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REVIEW ARTICLE

“MALADJUSTED FEMALE CHARACTERS IN ROOTS AND SHADOWS”

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“Maladjusted Female Characters in Roots and Shadows”

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Shashi deshpane's novel roots & shadows explores the inner self of Indu, who symbolizes the new woman who is educated and lives in close association with society brushing aside all narrow social conventions of a male –dominated and tradition-bound society. Indu, the protagonist, tries to assert her individuality to achieve freedom which ultimately leads to her confrontation with her family and society. The novelist, through the maladjustment of Indu, explores the absurdity of the customs and rituals, which help to perpetuate the myth of male superiority.

Here, we see that feminism not only raises a voice against male dominance, but also against women who cherish the values of patriarchy. As she had been acting against dominance right from her childhood, she hated obedience and passivity as a girl child. She even refuses to be cowed down by AKKA, the rich family tyrant who dominated their family. As an act of revolt, she marries Jayant who does not belong to her caste and thus breaks conventions. After a gap of seven years she returns on being summoned by AKKA, the despotic matriarch, who is on her death bed. And to her great astonishment, AKKA has made her the sole heiress of her property, and consequently the atmosphere in the house gets charged by the resentment of the members of the family over being excluded from the will. Deshpande represents with vivid details a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household and the myriad of women characters, their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments and their anguish. Among these female characters the old boss of the house, AKKA is worth special mention who decides to stay in her brother's house after her husband's death. She wields absolute control over her brother's household and her venomous vibes turn Indus's uncle KAKA into a tongue tied, submissive character. AKKA is so obsessed with untouchability that she refuses to move into a hospital for fear of getting polluted by the touch of nurses belonging to other than Brahmin caste. She is also very particular about how a girl should conduct herself in society and reprimands Indu for talking to a boy in the college library. She also raises her voice against the idea of mother of Naren going to learn music. She says:

“What! Learn music from a strong man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! 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?”(Deshpande 24)

Though AKKA seems to belong to the class of persecutors, yet after a deeper study of her character and situation, we come to know that her father had been of a similar nature. AKKA has left all her wealth to Indu and it is the time to rethink about the advisability of hard won independence. And only after her death Indu, she comes to know about her life from Narmada Atya. AKKA was married at twelve and her husband, tall; bulky with coarse features was well past thirty. On the contrary, AKKA was small, dainty and pretty with a round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. She went to her husband's house after six months. By the time she was thirteen, she made attempts to run away from there. Her mother-in-law kept her starved by locking her up in a room for three days. Then she was sent to her husband's room. She cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, “Lock me up again, lock me up.”(Deshpande 70) But AKKA told Narmada before the consummation of her marriage that there was no escape from a husband. Now our punishment begins. “Narmada you have to pay for all those saris and jewels.”(70) She is told, for child brides, in those days, sex was a kind of punishment against which they could do nothing and Narmada continued to suffer in silence. The role of elder women in this situation is equally unpardonable.

Shashi Deshpande does not put the blame squarely on man's shoulders but reveals the contradictions in a woman's character also. The other side of AKKA'S character is manifested in the way she controls her husband after he is struck by total paralysis. Although she takes excellent care of her paralyzed husband for two years, but avenges herself of all that she had to tolerate through not allowing his mistress to meet him whom he badly needs in that situation. Her sadistic nature is also manifested when she tells Narmada with a vicious pleasure that she threw his mistress out when she had come to meet him. Here Deshpande wants to emphasize that in Indian society a husband can have a mistress with impunity for his physical and mental needs whereas a wife in the same situation is branded adulterous. Although AKKA has undergone great suffering at her

husband's house yet on her return to her father's house after her husband's death, she enforces a rigid code of conduct for women in the household. She insists that a woman should never utter her husband's name, for it means not only disrespect towards him but also shortens his life span. But Indu, an educated upper middle class woman, reacts vehemently to such advice and exclaims, "what connection can there be between a man's longevity and his wife's calling him by name?" (32) Indu painfully realizes that despite her education and experiences, she was no different from the women that circumambulated the Tulsi plant to increase the life span of their husbands. Even her husband, Jayant, apparently a modern and educated man, is just a typical Indian husband who expects her to be passive and submissive. Her marriage makes her feel that there was something shameful in total commitment: "It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off when I am that, he turns away from me. I've learnt my lesson now and so I pretend I am passive and unresponsive." (83) Being so snubbed by Jayant, she feels humiliated and disillusioned.

In her ancestral home the partition between male and female worlds is always very sharp. Women are not allowed to join family discussions, not even AKKA in her heyday. So Indu used to feel incomplete and she breaks herself free from it after her love marriage with Jayant. She says: I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And in Jayant I had thought that I had found the other part of my whole self." But the idea whether she really attained wholeness and integration of personality has to be examined closely. Now she feels haunted by an unusual feeling of total disorientation. Thus, even after a marriage there is an emotional and psychological gap between Indu and her husband. The reason for this emotional void is their upbringing in a traditional milieu where a wife should expect nothing from her husband. She becomes conscious of the exemplary patience and courage. Since she is a woman, she is always marked. It is here that a woman has to be more than her domestic role playing submissive housewife. Centuries of tradition had made her this and she takes pride in such suffering. But we do not find Indu expressing such pride in her suffering. Indu calls the household chores tiresome, boring and frustrating like the job of Sisyphus. Simone de Beauvoir, the famous French critic has pointed out the same thing:

"Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than house work, with its endless repetitions, the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over and day after day." (63)

She tells Naren: As a child they had told me I must be meek and submissive. As a girl **they** told me I must be obedient and unquestioning because I am a female. It is the only way for a female to live and survive. Even womanhood is thrust upon her brutally and gracelessly, when she is told, I am a woman now....I can have babies myself. In traditional Indian society, a girl cannot choose a husband of her own choice.

Defying the traditional role, Indu seeks fulfillment in education and career and works as a journalist for a women's magazine but gives it up out of disgust for writing only about women and their problems and starts working for another magazine. Indu explains the reason for this shift:

"women, women, womenI got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. And as if we had locked ourselves in a cage and thrown away the key. I could not go on". When Naren asks her that it would have been better for her to write her own stuff, she replies back in agony: "What the hell shall I write about? Tell me? Women's lives and frustrations? Family life and domestic quarrels? Love without a capital and marriage as the ultimate happy ending? Or maybe I'll get bolder and write of menstrual pains and the pangs of child birth and the ecstasy of orgasm." (78)

After her marriage to Jayant, Indu painfully realizes that she has walked into just another trap. Very soon she realizes the fruit of her decision as Jayant is not able to give full emotional support to her. He had been impervious and indifferent to her emotional urges. After sometime, Indu also has learnt to deceive her husband with her false self. She reveals her pain:

"My marriage had taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to hear. I had my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage." (38)

Thus her marriage with Jayant suppresses her femininity and all her human demands. She is physically and spiritually dissatisfied with her husband who takes her for granted and expects her to submit to his demands without reservation. Her love towards Jayant makes Indu accept what he wants her to feel that she has abused her body's sanctity. After her marriage with Jayant she does everything with obvious motive to please him. She expresses her grumble in the words:

"When I look in the mirror I think of Jayant. When I dress I think of Jayant. I undress, I think of him; always what he wants. What he would like; what would please him. And I Can't blame him. It's not he who has pressurized me into this. It's the way I want to beHave I become fluid with no shape, no form of my own." (49)

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu who is proud of her logical and rational thinking and who sets out to reform Indian womanhood has become, after her marriage, uncomfortable, neurotic and emotionally unbalanced and above all a wife whose identity is only an extension of her husband. She considers love to be a big fraud, a hoax, a trap a process of making one humble and dependent. Among the many compromises that she has made in order to keep up the semblance of a happy marriage, the most

distressing one is of giving up her ambition of being a creative writer. The maladjustment of the female characters leads them to antisocial behavior and sometimes they seek refuge in extramarital relations. Finding her sexual personality repressed within her marital relationship, Indu strives for expression and acceptance through an extra marital affair with her cousin Naren. Perhaps, by presenting Indu's dilemma, Deshpande answers the double standards adopted in our society, where men alone can take liberties seeking sexual pleasure even though they are married. In India, woman is considered to be a possession of man, first of father and brother and then of husband. It exhibits the slave mentality when she allows her father to choose a husband for her. The clinical analysis of a married woman's life in Shashi Deshpande's fiction shows how suffocating marriages are in India. Getting the daughter married is considered an achievement for the parents. Indu is completely subordinated by her husband Jayant. As a result, her overwhelming love for him and her total surrender to him is frightening. She fears to be an 'ideal' traditional Indian wife and unwillingly acknowledges her love marriage as a failure.

The newly acquired sense of freedom that Naren's friendship offers her also excites in her natural impulses. She had rejected Naren in the beginning, when he tried to make love to her but later on offers herself twice to Naren with a total abandonment. Though she doesn't mind love making as a sin or crime, the next day she starts thinking of the enormity of what she had done:

"Adultery.....What nuances of wrong doing...no, it needs the other, stronger word...what nuances of sin the world carries. I will not brood on my sin, be crushed under a weight of guilt and misery".(155)

Her maladjustment in the new situation leads her to anatomies each and every action again to assess her involvement with Naren. Her traditionally brought up mind further oscillates over the matters of sin, cries, right and wrong young modern women like Indu are sandwiched between tradition and modernity. Those who leave being the conventions and take imitative to join modernity are entangled creatures. In a way Indu's predicament is representative of the larger predicament of 'New Woman' in contemporary Indian society which is caught up in threatening transitional phrase because it is moving away from the closed an oppressive world of conventions and traditions but is yet to reach the threshold of modernity. She is fully aware of the fact that these bonds are reasonable and yet she wants to be bound by them like a typical Indian woman. As Indu finally realizes that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots behind in the family and in Jayant. Naren with whom she develops an adulterous relationship is a mere shadow to her. Naren has no permanent place in her memory. Hence she decides to go back to Jayant who she feels is

totally innocent. She has failed in love and has escaped from the familial responsibilities of the home, chasing only crystallizing shadows. She realizes that marriage had stunted and hampered her individuality for she saw it as a 'trap' and not as a 'bond'. Now she realizes that all those were mere illusions and not reality and all the struggles of her life was an act of futility :

"But what of my love for Jayant, that had been a restricting, bond tormenting me, which I had so futilely struggled against? Restricting bond?"(186)

Thus, Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self that frantically longed for self expression for the articulation of her feminine voice, finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realization and discover of her authentic female self. Thus, in the end comes the realization that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is right to do and the determination to adhere to it. That alone can bring harmony in life. Finally, the meek, docile and humble Indu emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her job, thus defying the male authority. She comes out of her emotional upheaval to lead a meaningful life with her husband Jayant. She now feels a sense of hope for life, for existence. She negates the ideas of non existence, negates the ideas of non-existence and says:

"I felt as if I were watching life itself....endless, limitless, formless and full of grace."(21)

In this way, Indu asserts her individuality as a woman and begins to see life in a new light and the novel ends with a note of affirmation. Thus, Shashi Deshpande has been successful to a great extent in depicting social and familial maladjustments of female characters in her novel *Roots and Shadows*.

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