

FEMINIST CONCERNS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE’S ROOTS AND SHADOWS, THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS AND SMALL REMEDIES

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Shashi Deshpande has been acknowledged as one of the distinguished Indian writers in English. She observes life and manners of the society and probes into human motives and multifarious relationships. Writing in the 1970s, she dealt with themes such as crime, adventure, suspense similar to that of Enid Blyton and Somerset Maugham, but she took on to write about women in her novels that bought her fame and recognition of a magnitude very few of her contemporaries could experience. She is a coveted writer who had been honoured with the Padma Sri Award in 2009. Her novels deal with women who struggle to come in terms with their ‘selves’ as individuals and her protagonists are engaged in a search for identity.

The concern of identity of women would have been an alien theme in a patriarchal society when feminist writings began in the Indian literary scenario. A woman was seen as a living being who was created to do the house chores, bear children, support her husband and even some of ancient scriptures like that of writings by Manu indicated the submissive roles of women who was bound by societal norms. She was to oblige and never demand, her emotions were subdued and a cry against the patriarchal codes would defile her integrity and she would be branded an immoral being. The puzzling factor is that women are conditioned by the society to be women’s enemy, the generation of oppressed women never allowed the following line of young women to be absolved from the chains of servilities rather pushed them also to share their fate thus making oppression a contagious disease. The reading of Deshpande’s novels imply the immediacy to put an end to this tradition and enable women to evaluate themselves from their own perspective and not how the society would like them to be. The pathetic conditions of women are discussed and the solutions are provided through the lives of the protagonists in Deshpande’s novels. Be it Indu, Saru, Madhu or Savitri Bai, they are viewed as other women characters in the novel as rebels, decadent or arrogant women and not as individuals who garnered courage to live life according to their will. They assimilate the codes dictated to them by the society and regard the feministic perception as a crime or a major hindrance to the existence of family and thereby society and hence try to dissuade these ‘rebels’ from going against the patriarchal society and its norms.

The paper attempts to study her novels *Roots and Shadows*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Small Remedies* from a woman-centric perspective. In *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande explores the inner journey of women especially of those who strive towards self-realization. The protagonist Indu represents the educated, middle class woman who seeks to search meaning in her marital life and at the same retain her own individual being. She succeeds in tracing her roots

from the shadows of complex mesh of relationships and realizes that relationships are the roots of one's existence and follow one like myriad shadows.

The Dark Holds No Terrors deals with an atypical protagonist Sarita (called Saru) who takes a step ahead to subvert the societal norms and traditions by marrying an out-caste, Manu. Her marriage turns out to be a failure, firstly by her professional success that stirs Manu's unwilling ego to be overshadowed by his wife and then by Saru's intimacy with Boozie. Her discontented relationship with her mother who objected to her free will and gave priority to her brother Dhruva because he was "male" disturbed her life to a great extent. Dhruva's accidental death in his prime age silenced the mother-daughter association and her life became a deliberate antithesis to what her mother wanted from her. Saru's disillusionment with marriage, love, romance urges her to comply with the fact that it is not the dark phase of life that holds the terror but the human psyche that wields the power to subdue the miseries of life.

Small Remedies also deals with the theme of female identity in the midst of the patriarchal domain. The novel traverses through the lives of Savitri Bai, Leela, Meenakshi and Madhu. The complexities of man-woman relationships, particularly in the milieu of marriage, the trauma of a troubled adolescence, the attempt to break away from the conventional structure in which women are entrapped and gender discriminations form the major concerns discussed in this work of fiction.

In the fourth Union Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, Ms. Hillary opined: "For too long the history of women, has been as history of silence. However it is now no acceptable for the world to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights." Violence against women, whether physical, emotional or mental is a genuine universal concern pertaining to all sections of women. The feminist theorists like Beauvoir and Millet have engaged in understanding the differences between 'sex' and 'gender', 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in addition to scrutinizing the 'sexist' and 'patriarchal' elements in language. Theorists like Cixous focused on the *écriture féminine* or woman's writing that gave new dimensions to language in which a woman's body and temperament has to be written. Rashmi Gaur writes,

The calculated and implicitly suggestive construction of gendered identities has supported the binaries which proliferate and continue the marginalization, also the consequential secondary status of women as a class. Gendered interpretation of literary texts enables us to examine man-woman relationship as an axis of prevalent social inequality. Gender identity is a compulsory facet of our cognition—individual as well as collective. (177)

The influence of western feminism enraged the post-independent Indian women writers to revolt against the then existing male centric literary convention and engage themselves in depicting the miserable condition of women under the shackles of male oppression. Beauvoir's remarks on the male dominated culture find expression in this literary scene that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in itself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (xviii). The image of Indian woman is synonymous with self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion, silent suffering and accept the acceptance of the doctrines laid down by the patriarchal society Toril Moi observed that feminism represented one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times..

Virginia Woolf's *A Room for One's Own* describes the two significant conditions of women, the first being the room of one's own and the latter being the income of one's own; self reliance and economic independence of women play a poignant role in shaping their destiny in

the society. Deshpande's protagonists delve into this room of self realization after having been exhausted of the strenuous journey through the patriarchal routes. The major issues and themes in her novels emerge from the circumstances that focuses on women caught in the crisis of a traditional society where the shift is taking place from the conservative to the unconventional.

Roots and Shadows is about Indu who being highly sensitive and educated is said to be a representative of modern young woman. She breaks away from the conventions and traditions of her family carried forth by the tyrannical Akka and other family members. She exerts her freedom as an individual and marries Jayant out of her own choice as a step for fulfilling her desire for completion of her 'self'. She muses: *I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And in Jayant I had thought I had found the other part of my whole self.* No sooner than she realizes that "marriage makes one dependent", her disillusionment begins. His influence on her personal life cripples her of her identity and the idea of a separate identity of the wife seems a meaningless and deplorable thought for the patriarchal society.

There are two categories of women: one set represented by Akka, Narmada Atya, Sumitra Kaki, Kamala Kaki and the other by Indu who is in a quest for identity. Indu, despite being the face of the modern young woman hesitates to break the labyrinth of marital codes when she knows that she is being stifled and suppressed with sexual disappointment and humiliation. She realizes that she is not different from the other women in her family and she is being mould into the image of the woman she wanted to break away with. Her inability to find an alter ego in Jayant drives her towards her cousin Naren to whom she yields twice.

Even in her professional career she is expected to curtail her freedom and submit to the codes and conduct laid down by her editor, and thereby to the society. She cannot leave the job for it would create a financial crisis for her family and also restrict her economic independence. Her return to her parental home comes as a revelation to her. The home which is a place to 'come in' and 'go out' in search of personal freedom is also revealed as a mother figure in the novel. The visit helps Indu to understand the women in her family and in a way her own individual self. Her relation with Naren does not incite a sense of guilt in her for she does not believe in love, according to her love is a "big fraud, a hoax". She seems to take it in her stride and to an extent feel proud of her illicit affair though brief, as an exercise of her free will. Naren's death does not move her initially but towards the end reinstates her with courage to reveal herself to Jayant for she understands that there is no lacking in selfhood to express one's desire for the partner. She had thought that she never pretended before Jayant, but that was the greatest 'hoax', the real self was always shadowed by the projected self which befitted the way he wanted to see her: "I [Jayant] know as much of you [Indu] as you allow me to know" (15). This realization completes her journey in search of her lost self and she finds solace in herself. Saru and Madhu also undergo the same emotional conflicts as well as recognition when they walk out of their married life to return to the same after a brief time. The hiatus is a crucial period in their lives as they examine closely the issues of their lives, the reasons behind their strained relationship with their parents and husbands and in a way their lives in a holistic manner.

The professional ego and disillusionment with marriage are significant themes *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. One of the primary concerns of feminism is that woman is not an appendage of man and this has been established in this novel where Saru articulates her needs and desires to live as an individual than exist as a mere living body. Her life is a rebellion against her mother who made her feel that femininity is subordinate to the masculine and there are certain ways a female should conduct herself in the society. The triumphant moment of leaving her traditional household and marrying Manu is however short-lived as she like Indu finds that the feeling of

love in absent in their lives. Saru also goes back to her home, to her father with whom he never had much of a communication. Her alienation from her home and parents rose out of the anger towards the discrimination she had to face being a girl child. Sunita Reddy observes,

Saru's problem is compounded when her brother accidentally dies by drowning. This becomes as turning point in her life. her childhood memories are replete with her mother accusing her: "You did it, you did this, you killed him" (173)... She is persistently haunted by the thought that she is responsible for his death because she is a mute spectator to the incident. (51)

Her return to home absolves her from the remorse and guilt of being a silent spectator of Dhruva's death. His death widens the emotional distance between her mother and she, Saru realizes that Dhruva had been an intermediary between them. The overt attention towards the male child in a family is a general concern in most of the Indian families and the Deshpande's heroines struggle to prove women are equal to men as a means to subvert this common practice.

Deshpande questions the customary construct of a woman- her sexuality and freedom of expression. Her protagonists express their sexual desires which is seen a taboo or an emotion 'never befitting a family woman'. The case of child abuse in *Small Remedies* bears relevance in the contemporary times when sexual abuses of women and children are increasing at an alarming rate. The way Madhu's husband responds to her having been a victim of child abuse would turn eyebrows among the readers but positioning it in a middle class Indian familial system, the situation is not uncommon. A woman is not expected to nurture sexual advances to another man except her husband and even she is victimized the blame would fall on her and not the man. Savitri Bai's courage to elope with her lover made her an outcaste, but her character gives voices to those women who live a desolate life with men who they never wanted to marry and bear the suppression with pursed lips.

The working women are pulled into a dichotomy of professional and personal life where they are exposed to an economic freedom but have to live as shadows to the men in their home- be it father, brother, husband or son. The financial independence helps them to survive on their own as in the cases of the women protagonists in the novels discussed in the paper, but the emotional insecurities and subduing never cease to exist.

The women however return to their respective homes after a hiatus of self realization. Deshpande never advocates a complete break away from the family and society rather exhorts the need for women to have a space of their own to re-view their lives through their own eyes as persons and not as social beings. The image of woman as sketched out from her novels seems to be the same despite the diverse situations and positions they are placed in. The women are always psychologically chained to the familial bonds despite their progress in professional and academic lives. The novels project this image of women who want to sustain their disturbed marriages by mending the discord in it on their own. We hardly see the husband taking a serious effort to save the marriages for they take the women so lightly till they decide to leave them for a while. The necessity for personal space, irrespective of gender is asserted in these novels.

The Indian literary scene has developed ever since Indu, Saru, Madhu and so on appeared before the readers, yet their lives and characters are for all times as they represent the Indian working class women to their fullest. Indian feminism takes a milder stance compared to the radical western feminist movements by suggesting a reconciliation with the family with the acknowledgement of the personal Self. Thus, Deshpande's novels become a compelling study as they deal with the various hues of a woman's life from a woman's point of view.

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