women. The helplessness of women. The courage of women. And the thought - was it mine or Indu's? - I won't belong to that world, I won't be like them, my God, I don't want to be like them." (Sarabjit K. Sandhu 1991. 27-39) In 'Roots and Shadows', Shashi Deshpande portrays an independent woman from contemporary society defying traditional roles and holding her womanhood responsible for closing many adventurous doors to her. Indu's struggle for selfhood, her struggle towards liberation of the mind, her struggle for an emotional and intellectual definition of herself as a self-actualizing person is in a sense a fight against her womanhood. She felt limited by her sex and resented her womanhood because it closed many doors to her. This woman Indu came to Shashi Deshpande from the society in which Shashi Deshpande lived.

Shashi Deshpande portrays the status of women within the conventional social structure. Her present novel begins with the wedding of Mini, Indu's cousin in her ancestral home. Indu recalls



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the life of Akka an old aunt of Indu's who was made to suffer when she was young due to the betrayal of her husband. Through the character of Akka, Deshpande successfully portrays how women though suffered once because of the patriarchal set up never deviate from their ancestors. She who had once desired to be freed from the marriage bond, on her return to her father's house implements a rigid code of conduct on the other women in the household. Indu being an educated woman resents such traditional practices. Madhurima Reddy rightly observes: The novel presents a typical facet of deprived womanhood through the character of Akka, who is the youngest sister of Indu's grandfather. Akka returns to her parental home as a rich widow after the death of her husband and starts looking after her nephews and nieces with the care and attention of a truly compassionate mother. She becomes the presiding deity of the family who confers peace and security on her willing subjects but deals ruthlessly with the rebellious and the recalcitrant. Akka's authoritative nature never allows people to peep into her life and understands her (Reddy, Madhurima.Vol-III 2012). Akka represents the old order, and is passionately obsessed with caste and the moral conduct of girls. Even when she is on her death bed she refuses to go to the hospital because as she puts it, "God knows what caste the nurses are or the doctors. I could not drink a drop of water there." (Roots and Shadows, 24) She also puts her foot down when Naren's mother wants to learn music, saying: "What kind of 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 decent family need to know?" (Roots and Shadows, 55) Once she was the prey of gender oppression. Akka lives in the midst of a vast diversity of discourses, but never changes her attitude as far as her family circle is concerned. As Deshpande aptly remarks in Writing from the Margin; the women in my novels, like the women in India today, or indeed like women or humans anywhere, have so many forces working on them – and all at the same time. There's history and culture, there's religion and customs, there are individual and family faiths and beliefs, family traditions and histories. And last not but the least, there are people around us (Shashi Deshpande 2003 P.16)

Shashi Deshpande speaks about the workload of women in the joint families. Women work endlessly. Her readiness to work should have come to her through the constant instructions given by the elderly ladies like Akka in 'The Roots and Shadows'. Women work ceaselessly for Mini's wedding. Indu observes: I could hear voices slurred with sleep coming from the courtyard behind the kitchen, and I knew the women hadn't slept the whole night. They had been chopping, rolling, pounding, and getting ready the festive lunch that would follow the puja that day.... Drove of women worked continuously in the kitchen, against a deadline it seemed they couldn't possibly meet, turning out mammoth quantities of food and endless cups of tea and coffee. (Roots and Shadows, 13-14) As flocks of women working for Mini's wedding in 'Roots and Shadows' for worked and served everyone with care to avoid any criticism about their reception. The writer tries to convey that women of all ages in India are trained to work without a complaining attitude because they believe it as their responsibility and not as their destiny.

Shashi Deshpande depicts how the marriages are fixed after the horoscopes. Even at present the society turns deaf to the wish of a bride. Mini's wedding in 'Roots and Shadows' is fixed by the astrologer. Indu is displeased with the choice of the bridegroom for Mini. Indu is convinced as: "...You know Padmini's horoscope has a flaw in it."(Roots and Shadows, 51) "Padmini is past twenty-four now. And there's her horoscope. And the problem of finding a family with a status comparable to ours. And when everything clicks, there's the dowry hurdle. What am I to do? Let the girl stay unmarried?" (Roots and Shadows, 55) "What's wrong with the boy? He has two legs, two arms, two eyes, two ears..."(Roots and Shadows, 52) "May be the boy is a little ugly, may be a little stupid...but everything else is fine". (Roots and Shadows, 55) Shashi Deshpande conveys her idea through Indu about weddings at India in the following words: "The Indian way. The husband. A definite article. Permanent. Not only for now, but forever. To be accepted. Stop." (Roots and Shadows, 118)



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In 'Roots and Shadows', the aunt and uncle of Indu are never given a chance to meet during day time as they live in a joint family. Akka was tortured before sixty years by her husband; the writer tries to state that marriages are celebrated as a festival in India but not the married life. The importance given for the occasion is not given to life. All the happiness vanishes off with one day. Indu revolts against Akka and selects Jayant as her life partner. She is blessed with an improved standard of life than Akka, Narmada and Mini. But she is also displeased in her marriage with Jayant. The marriage of Akka, Narmada and Mini has been fixed by the astrologers and elders but not Indu's. At the end after observing Mini's confidence and Narmada's narration about her marriage and Akka's marriage, Indu realizes her role in the society.

Shashi Deshpande gives importance to familial relations and suggest her protagonists to untie the knots of the problem to lead a healthy life. She insists on mutual understanding and co-operation among the members of the family. Along with marriage she deals with the issue of widowhood and reflects on how traditional Indian norms make life hell for widows. They do not approve separation and divorce but they condemn those practices that hamper women's lives.

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