Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's Roots and Shadows

N. K. Prasad* N. D. R. Chandra**

Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to liberate women from male oppression. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any woman. In literature, it refers to any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience. The inequalities against which the feminist have raised their voice of protest-legal, economic and social restriction on the basic rights of woman-have existed through out history across the world in all the civilizations. Naturally, the principle of feminism was articulated much earlier and its roots can be traced in the history of human civilization.

The literary world of the Indian English fiction has spread red carpet for woman writers. Consequently, more and more woman writers are articulating anxieties and concerns focusing on woman's issues and creating a body of 'literature of their own.' Feminist issues transcend all limits of nationality, race, creed etc. Woman writers have been echoing the feeling of marginality and expressing their revolt against the purely masculine world. One of the major concerns of the contemporary literature all over the world has been to highlight the plight of women, their increasing problems, their physical, financial and emotional exploitation, and their mental anguish in the male dominated society in every sphere of life.

In almost all the countries, in the academic field, in woman forum, the main focus is to bring into light the oppression faced by women in various forms. The enforcement of the feminist movement, the establishment of various woman study centers and the formation of various welfare organizations are the indication of the fact that the voice of women is being heard. In order to reach the stage of being listened to, the woman writers had to struggle much and through their writing, they have been projecting their points, pleading and

^{*} Research Scholar, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima.

^{**} Professor & Head, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima.

62

fighting for a change in the attitude of society towards woman. Paravati Bhatnagar aptly remarks:

Values need to be redefined, so also human relationship, especially within the family. Such is the dilemma of the middle class. An adherence to the traditional values has become difficult. New values have yet to be evolved. It requires tremendous courage (and thoughtlessness?) to break, away from the tradition. (2001:50)

Many female writers such as George Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Dorris Lessing, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Dalip Kaur Tiwana, Bharati Mukherjee, Shoba De and a few male writers like Thomas Hardy, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, in their many writings, have analyzed the female psyche, the inner turmoil of the woman, the culture and context- specific problem of woman. Shashi Deshpande is one of the noted Indian feminist writers who have shown their serious concern within the depiction of women in literature and have expressed restlessness with the traditional positioning of women. In Roots and Shadows, her concern with the social and cultural construction of gender, her open protest against the treatment of women as sexual object, her defiance of the stereotyped roles assigned to women, her bold effort to project the prejudiced attitude of the society towards women are obvious. She articulates not only a thematic and technical maturity but also effectively communicates an intensily apprehended feminine sensibility. She has apparently injected a new consciousness offering varied interpretation of imperishable Indian values, and highlighting our cultural heritage. Ramesh Kumar Gupta remarks: "Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and protagonist's place in it." (2004:42) Though Indu, the protagonist achieves 'Personhood' yet does not negate the family or the society.

Roots and Shadows (1983) is Sashi Deshpande's first full length novel. Indu the protagonist represents the educated middle class Indian woman. The story of the novel is about the struggle of the protagonist who has a lot of hurdles to cross and achieve freedom. Being smothered in an oppressive male-dominated and tradition- bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her "individuality"... Indu, a

rebel, often wished to be free and unrestrained. Thus she is presented as model against women belonging to the older generation." (Gupta 2002: 43)

Indu comes back to her parental home after a gap of eleven years, which is occasioned by her cousin Mini's marriage being performed in the traditional manner in their ancestral home. She had left home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loved. She represents new generation and reviews everything "with reason and new vision." She explains the ideal of detachment and liberation and tries to achieve them. She tries only to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolt. But unfortunately, she fails, in all her efforts, miserably due to the impact of culture and tradition, or fear of stigma, or timidity, or all these combined together.(Gupta 2002:43)

She comes back on being called by Akka, the domineering matriarch, as she is on her death bed. Akka has made her the sole heiress to her property and the household atmosphere becomes charged with resentment by the members of the family for being excluded from the will. Deshpande has presented very clearly the details of a large Maharastrian Brahmin household, and the myriad woman characters, their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments and anguish. In a book- review of *Roots and Shadows*, C.W. Watson has opined:

This novel which was published in 1983 succeeds magnificently in its haunting description of the decline of a once prosperous middle-class family in south India. Much of the material of modern Indian writing, especially Indian writing in English, is drawn from this social milieu— one has only to think of recent novels by Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chandhuri, but where the strength of this novel lies is in the marvelous evocation of character and mood.(1995:75)

Besides, the problems faced by the girls of the new generation have also been paid special attention. Indu, Mini and Akka belong to this series of girl children. Mini possesses in her character all the traditional feminine qualities since her childhood. Devoid of any fixed aim is her life; she devotes herself to her family members. Her obedience, silence and submission never allow her to cross the boundary line of rules and regulation set by the family for the girls.

64

As she is brought up under strict supervision, guidance and restriction, she becomes acquainted with the real duties of the girl at an early age. This is the reason, Indu, her cousin, recalls Mini as a child. Indu remarks:

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 women had no choices but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered... have they been born without wills, or have their will atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini, who had had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with the grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength. (6)

Mini's father, Anant, was aware that with his weak financial position, he won't be able to get his daughter married. Finally, he agreed to marry Mini to a distant relative of Akka, who was not a suitable match for her. Mini's lackadaiscal face makes Indu understand that she found the match incongruous. But in order to save her father from further complexities of her marriage, she poses a semblance of agreement and decides not to show her disagreement. Indu, on perceiving the displeasure in Mini towards her own marriage, requests her uncle to look for a better match. Anant rejects her idea:

May be the boy is little ugly, may be a little stupid... but everything else is fine. The family is good, it's known to us, they have money, she'll be quite comfortable. And Akka had promised she would pay for their wedding expenses as well as the dowry if this came through. What else could I ask for? (51)

This statement truly reflects the stereotype tradition in selection of groom. A girl's wishes are never considered. As a matter of fact, Mini did not welcome the proposal of marriage whole heartedly but gave her mute consent considering the problems faced by her father. Her parents' growing concern to settle her marriage fills her guilt-guilt for being girl, guilt for remaining unmarried, guilt for being a burden on her family. She also feels humiliated when people rejected her on the ground of her physical appearance or the matter of her dressing. After being interviewed and rejected several times, she loses

all her buoyancy and enthusiasm, and her only wish is to get married in order to save her parents from the imbroglio of groom search. She says:

"Any man Indu? Yes, any man. Any man who says, "yes." you don't know what it has been like. Watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhav-Kaka running around after eligible men." (126)

Mini describes to Indu the efforts made by her Kakas and Kakis as well as her parents to wheedle and lure the boy and his family. Every time they rejected her, she felt down-cast and blamed herself for putting her parents in distress.

Among the myriad women characters, the old tyrannical matriarch Akka deserves special mention. She is rich and childless, and stays in her brother's house after her husband's death. Only after her death, Indu came to know about Akka's life from Narmada Atya. Akka was married at twelve and her husband was tall, bulky and well past thirty. She was sent to live with her husband at the age of thirteen only. She made two attempts to run away from her husbands' house. Her mother-in-law whipped her and kept her starved by locking her up in a room for three days. Then she was sent back to her husband's room. Narmada Atya narrates the story of panic-stricken Akka trying to escape from her husband's and mother-in-law's brutal behaviour.

But I heard that twice she tried to run away...a girl of thirteen. 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 her telling me before my own marriage was consummated. "Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels." (70)

Those days sex was a kind of punishment for child brides against which they could do nothing and continued to suffer in silence. Akka's husband was a wealthy man and kept a mistress. She as a married woman was expected to bear children but she had much miscarriage due to the uncomfortable life she led. Her mother-in-law

rmade her life miserable for her inability to give birth to a living child. The chain of traditional marriage is heavy and the escape routes are not available for a wife, who often seeks consolation and refuge in oppression, masochism or mental slavery often leading to her physical decay or death? She is supposed to bear her exploitation and suffering with willing fortitude. Akka, too, has to endure and submit to insult, injuries and humiliation with a stoic patience without any complain.

Indu went ahead with her education and went for an inter-caste marriage with Jayant, who was of her choice. Like her mother she was segregated from the family for transgressing the traditional mode of settling marriages. Deshpande has given us the glimpse of the rigid system of marriage in India which is decided not on the basis of compatibility but on caste, religion and dowry. Simon de Beauvoir rightly remarks: "The true woman' is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. Her presumed 'instincts' for coquety, docility, are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man." (1997:428)

Indu is interested in creative writing— a means to articulate her feminine voice to forge moment in art that are arresting and original. But Jayant does not approve her writing. He betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. He fails to be her 'alter ego.' Neither is 'a sheltering tree' to protect her in weal and woe. Whatever Indu does, it is only to please Jayant, and to please him is her way of life:

'Now I dress the way I want. As I please.' As I please? No, that's not true. When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant. When I dress, I think of Jayant. When 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 the way I want it to be. (49)

A woman responding to other's needs may detract her from her own sense of identity, of her becoming fluid as to assume any shape. Indu feels as if she had become so fluid that she has no tangible shape, no form of her own. Without wants of her own, what is her identity in the family? Indu without 'I' of course renders her an ideal woman— "A woman who sheds her 'I' who loses her identity in

her husband (49), a woman who bears everything without a drop of tear. Through Indu, Deshpande voices her view of marriage:

It's a trap... that's what marriage is, A trap? Or a cage? May be the comic strip version of marriage... a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... isn't so wrong after all. And it's not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself? (60-61)

Women's experience is primarily defined through interpersonal, usually domestic and familial relationships— serving the needs of others. Her identity exists largely on being for others.

Indu's problematic of "becoming" expresses Deshpande's feminist polemics against sexual and gender roles imposed upon woman in a patriarchal culture. Such 'relative identity' or rather the 'received role models' distort and problematize her self-perception. Such a world reduces woman like Indu to a mere thing or a mindless body. With her peremptory and subjugating voice, her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed. Even ready to please Jayant, Indu acquiesces to his will and desire, and does everything to reflect his image. She gradually realizes that she does not exist for herself but for Jayant only. She feels a sense of existential anguish and insecurity.

Indu ultimately realizes that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots far 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 whom she feels is totally innocent. It is she who is to be blamed for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of the heaven. She "had locked herself in as cage and thrown the keys." (85) She had forgotten the roots feeding on only dreams and shadows. She has failed in love. She has escaped from familial responsibilities of the home, chasing after oneirodynic and uncrystalling shadows. She realizes that marriage has stunted and hampered her individuality because she saw it as a 'trap' not a 'bond' and the home where the family feels comfort, she saw it as a 'cage.' Now she realizes that all those were mere allusion not reality and all struggle of her life was an act of futility.

The predicament of Indu represents the larger predicament of woman in contemporary Indian society where the new concept of Western education, economic independence and globalization have completely shaken the roots of old Indian culture and social values. The breaking up of the joint family - the school of inculcating dedication, sacrifice, moral values etc... is the immediate visible impact upon the Indian culture. It has adversely affected different relationships at different levels in general and husband-wife relationship in particular. The novelist has very subtly conveyed the message of mutual understanding and co-operation between wife and husband. The Indian woman needs not to be rebellious like the Western feminists nor like the legendry meek and submissive Indian wives. The Indian women must seek their freedom within the periphery of marriage through mutual understanding without disrupting the Indian socio-cultural values.

The novel ends with a positive note with the hope of a new dawn. The novel depicts the permanent mark carved on the psyche of woman by traditions, norms and conventions of the male-dominated society which prohibit them from exhibiting their true self. The mode and style of their development inculcates in them submissiveness, silence and passiveness which hold a strong hold on their psyche. Even modern educated women consciously drape themselves with this traits and find themselves in a fix. Thus, Shashi Deshpande conveys the message that the modern Indian women should learn to conquer their fear and assert themselves. The novel comes to an end with a note of compromise rather than revolt and revenge which is the basic attribute of Indian feminism.

References

- Beauvoir, Simon de. 1997. *The Second Sex.* H.M. Parshley. (trans. & ed.), London: Vintage.
- Bhatnagar, Paravati. 2001. "Search of Identity: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors. The Quest. Vol.15, No.l, June.pp. 50-57.
- Deshpande, Shashi. 1983. *Roots and Shadows*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd.
- Gupta, Ramesh Kumar.2002. "Image of Woman in Shashi Deshpande's Novel *Roots and Shadows:* A Critical Study." *Poetcrit.* Vol. 15, No.l, Jan.pp.41-47.
- Watson, C.W.1995. "Some Recent Writing from India." Review of Roots and Shadows. Wasafiri, No. 21, Spring, pp. 74-75.