



ROOTS AND SHADOWS: A STUDY OF FEMINIST APPROACH

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Abstract

The term feminism was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas, the younger, in 1872 in a pamphlet 'L' 'Home-femme' to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. An anti-masculinity movement of the women for the assertion of their individual rights, feminism is also called Aphorism after Aphra Behn, a seventeenth century feminist and political activist.



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Introduction

Ferminism recognises the inadequacy of male-created ideologies and stuggles for the spiritual, economic, social and racial equality of women sexually colonized and biologically subjugated. An expression of the mute and stifled female voice denied an equal freedom of self expression; feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalisation of women. Sarah Grimke observers:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; bur never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to full. he has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind.....(Letters on the Equality of the Sexes 10 ff).

A woman is a woman and a woman she must remain but not a 'man's shadow-self', 'an appendage', 'an auxiliary' and the 'unwanted and neglected other'. A woman is held to represent the 'otherness' of man, his negative. The development of Feminist thought at the outset of this century has brought about a perceptible change in our outlook towards women. Now, women are one with man and not their 'otherness'.

Elaine Showalter posts three phases in the growth of feminist tradition: "limitation, protest and self-discovery" (Literature 13). Shashi Deshpande's novels are directly related to all these phases. They encapsulate her artistic vision of femininity as alienation. In her novels, she explores and exposes the long-smothered wail of the incarcerated psyche, imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity. Here we have the heroine protagonist sandwiched between tradition and modernity, between illusion and reality and between the mask and the face. Thus positioned, the Deshpande woman disowns a ritualistic and tradition bound life in order to explore her true self.

Shashi Deshpande has dealt graphically with the problems that confront a middle-class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. Deshpande's is not "the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the cause of all troubles" (Deshpande interviewed, Literature Alive, 1987:08). Rather her novels that deal with the psychic turmoil of woman within the limiting and restricting confines of domesticity, The Deshpande heroine is not like the women of Anita Desai, neurotic and hysterical. She is not a Maya or a Monisha ever ready to face the "ferocious assaults of existence" (Desai interviewed, Times of India, 1979). Deshpande does not make her woman characters stronger than they actually are in their real life. She declares that her "characters take their own ways" and that her "writing has to do with woman as they are" (Deshpande interviewed, op. cit.), Woman as presented in someone to shelter her, be it her father, brother or husband. Indu, the protagonist in *Roots and Shadows* says, "This is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself" (34). Battered down by existential insecurity and uncertainty, women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande are in quest of refuge which in *Roots and Shadows* is portrayed through the image of the house.

Roots and Shadows explores the inner self of Indu, who symbolises the New Women who are educated and who live in close association with society brushing aside all narrow social conventions. They have the freedom to talk about anything they like and are also free to think of their own caged selves besides politics, corruption and what not.

Through the character of Indu, Deshpande is portraying the inner struggle of an artist to express herself, to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potentiality, i.e. creative writing. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service-life but her husband, Jayant, is not one with her. He is a barrier to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that one person like Indu can do nothing against the whole system by wielding her pen :

What can one person do against the while system. No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile gestures. we need the money, don't we? don't forget, we have a long way to go (17).

Look at the diametrically opposite temperatures of the husband and the wife. One is sympathetic to the ills of the society, the 'system' as Deshpande puts it, whereas the other is nonchalant. One is a writer in quest of an artist selfhood while the other is a philistine, in pursuit of materialistic happiness. Despite these temperamental differences, Indu is quite submissive. Hence, she had not asked him, "To go where?" Instead she had silently gone back to her work, hating it and hating herself. Her self-alienation increases as she becomes aware of the contradiction between her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer. Thus Indu perceives herself as a shadow of the female self, a negative, an object.

But why doesn't Indu ask Jayant? It is because, she is hedged in, she is incarcerated, unable to 'go on' (18) through the ordeal of life and "feeling trapped" (Ibid), seeing herself "endlessly chained" (Ibid.) to the long dusty road that lay ahead of her. But with Akka's summons she heaves a sigh of relief:

It had been a welcome reprieve. A chance to get away.

To avoid thinking about what was happening to me... to

Jayant and me .. and our life together (18).

A woman's role is not only confined to the centripetal needs of the family in which she lives but also to its centrifugal needs. It is here that a woman has to be more than her domestic role as a submissive housewife. She has to become a 'society lady' as Shobha De would put it. But there also, she is a meek and yielding creature. Centuries of tradition have made her so and she takes pride in such suffering. But we do not find Indu expressing such pride in such suffering. She cannot bear with the suffering she has to face in the family and hence she breaks away from it and marries Jayant. In the family she was an incomplete

being. Without a sense of the wholeness of personality. But with Jayant she feels a sense of completion and wholeness :

I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person.

and in jayant i had thought i had found the other part of

my whole self (51).

But did she attain wholeness and the integration of personality? No. She is often haunted by an “usual feeling of total dis-orientation” (33).

An outsider, she remains untouched by the milieu:

For some reason I was an outsider. The waves of sorrow,
Sympathy and comradeship rippled all around me, but
Left me untouched (30).

Indu reckons her roots in breaking away from the family but she ultimately discovers that these family-bonds are the roots of one’s being and keep on dogging one like shadows. In fact these roots are the shadows. Shadows that one can’t flee from:

We flatter ourselves that we’ve escaped the compulsions
of the past; but we’re still pinioned to it by little things (34).

As a woman, Indu is hardly left with any choice. Her life is so acutely circumscribed that she cannot make quick decisions and hence fails to arrive at concrete determinations:

Inner strength..... I thought of the words as I looked down
on mini’s bowed head. 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 choice but to submit, to accept. and i had often
wondered have they been born without wills, or have
their wills atrophied though a lifetime of disuse? (06).

Women like Indu can neither express themselves nor choose for themselves. They can neither love nor hate but be content with “the gift of silence” (33) that marriage had taught them. In silence, Indu pines for love, almost frantically :

Jayant and I ... I wish I could say..... But I cannot I
want to be loved, i want to be happy. the cries are now
stilled. not because i am satisfied, or yet hopeless, but
because such demands now seem to me to be an exercise
in futility. neither love nor happiness come to us for the
asking (13).

Marriage is a fate traditionally sanctioned to women by society. But marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman. The two sexes are different from each other, though one has the necessity of the other. De Beauvoir observes:

....this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them; women have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality. (The second Sex 446).

A woman like Indu is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. Neither upon the future nor upon the world. She has to reach out beyond herself towards the social milieu only through her husband. But does she husband allow? He is impervious and indifferent to her emotional urges and drives:

But 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 hid my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage (38).

Indu is interested in creative writing --- a means to articulate her feminine voice, to forge moments in art that are arresting and original. To this Jayant says 'No' because they need money and they have a long way to go but "To go where?" (19), Indu could not ask for she had no right to ask. It is the authoritative husband who has the say and not a meekly submissive wife like her.

Jayant betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. He fails to be her 'alter ego'. Neither is he 'a sheltering tree', to protect her in weal and woe. Instead she finds that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant's masculinity, by becoming his wife. Willingly she yields to the demands of marriage and moulds herself up to the dictates of her husband. But she never blames him for it is men who 'tear' and woman who 'bear'. Indu exists and yet does not exist. There are women in our society who hate the rearing of a child. They are simply sex objects who produce children and leave them to their hapless lot. Indu is one such woman who does not believe in mothering. She is a woman who 'bears' and not the one who 'rears'. In an act of unreflecting defiance against patriarchy, she believes that woman should deprive herself of the satisfaction that comes from not only bearing a child but also playing a major role in his/her personal development. In this sense she is an anti-radical feminist. She says:

Having children... it isn't something you should think and plan about. you should just have them. and yes... end up like Sunandaty. Pure, female animal (115).

Probably she believes that a female's job is only to reproduce and breed and to take care of the offspring's growth and development is the look-out of the male. This seems to be a volt in her femininity. A fluid character as she is, Indu, willingly bears all and acts up to the expectations of her husband.

Indu, true to her feminine virtues, plays the role of an ideal housewife but the role of a wife restricts, rather circumscribes her self-development – firstly by taking away her freedom of thought and expression and secondly by denying her the scope of giving free play to her artistic (creative) potentiality.

Jaya is discontented with this pre-ordained role of a woman. She has so many choices but for a married woman like her, she is left with a few or practically no choice save what her husband wills and desires. She cannot unburden herself. Her feminine instinct is curbed and suppressed. Despite all these, she is reluctant to admit failure and drags on with her marital life which encloses and imprisons her true self. She confesses to Naren:

As a woman I felt hedged in by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me (87).

Such is the paradoxical situation in which Indian women are enmeshed. Like Indu they lead ambivalent lives, The cherish within their hearts deep and profound love but when the occasion comes for expressing it they retrace. Willing to wound, they hesitate to strike. They are loyal and obedient women who have been nourished and reared by a traditionally bogged society. Indu says:

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 had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive (158).

But as said earlier, Indu is a woman of free thinking, her thoughts are with the coming generation of women steeped in a scientific rational way of life. She has her own say to what people say:

And I ... I had watched them and found it to be true.
There had to be, if not the substance, at least the shadow
Of submission. But still, I had laughed at them, and sworn
I would never pretend to be what I was not (158).

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 who she feels is totally innocent. It is she who is to blame for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of a heaven. She, the narcissist who “had locked herself in a cage and thrown away the keys” (85), forgotten the roots, feeding on only dreams and shadows. She has failed in love not Jayant. She has escaped from the familial responsibilities of the home, chasing after oneirodynamic and uncrystallising shadows. She realizes that marriage and stunted and hampered her individuality for she saw it as a ‘trap’ and not a bond and that the home where the family is housed, she saw it as a ‘cage’. 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? Was it not I who made it so?
Torment? Had I not created my own torment? Perhaps it
was true.... There was only one thing I wanted now...
and that was to go home.. the one I lived with Jayant.

The meek, docile and humble Indu finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her jobs, thus defying the male authority, hierarchy and the irony of a woman’s masked existence. Her self-discovery is the frightening visions of the feminine self’s struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval, to lead a meaningful life with her husband Jayant. Her ‘home-coming’ is ironical since the home she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace and consolation. It is Akka’s house which makes her realize many things and offers ample opportunities to now herself, her inner life. It is here that she is able to discover her roots - an independent woman and a

writer and what the shadows are – a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer. She begins to see life in a new light. Have a fresh look at Akka's house:

Yes, the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past

I had to move away from. Now, I felt clear, as if I had

Cut away all the unnecessary uneven edges of me (204).

Indu now, feels a sense of hope for life, for existence. She negates the ideas of non-existence. Marriage to Indu is a "cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce" (03). That's all. The tragedy of her marriage is that it fails to assure her the promised happiness. It mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine, the monotony of "meet, mate and reproduce" (03).

The novel ends with a note of affirmation. Indu asserts her individually as a woman and also as a partaker in the endless cycle of life. She lives to see life with the possibilities of growth. Thus she has discovered the meaning of life in her journey to individuation. Through the character of Indu, Deshpande has registered her awareness of the arrest to feminine development brought about by an economic system given to sheer materialistic happiness and inhabited by philistines like Jayant, and a patriarchal family-structure which produce in women dependency, insecurity, lack of autonomy, and an incomplete sense of their identity.

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