



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FEMINIST TENDENCIES IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND SHADOWS.

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 08 June 2019

Final Accepted: 10 July 2019

Published: August 2019

Abstract

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Introduction:-

Feminism is basically concerned with the projection of women as individuals with equal sensibilities as man. The first woman was created out of the ribs of the first man is a myth. Universally a woman is looked upon as gentle, warm, and dependent on man for her living.

This has always been a man's world. It is a natural phenomenon that when two categories exist, the privileged one tries to dominate the less privileged and make a stamp. The concept of master – slave is applied at all stages in the tree of evolution.

Simon De Beauvoir the Feminist has rightly expressed that the bondage of reproduction has reduced a woman to “a category of an “object of reproduction” (P.63). The routine labours that a woman is perpetually trapped in does not result into any prospective, on the other hand man is shown as historically concerned, and he has established himself as a superior being. He is projected as risking his life as a part of providing food, shelter and clothing to his dependents. In this regard, women who were confined to the four walls were left with nothing but occupy themselves with domestic chores, struggling in vain to compete with the exterior labour of man. This is the key to the mystery of who is superior. Marriage gives her a home. Labour is also discriminated and women are paid less for work.

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad in 1938. She obtained a degree in economics (1956), in 1970 a diploma in journalism as well as an M.A. in English. In Mumbai, she enrolled herself in Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Then she took up a job as a journalist in the magazine, “on looker” and it was at this juncture she began her career as a writer. Her first short story was published in 1970. She began writing novels. Her first novel, “The Dark Holds No Terrors” was published in 1980. There was no looking back from then. Her novels deal with women who are not extra ordinary, but very ordinary who try to understand themselves and their roles in the immediate life circles. The long silence of women has been broken, and the heroines make their own decisions appropriately and face the consequences. The transformations that take place are considered as mere stepping stones or trials. The errors are treated as mere errors, however serious they are.

The women in Shashi Deshpande's novels belong to the middle class and they are educated. The protagonist's voice is representative of the whole class of women who have for centuries been suppressed. The suffering is socio-psychic and her quest for identity raises her level from self-negation to self-assertion. Her struggle, as in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana is to attain completeness and an authentic selfhood. In every woman, the original self always exist and tries to surface. The familial bonds push them to the periphery. It is this aspect that Shashi concentrates on and allows her heroine – Indu of Roots and Shadows to break the traditions.

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Roots and Shadows was published in the year 1983. The novel begins with the character Indu taking a journey back to her ancestral home. Indu's Aunt, a widow is portrayed as a powerful woman, who controls everyone in the house with her money and authority. Indu leaves this home as a teenager to study in the high city, as a rebellion against the dominating Aunt. Indu becomes a journalist and marries Jayant of her own choice. In the city, far away from her Aunt, she lives with Jayant in a materialistic world where principles are compromised to sustain life. But Indu realizes that the self attained freedom is only illusory. Indu returns after 12 years to the ancestral house when her great aunt dies. She is shocked to hear the news that her aunt had named her as heir to the house and property. It is during Mini's (her niece) marriage, Indu realizes the strength and resilience of the village women. A self revelation begins in her.

Indu's life is the struggle of a woman writer chained by the social dogmas that are framed and dominated by men in this field. She begins to travel in the road to life, by abandoning the customs and concerns of the family members. Ironically only at the end of the road, Indu feels that she could vaguely understand the mystery of human relationships. She realizes that freedom can bring harmony only when it is accompanied by being loyal to one's own conscience. It is only through self-exploration that Indu realizes the basic truth of human existence. To escape from the familial bondage Indu very cleverly chooses to marry as a rebellion for a better change. Freedom is misconceived by Indu. The conflict between illusion and reality begin to haunt her. As the title of the novel signifies her roots as she conceives are of an independent woman and a writer. The shadows that price the feminist tendencies in her are reflected as a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer. But apparently the paradox of her freedom is revealed when Indu shares her feelings and emotions with her cousin Naren, a bachelor, about the relationship between a husband and wife. Her conversation makes it clear that she is not happy with her husband Jayant. However lofty her ideals and anguish against the institution of marriage she considers it as a trap where a woman lives a life of a caged animal. However there is still the angel in her which haunts her that she cannot live without Jayant regardless of his indifferent attitude.

Freedom is misconstrued by Indu, or rather she is too weak an example to raise a voice against chauvinism. She is a very fragile woman who could be a true and a devout wife. There are better ways to tackle the problem of unfulfillment. She indulges in the act of adultery with Naren, not once but twice. She is not loyal to Jayant. It is very strange that Indu, a staunch feminist, does not consider the illegitimate act of love making with Naren as a sin or a serious crime. But she goes on to justify her predicament thus.

"But had I not wronged Jayant even before this? I had cheated him of my true self. That, I thought, is dishonourable, dishonest, much more than this, what I have done with Naren" (P.155)

However her conscience does make her feel ashamed of her adultery. She begins to hate her woman hood as she fails to be a virtuous woman, as her efforts are stained by the act of sin. She is tormented by her real self and finally she brushes away the sexual desires, decides to hide from Jayant everything that happened between her and Naren and pretend to lead a life detached from any pleasure. She comforts herself that she is not bodily corrupt.

Indu is an example of the new class of Indian women who are torn between tradition and modernity. Shashi Deshpande allows Indu to triumph over her frailties and return back to Jayant after Naren's death in a very earnest way; for she believes that her love to Jayant has not faded an inch. How exactly can Indu be described? What is the definition of a new woman? She goes back to her home, and as she had often wished to give up her job with the magazine and walk into the road of a creative writer. This she does to convince herself and Naren.

When we look at Mrs. Deshpande's novels, they are all woman-centered, in their earnest quest for self-fulfillment under dire situations. In **Roots and Shadows**, there is a clear demarcation of the male and female domains. But Mrs. Deshpande has portrayed the character of AKKA, as a woman who has internalized the subtleties of patriarchy, but also enjoys exerting her power over others in the house. The reasons are traced out to her married life, where she lived like a caged animal. Her husband had abandoned her and virtually lived with another woman. But things took a turn when she gathered strength and authority when her husband became sick and bedridden. She began a new leaf in her life. From then she took the house into her hands. This experience hardened her into a harsh person. She is a contrast to characters like Kaki and Atya, who are smug about their life. Through a mundane character like mixi, Mrs. Deshpande puts forth the inevitable laws of the society – with reference to societal perspectives on marriage. However Indu's contempt for marriage is that, "it is a bargain of bringing two people together to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue" (P.15)

Roots and Shadows need not be labelled as feminist fiction. It could be controversial if we look at the text in this angle, for Mrs. Deshpande clearly pictures the plight of a modern woman, who is chained yet ironically lives with a feeling that she is free and flying. The portrayal of Indu as a woman who liberates herself and unconsciously entangles herself only to analyze her real self is an attempt of self-exploration. Indu surfaces out of all the situations/crises. She is at the same time a failure and a success. Indu is a phoenix who rises out of her ashes. She is portrayed as a person possessing tremendous inner strength.

The author fights openly against some of the rigid practices in the society like, treating a woman during her menstrual days, a biological cycle as an untouchable. This gesture infuriates Indu so much so that she begins to look at her own body with contempt. Indu scorns at the custom of shaving the head of a widowed woman after the death of her husband. She pities Atya who is a widow. She relentlessly fights against all odds to stop people from shaving Atya's head; for she knew it would be a ghastly sight affecting the person psychologically. The orthodox community however ostracizes Atya cleverly. A widow cannot escape from the social conventions. She is destined to go through the trauma; silently within as she is not permitted to show any outward discomfort. Indu empathizes with the suppressed women and fights vainly against the meaningless customs.

Indu proudly thinks she has escaped from this set of conservative laws, but in the end realizes that she is no different from such women. Her vanity deceives her. She journeys into her self to unearth the truth that her choice of life failed miserably. The women at her home are far better than her. This prompts her to go ahead with Mini's marriage. She consents to fund the marriage as Akka had promised to do, for now she is the heir to the property. Everyone at home is happy over Indu's change. There is a sense of satisfaction to Indu also.

The concluding chapter of the novel is quite crucial in deciding the course of life for Indu. She contemplates over her fall, but considers it as an act of hypocrisy with which to satisfy and live a shallow life with a husband who has a materialistic attitude to life. However one cannot justify Indu's move of going back to her husband as a loyal being by hiding all the wrongs she had committed as a balancing gesture to Jayant's callousness and failure to understand the feelings of a woman.

The modern woman as Mrs. Deshpande portrays therefore wears the mantle of a dual personality. She will wrap herself that role which would suit the mood of her husband. This is yet another challenge that a woman has to confront with in the battle of life.

Indu acts like an emancipated woman in doing the deeds that Akka had promised in conducting Mini's marriage and spending on Vittal's education. She displays tremendous courage in going ahead with her decision. She decides to give up her job even as she knows Jayant would disapprove of it. She tells him her desire to settle down as a writer. Surprisingly she gets Jayant's support for this. This is the ultimate happiness that Indu aspired for. This is a typical win-win situation as in the business bargain. There is no loser. The result is harmony and understanding.

The climax is a fitting one. Indu surfaces as a complete, practical woman who is not cowed down by social obligation. Mrs. Deshpande hints at the various critical situations, the modern woman is facing today, where she has no choice but survive and survive successfully. Indu's success and happy ending is perhaps a clue to the modern woman not to be bogged down by the social and psychological disturbances, but try to overcome them by analyzing the situation to find out ways to escape from them.

This may sound highly controversial, it is a success for Indu, it cannot be concluded as the universal solution, but one way out. Mrs. Deshpande need not be looked at as a feminist, but she is certainly a great artist and champion of women. She not only creates situations with problems, but ends up by providing probable solutions.

The search for her roots makes Indu affirm to her identity that she is a woman. In the beginning she shows contempt for her body, but finally she discovers the meaning of life in this search. She has no regrets of being a woman who learns out of her experiences and begins to regard her womanhood as a happy journey. There is a subtleness in the style of the narration, which encourages women with a bumpy path also to feel that 'this is not the end', but a 'beginning' of a new life. Shashi reassures that women, however they are still have a chance to realign their lives and begin anew. The triumph of Indu may therefore be seen as a path shown to such women, ruled and ruined by their vanity. It is often said and believed that there is nothing perfect in this world. Everything goes through a change. This course of change can also be applied to the way of living.

This is the message or the philosophy of life that Shashi Deshpande offers to the women folk. Writing is the tool with which such reforms can be achieved.

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