

Mutiny of Traditional Indian Feminine in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's Roots and Shadows explored the conflict between tradition and modernity. One can live an isolated life to forget all family, social responsibilities and obligations. The protagonist is projected as a modern woman yet the minor characters follow the traditions of the family. Modern women cannot inculcate all the traditions whereas the elder doesn't support modernity. Total opposition towards tradition forces the protagonist to study abroad yet does not avoid the traditional practices. In life, everyone has to live with a relationship and there is no way to escape within the circle.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Opposition, Relationship.

Deshpande's concern is to depict the pain and conflict of the modern educated Indian women. Her fiction explores the search of the woman in fulfilling herself as a human being, independent of her role as daughter, wife and mother. Indu, the protagonist of the novel represents the modern, educated and liberated woman and contemporary Indian middle-class woman who hopes to become independent and complete in herself. She is an educated Indian woman who leaves home at the age of eighteen to study in the big city of Bombay. It is a forced vacation because she cannot tolerate the rigid behaviour prevailing in the house. She hates her dominating Akka and calls her the old tyrant of the house.

Indu is a writer and belongs to the modern society. Hence, she breaks away from all the traditional rigid customs that are unnecessarily imposed on women. Thus she is torn between self-expression and social stigma. Indu proposed to Jayanth and married him against the wishes of Akka and others. Indu loved Jayanth too much when Jayanth was shocked to find passion in her with initiative in lovemaking. Her relationship with Naren helps her to release her long subdued passions.

In the novel *Roots and Shadows*, no woman remarried but Indu loved Naren but refuses the rumour and says her statement that there is going to be only one man in her life. According to the tradition, women wait for their husbands to eat food after that the women will eat on the same plates but Indu is opposing this way:

It disgusted me to see the strewn plates, the scattered remnants. And yet, for the whole lifetime, the women patiently cleared up the mess with their bare hands after each meal. And women like Kaki even ate off the dirty plates their husbands had eaten in earlier.... We will eat when we want and if we want. A Declaration of Independence. (68-69)

Among all the women characters, Akka deserves special attention. All the members of the family fear as well as respect her. It is Indu who questions and challenges the authority of Akka walks out of the house and marries Jayanth to seek fulfilment in her way. But Indu is called back by Akka when she falls critically ill and realizes that her end is near. She chooses Indu as her heir and wills her entire property, including the house. Indu returns to her ancestral home and has a brief meeting with Akka who soon passes away. After her death, she left with responsibilities of the family including the marriage of her cousin, Padmini. She

manages to fulfil most of them. “You people... you’ve thought of everything... the families, the communities, the stars, and the gotras, everything...” (94)

Her memories of episodes and events from the past interlink with one another to give the picture of childhood, leaving the house, marriage and coming back. She is the narrator and the motherless daughter of one of the sons of this huge family. She left the house full of resentment and rebellion, determined to prove to her and the family that was not her home. It is the rejection of the family in the most emphatic terms possible. This particular phase of her life gives her enough experience to know the world which exists outside the four walls. However the introspection and self-analysis, she comes to realize that is indeed a comfort in living as part of the family.

One of the widowed aunts, Narmada Atya looked after her, when she was just fifteen days old. Atya was living in a joint family. As a child, everyone in the family pampered her because she was a motherless child but her father did not shoulder the responsibility to bring her up. Another widowed relative is dominating in nature and she commands not only because of her age but also her wealth. It is Akka, the rich widow who makes Indu come back when she is on her deathbed and leaves all her wealth to Indu.

A conflict arises in Indu whether to help Anant Kaka by selling the house or to keep the house but finally, she decides to sell off the legacy of Akka. Before Akka’s death, she fixed the marriage of Padmini without consulting the girl. Indu honours her wishes and she brooks over the fate of a woman in a large family and deeply resents the fact in traditional Hindu joint families. But women are nothing more than puppets without any identity, voice or name in the family. But her revolutionary idealism finds no place in the family. Padmini refuses to romanticize her marriage which is an arrangement arrived at her good by the elders.

A woman’s life, they told me, contained no choices... The women had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered... have they born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini, who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the fanality, with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength. (17)

Akka knows that many well-deserving candidates are living in the ancestral house itself. In this huge family where only the close family meant were twenty of them. “It was now six days since Akka’s death, and the close family was left at home. Which still meant about twenty of us” (41). The orphan boy, Vithal who is given shelter and food refuses to be part of the family and keeps Indu herself away for ten years away from the family.

Indu loves freedom and always has a resolute mind. She may be called the new woman who has the desire and freedom to talk about things and question the seriousness and nature of matters related to her. Indu’s attempt to break off from the ancestral house, the joint family and its tradition are not successful. Indu is planned for modern life but she again returns to the traditional way of life.

Another important aspect is that the older members of the family have remained devout Brahmins whereas the younger generation makes casual reference to caste. But once again the traditionalism of the hierarchal society is placed. The secular replaces the religious for this liberal younger generation. An old lady who dominated over everyone in the house would be the last person to bring about change. “But then, new pillars take the place of the old” (21).

Akka refuses to go to the hospital when she is sick because she does not know what caste the nurses and doctors belong to. She is the representation of the old order and fixated

on untouchability that she is also very particular about how a girl should conduct herself in society.

Akka's illness had meant nothing but trouble and inconvenience for everyone in the house. Why didn't you get her admitted into hospital? I had asked Kaka. Kaka had looked at me apologetically. She wouldn't let me. She didn't want to go to a hospital. She was worried about the kind of people she would come in contact with. "God knows what caste the nurses are", she said, "Or the doctors. I couldn't drink a drop of water there". (30)

The life of Akka shakes many of the stereotypical views of the hard life of Brahmin widows in traditional families. Akka is privileged based on caste but her status as a widow makes her an oppressed person. "We Indians can never get away from caste. If we've rejected the old ones, we've embraced new ones". (61) Akka is a representation of the middle-class, upper-caste gendered subject who is caught in the struggle between the traditional and the 'modern/western' mode of thinking and living.

Indu asserts her position as a human being equal to that of man and does not want to submit herself to anyone's dictates. This projects her bitter struggle through conflicting trends between the old people's traditions and emerging new ideas. Indu is seen as a woman who achieves freedom but cannot break herself free from the clutches of tradition and realizes that her education and exposure do not support the women who go around the Tulsi plant to increase their husband's life span. Indu calls her husband by name when Susanda Atya tells her:

Shows disrespect, she would have said. They also say it shortens your husband's life. That's just to frighten the women. To keep them in their places. And poor fools, we do just that. What connection can there be between a man's longevity and his wife's calling him by name? It's as bad as praying to the Tulsi to increase his life span. I used to watch the women piously circumambulating the tulsi, devoutly standing in front of it with folded hands and closed eyes. (39)

Even her husband is an educated modern man for whom she remains passive and submissive.

Deshpande has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of Indian women. One is the representatives of Narmada, Kamala Kaki, Sumitra Kaki, and Atya and the other is representation by Indu. Indu's academic achievement, economic independence and attitude mean nothing to the women of the older generation, as their aim in life was, "To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand children". (109)

An educated woman resents such traditional practices. There is history and culture, religions and customs, individual and family faiths, family tradition and histories but there are people around whose expectations and relationships are different. Even the orthodox widow of the early twentieth century emerges with a strong personality and a sense of duty and devotion to family. The succeeding generation of women is stronger and more modern and has more freedom than the preceding generation. The upcoming women may give birth to children in the house and not in hospitals. "The dark room. Where so many women had given birth. It seemed to me as if the smell of childbirth still clung to it". (29)

Child marriage is prohibited by the younger generation of girls against the curbed freedom. Narmada Atya was saved by his elder brother from the crude rituals after the death of her husband. The people who observe strict traditions consider her as a second citizen in the world of windows and avoid the food prepares by her. The bare skull with its short hairs looked obscene and indecent. Even though she has no children, she was not suggested for remarriage. "A childless widow, knowing she had no claim on anyone. The house had been, perhaps, her only security... widow's way of living, her rituals, her fasts and her self-

deprivations” (23). Society neither prefers her second marriage nor her lifestyle without a shaven head. Even in the new generation era widows are not permitted to take part in functions and marriages that telecast the society that is dominated by males.

The issues of arranged marriages in middle-class families can be envisioned through the marriage of Akka in the past and with the marriage of Mini in the present. Indu speaks about against the traditional mode of settling marriages when she sees Mini who is being pushed into an incompatible marriage by her elders. With her marriage, it is clear that an arranged marriage is not a marriage of two souls but purely of sentiment and tradition.

Generally, society never cares about a man who takes in sexual liberties with impunity and if a woman indulges in the same, she is looked at with bad eyes and thereafter she is branded. Indu realizes that she should listen and be faithful to the voice of her inner conscience because she believes that conscience is the softest pillow that one rests on the concept of marriage that later can be seen as a practical joke. Hence, it is true that a poor woman is locked along with an animal. She cannot execute the thoughts that she has and cannot express them with concerns.

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