
Struggle For Individuality In The Novels of Sashideshpande: A Reference To The Roots and Shadows.

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ABSTRACT

The novel deals with Indu's attempt to assert herself as an individual. In a traditional way in their ancestral home, it makes Indu think retrospectively about the events which led to her returning home after a gap of eleven years. Deshpande makes a strong statement on the society called marriages which are so unfair to woman. A husband who finds his wife incompatible has at least the option of finding for himself another woman to satisfy his need. The novel ends on a note of hope with the protagonist Indu, asserting herself as an Individual and putting an end to her doubts about herself. She is able to hold her own in a house hold full of tradition –bound men and women is proof of her Individual.

Keywords: Sashideshpande, struggle for identity, the roots.

The novel deals with Indu's attempt to assert herself as an individual. This process brings her into confrontation with her family and society in general. The novel begins with the marriage of Mini, Indu's cousin, which is performed in a traditional way in their ancestral home. It makes Indu think retrospectively about the events which led to her returning home after a gap of eleven years. The eighteen-year-old rebel, who leaves home to live life her own way, returns on being summoned by the old matriarch, Akka, who is on her death bed. Indu is drawn once more into the vertex of the family as Akka makes her the sole beneficiary of all her property. From here the spotlight shifts to all the myriad characters in the novel. Deshpande brings alive a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household. She successfully portrays the basic human emotions like greed and jealous which are bound to be present in an atmosphere charged with resentment by the family at being excluded from the will. The novel, however, stands out particularly for the stark presentation of its women characters-their hopes, fears, their disappointments and their anguish.

In the long list of women characters in the novel, the portrayal of the tyrannical and matriarchal figure, Akka, deserves special mention. She is a rich childless widow who opts to stay in her brother's house after the death of her husband. That she wields tremendous influence in the house is obvious from the beginning. Since the day she enters the house she maintains absolute control over her brother's children. Indu graphically narrates how "Kaka even after becoming a grandfather, could be reduced to a red-faced, stuttering school boy by Akka's venomous tongue."

Akka represents the old order, fanatically obsessed with keeping caste, so much so that even when so that even when she is on her death bed she refuses to move into a 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.” (24) Akka is also very particular about verely for daring to talk to boy in the lone corner of a library. It is a known fact in the house that she had put her foot down when Naren’s mother wanted to learn music, saying: What, learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like THOSE women? Are we that 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? (55)

Akka herself is a victim from gender oppression but she perpetuates the same victimization as far as her influence extends. Indu, who grows up with no fond feelings towards Akka, learns her story through Narmada Atya, only after her death. Narmada Atya’s narration immediately evokes the reader’s pity and focuses attention on the plight of all those victims of child marriage who were sometimes forced to undergo inhuman treatment, bound as they were by the shackles of marriage. Indu often recollects Akka,s story in Narmada Atya’s words

She was just 12 when she was married. And he was well past 30. Remember him still. He was a tall, bulky man with large, coarse features. And she..... she was small, dainty, really pretty, with her round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. Six months after her marriage, she ‘grew up’ and went to her husband’s home. What she had to endure there, no one knows. She never told anyone. Our grandmother, her father, was a man who kept himself aloof. No one could approach him easily. And her mother, our grandmother, died when she was a child, But I heard that twice she tried to run away-a girl of 13. Her mother- in -law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days, starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband’s room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, “Lock me up again, lock me up.” But there was no escape from a husband then. I remember the telling me before my own marriage was consummated, “Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels.”(77)

Sex as punishment was, perhaps, how it was viewed by such child brides who nevertheless did not raise any banner of revolt but on the other hand continued to suffer and helped to perpetuate such oppression. As Tara Ali Baig comments, “Arch traditionalists that women are, it is they who have successfully and brutally established man’s ascendancy over woman in society.”² Through the character of Akka, Deshpande successfully portrays the contradictory traits in a woman’s character. That Akka was a domineering character is evident from Narmada’s narration where she tell Indu about the way she controls her husband after he suffers from a stoke which leaves him totally paralyzed. He lives for two years in this condition when Akka takes care of him excellently, displaying her sati-dharma. But she gets back at him excellently, displaying her sati-dharma. But she gets back at him for all that she had endured earlier by not allowing his mistress, whom he adores, to meet him. She even takes a vicious pleasure in informing him that she threw his mistress out when she had come to meet him. Narmada, who is just a child then, is moved to tears by the grief experienced by Akka’s husband on hearing this from his wife. Later, that night Narmada also finds Akk in tears and learns from her that no night passed when she did not cry after getting married.

Through the portrayal of Akka's marriage, Deshpande makes a strong statement on the so – called marriages which are so unfair to Woman. A husband who finds his wife incompatible has at least the option of finding for himself another woman to satisfy his need: but a wife in a similar situation has no option but to lead a loveless life. Narmada's narration also highlights the tragedy of the mistress who had given Akka's husband the best years of her life, but is now doomed to face humiliation. As Neena Arora remarks: "Man considers it as normal behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and the physical levels outside marriage, while it is ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case a woman indulges in it even though accidentally the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not even involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts prosecuting her this condemnation is dictated by man's interest in persecuting his property rather than by any moral consideration."3

When Akka returns to her father's house after the death of her husband she enforces a rigid code of conduct on women under her influence like Indu, by insisting that a woman should never utter her husband's name as it would shorten his life span and that it is a sign of disrespect. Indu reacts vehemently to such talk and exclaims, 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. " (35) Indu as an educated, upper middle-class woman resents such traditional practices but like the protagonists of Deshpande's other novels, Jaya and Saru, she is caught in the web woven by age- old custom and tradition. Though her education and exposure encourage her to break free from the clutches of tradition she eventually finds that she is no different from the women who circumambulate the Tulsi plant and who believe that a woman's good fortune lies in dying before her husband. She draws this conclusion

Her husband, Jayant, in spite of his seemingly western style of living, is no different from the average Indian male. He expects his wife to be passive and submissive. Any display of passion or desire on her behalf shocks him.

There are several instances in the novel which subtly prove that Indu has always been playing the role of a perfect wife in order to keep her husband happy and satisfied. The most glaring example is Jayant's insistence that she should continue working for her magazine even when he knows how frustrating it is for her. Indu narrates the story of how she once interviewed a social worker who received an award for her services. Indu was suitably impressed by the woman who was "soft spoken, articulate, seemingly sincere and dedicated." (18) After writing up the article, Indu was given another article written about the same woman by an old man. Indu was shocked to read it. She thought: This..... Was a story of shameless exploitation of ignorance and poverty. A story of ruthlessness and unscrupulousness in the pursuit of fame, power and money, all of which had come now".(18) She wants her editor with both the copies and, worldly – wise as he was, he refused to accept the copy written by the old man, though he admitted that it was true. Indu was taken aback by the hypocrisy of the woman and the attitude of the editor. She narrated the story to Jayant and expected him to stand by what was right, but contrary to her expectations he replied, "That's life ! What can one person do against the whole system! No point making yourself ridiculous with futile gestures. We need the money, don't we? Don't forget we have a long way to go."(19)

Indu therefore continues working albeit hating every moment of it. She stifles her conscience and writes only that which will be accepted by the editor and the public. It also disturbs her to realize

that she has left her middle- class values behind to become a part of the success-oriented society. She is overcome by a sense of futility. She, perhaps, would have continued to live this way if she was not summoned by Akka and if she did not meet Naren. Her reunion with Naren offers her an opportunity to vent her frustrations and review her frustrations and review her life objectively. She relates to Naren her life with Jayant in detail:

We belong to the smart young set. Do you know what that means? Fresh flowers in the house everyday. Can you believe it, Naren. I've gone and done a course in flower arrangement? The best place, whether you go out to eat or to cut your hair, freshly laundered clothes twice a day. Clothes..... yes, we have to keep up with the latest trends We don't have friends, but the right contacts and "people one should know, "Who entertain us just as often as we entertain them. And when we get together..... oh, you should listen to us Naren. We talk with nostalgia of place abroad. We're gay and whimsical about our own people . . . our own country. We are rational, unprejudiced, board minded. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption and family planning. We scorn the corrupt. We despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked – and our hearts bleed, Naren for Vietnam, for the blacks, for the Harijians – but frankly we don't care a damn not one goddamn about anything but our own precious selves, our own precious walled in lives. (28)

This emotional outburst from Indu proves that she had been exercising extreme control over herself in order to protect her marriage. It is difficult for her to accept her compromise in this matter as she had all long fooled herself that she was different from her Kakis and Atyas. As P. Bhatnagar comments: 'it baffled her to realize that she who had been so proud of her logical and rational thinking: she who had been all set to reform Indian womanhood had fallen into the trap waiting for her'.(4)

Throughout the novel, there are several examples which prove that Indu is very conscious of the unfairness prevailing in society with regard to women. There are so many small incidents.

In everyday life which we simply take for granted but Indu highlights these incidents and makes us look anew at them and wonder at the injustice. Men are not even aware of the drudgery and the disgust involved in the countless household chores performed regularly by women. One such scene is graphically described by Indu:

I went into the house avoiding the hall, ugly now with all the aftermath. Of an eaten meal, it disgusted me to see the strewn plates, the scattered remnants. And yet, for a whole lifetime, women patiently cleared up the mess with their bare hands after each meal. And women like Kaki even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools. (73)

Domestic chores as Indu describes, can be terribly tiresome, boring, and frustrating. This is observed by Simone de Beauvoir who says: "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time. She makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present".(5)

There are several other examples to show how sharply aware Indu is of the prevailing injustice in society. If most people are unaware of this injustice, it only proves that they have been nurtured

since childhood in a formative years of the child, which are critical for later personality development, he or she is exposed to traditional patterns, which sharply define the male/female pattern of behaviour. It is indoctrinated in the girl-child to play the role of a disciplined daughter, a meek and submissive wife and daughter a meek and submissive wife and daughter – in law, and a sacrificing mother. The exaggerated importance given to the virginity of a girl is also greatly responsible for enforcing a restriction on her movements as soon as she reaches puberty. Any girl who tries to rebel against such rules is severely reprimanded and shown her place. In one of her conversations with Naren, Indu tries to explain herself to him:

How will you understand, Naren, you who have never had to fight, to turn aggressive, to assert yourself? How easily it comes to you, just because you are a man, for me-as a child they had 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 said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive. (174)

Indu also bitterly recalls how crudely the idea of her womanhood was thrust upon her. Naren's Question as to why she always fought for her womanhood makes her think in retrospect about the day when she was first made aware of it:

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," Kaki had told me, "you can have babies yourself?" I, am woman? My mind had flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. 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 the entire child's unselfconsciousness about my own baby, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it. "And don't forget," she had ended, "for four days now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything." And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean. (87)

Simone de Beauvoir expresses something similar when she talks of "the dramatic conflict that harrows the adolescent girl at puberty: she cannot become 'grown-up' without accepting her femininity; and she knows already that her sex condemns her to a mutilated and fixed existence, which she faces at this time under the form of impure sickness and a vague sense of guilt." (351)

Right from her childhood, Indu also observes the second position occupied by women in the family. It is unthinkable for a woman to have a cup of tea sent to her room. Indu lightheartedly mocks the women's reaction if she were to do something as brazen as that. She laughingly asks her Kala, "Can you imagine them sending up a cup of tea for me? Women and children should know their places." (53) The shaven head of a widow, a domestic help, reminds Indu of the plight of all widow-those who shaved their heads to avoid censure and those who didn't and are treated like outcastes. Looking at the widow's shaven head, Indu says:

The bare skull, with its short hairs, looked somehow not only indecent, but obscene when bared. And I understood why Kala had, when Atya was widowed, so stoutly resisted the idea of her becoming a shaven widow, He had won but at the cost of Atya's

status . She was now a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows the orthodox would not eat food cooked by her. (130)

Indu is also made deeply aware of her shortcomings as a complete woman in the eyes of all those conventional women who had their own standards for judging people. In the eyes of such a woman, she says:

Nothing about me – my academic distinctions, my career my success, my money- none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren they were still for them the only success a woman could have. I had almost forgotten this breed of women since I had left home. (128)

However, in spite of her obvious feminist stance, in spite of her being highly sensitive to the injustice shown to women, and in spite of being educated and economically independent, Indu realizes that she is no different from the women like her atyas and kakis from her outburst to naren it is obvious that she is disillusioned by her husband jayant's materialistic attitude to life Her husband also resents any display of passion on her part He expects his wife to be demure and coy, without shedding her inhibitions even in the privacy of their bedroom this is evident from what Indu narrates, "Jayant, so passionate , so ready , sitting up suddenly and saying , 'no, not now,' when I had taken the initiative," (91) Her intimate tete-a-tete with Naren also reveals the pain and humiliation she experiences at being rebuffed in this manner . In a voice choked with emotion, she confides Naren: 'And now I know...it shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. When I'm like that, he turns away from me. I've learnt my lesson now, and so I pretend. I'm passive and unresponsive. I'm still and dead".(92)

It is difficult for Indu, however, to remain totally indifferent to her husband. Her home –coming after a long exile makes her feel tremendously happy but, for her , this happiness is incomplete without Jayant by her side She thinks, "this is my real sorrow . That I can never be complete in my self ,"(34) Her hardwon independence seems only an ephemera when she honestly questions herself if she is indeed independent . Under the guise of independent. The rebel in her had always mattered to her: "When I look into the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I undress I think of him. Have I become a fluid with no shape, no the way to becoming an "ideal woman. A woman who sheds her I' who loses her identity in her husband's" (54)

This desperate need to assert herself combined with the attraction she felt for her cousin , Naren and the easy compatibility between them makes her take a daring step in surrendering her self to him It is to be observed that she refuses to be consumed by guilt after committing adultery She in fact revels in the act with wild abandon and deliberately savours the memory of it refusing to wipe it out of her mind She thinks:

I can go back and lie on my bed. I thought, and it will be like erasing the intervening period and what happened between Naren and me. But deliberately went to my bed and began folding the covers. I don't need to erase anything I have done, I told myself in a fit of bravado. (168)

She feels that her sexual encounter with Naren has nothing to do with Jayant, and so she resolves not to tell him anything about it. This bold assertion of herself has sparked off contradictory

remarks from the reviewers. Commenting on her decision not to reveal this to her husband, p. Ramamoorthy says; “this sheds a brilliant light on Indu’s awareness of her autonomy and her realization that she is a being, and not a dependent on Jayant. The novel gains its feminist stance in Indu’s awareness of her autonomy and her realization that she is a being, and not a dependent on Jayant. The novel gains its feminist stance in Indu’s exploration into herself but it also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the very predicament of the human existence.”

This same incident is, however, seen in a totally different light by P. Bhatnagar who laments the fact that she had to commit adultery to come to term with her married life. She feels that ,”Indu’s casual and matter-of fact attitude to what she had done is shocking. Have our morals really gone so low that women commit this sin for nothing just to prove that they do not lack courage? Is this really representative of the modern Indian woman?”(129)

Perhaps this is Deshpande’s answer to the double standards practiced by our society where only men are allowed to take sexual liberties. Deshpande, in the *Root and Shadows*, also highlights the problem faced by middle-class people in finding suitable grooms for their daughters. This is aptly illustrated in the case of Padmini. After an interminable search when a boy finally agrees to marry her, the marriage is settled without further hesitation. This in spite of the fact that the boy had “heavy, coarse features and crude mannerisms” (3) Padmini’s acceptance of this marriage makes Indu wonder, “A woman’s life, they had told me, contained no choices. And all my life, specially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The woman had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered ... have they been 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 finality, with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength.”(6)

Mini’s stoic acceptance of her partner in marriage reminds the reader of Charlotte in Jane Austen’s celebrated *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte unhesitatingly agrees to marry the ridiculous Collins for the fear of remaining unmarried if she let the opportunity slip by. It is indeed a tragedy that almost two hundred years later Indian girls echo the same sentiment where “it was marriage that mattered, not the man.”(4) In reply to Indu’s persistent questions about the reasons for her accepting to marry someone who obviously is no match for her, Mini tells Indu that she is marrying him because there is nothing else she can do except look after a home and to have a home she needs to marry. On probing further, Indu elicits a reply from Mini who aptly sums up the trauma faced by most Indian girls on the threshold of marriage:

You don’t know what it has been like, watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhav Kaka running around after eligible men. And then sending the horoscope and having it come back with a message, it doesn’t match? And if the horoscope matched there was the meeting to be arranged. And mother and Atya slogging in the kitchen the whole day. And all those people coming and staring and asking all kinds of questions. And if we heard they were old-fashioned people, I would dress up in an old-fashioned manner and they would say, ‘She’s not modern enough.’ And if dressed up well, they would say, “She’s too fashionable for us. Or too short or too tall. Or too something.” And Kaka trying to laugh and talk to those people, while his eyes looked so.... Anxious. And I, feeling like as

if I had committed a great crime by being born a girl. So we would have to go through with it all over again. And finally if everything was fine was the dowry.(135)

It is to be observed, however, that Deshpande desistes from making hysterical anti-dowry statements and instead tries to look at the problem without any preconceived ideas. She lays bare the hypocrisy and double standards practiced by society. Padmini's mother and other relations do not consider the easily available Naren a suitable match for their daughter. They would rather pay a hefty dowry and settle for someone who has little to recommend him other than his family's position in society. "They would," argues Indu, think of everthing, "the families. The communities, the stars, the gotras," and leave out "that great incalculable."

Towards the end of the novel, Indu eventually meets up to her own expectations of an emancipated woman by the way she puts Akka,s wealth to use-spending it on Mini's weeding and Vithal's education. She takes this decision at the risk of offending her numerous relatives each of whom has his or her own idea of how the money should be spent. The list includes the dead Naren who had vehemently opposed the idea of Vithal being educated with Akka's money, and Akka herself who would never have wanted her money to be spent on anyone outside the family. But Indu, after serious introspection decides to act according to her wish without taking into consideration the likes and dislikes of the living and the dead alike. She refuses to take need of the promise she had made to Naren, telling herself that it is the living who need our loyalty, not the dead.

Towards the end Indu does achieve her freedom, refusing to let herself be influenced by kaka, Atya or even Jayant, in doing what she believes is the right thing to do. She who had earlier been cowed down by Jayant's disapproval of her giving up her job now gathers enough courage to stand by her decision. Jayant who is initially bewildered by her attitude, finally acknowledge her right to make her own decision and recognizes her strength which she has never displayed earlier. He even comforts Indu who despairs of not finding a publisher for her book by saying, "I wish publish it for you." (15) For Indu, this assurance by her husband is the ultimate in happiness.

Indu's dilemma is representative of the larger predicament faced by women in modern India where a slow transition threatens to shake the age-old social set-up to its very roots. The most obvious symbol of change is the breakup of the joint family. The total contrast in the life style of the joint family in which Indu was reared, and her own home which consisted of only her husband and herself, is evident. The breaking up of the joint family has affected relationship at various levels but most glaringly the relationship between spouse. In a joint family, "husbands and wives.... their words touched briefly in the darkness of the night," (46) as Indu puts it. This brief meeting gave them little occasion for conflict. In the nuclear family pattern, however, husband and wife are constantly thrown together, placing a greater responsibility on both, giving rise to situations which may lead to incompatibility, frustration and disappointment in each other. The wife especially is more vulnerable, with her new-found desire for freedom and the age-old tradition of male dominance.

Shashi deshpande suggests through the character of Indu that there is a greater chance of happiness for women if they learn to conquer their fears and assert themselves. As P. Bhatnagar comments, "Thus Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine chose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and harmony and

understanding between two opposing ideas and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude.” (128)

The novel ends on a note of hope with the protagonist, Indu, asserting herself as an individual and putting an end to her doubts about herself. That she is able to hold her own in a household full of tradition-bound men and women is proof of her individually, in breaking traditional ground, she is also careful

To delineate her presence on yet another dimension – as one who is qualified to defy the status quo with not only courage but also with the conviction of rationale and accountability. In a global drama involving the dance of the sexes, she emerges as an intelligent, attractive and wholly practical woman who is not lured into a relationship but enters into it fully aware of the consequences and confident that she is not stretching her moral obligations.

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