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Victims Of Gender Binary: A Study Of Shashi Deshpande's Marginalised Women In Roots And Shadows

Dr Sunit Bhandari

Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English

KVA DAV College for Women, Karnal, Haryana

Abstract: The rise of human civilization is an awe inspiring saga that is equally remarkable and intriguing. The growth from being a caveman to becoming the rocket scientist is an enigmatic success story. However when it comes to attributing the credit of this accomplishment, gender plays the decisive role. Man basks in the glory of achievements while woman is pushed ruthlessly to the periphery. Over the past few hundred years, literature has sincerely produced such priceless narratives that have explicitly documented the plight of marginalized, particularly women. Shashi Deshpande is one of the contemporary writers in English literature whose oeuvre explores the inner lives of suffering women. Deshpande's protagonists are marginalized women who struggle for their autonomy, expression and belonging. In addition, there are women in her works who are so acutely suppressed that they do not make any effort to venture out of the position assigned to them by patriarchy. They internalise the intent of subjugating forces and remain at the margin forever. The present paper explores these women who have lost all hopes of crossing the threshold and seem to have willingly succumbed to their situations. The writer's focus, albeit small, on these women indicates that women liberation is still a far cry. Besides, the suffering embitters these marginalized women to such an extent that they too become agents of oppressive patriarchal norms. They are sufferers as well as the perpetrators imposing misery on other women.

Key words: marginalized, oppressed, subjugated, suffering, periphery, suffering, patriarchy.

Shashi Deshpande is a discernible writer whose expression in contemporary Indian English Literature holds a magnetic charm for the conscientious sensibilities. She honestly examines the journeys of women who navigate the confounded complexities that arise out of a conflict between the personal and the social. Her works resonate with the struggles of women at the margin who are not easily perceptible in the mainstream narratives yet they embody pain, suffering, and oppression which goes unnoticed in society. These marginalized women of

Deshpande are not mere victims; they are complex characters who surrender to the forces that silence them. Some of them become re-vengeful as a consequence of their victimization and unfortunately themselves become agents of suppression. *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is one of the distinguished novels penned by Deshpande. It opens a gaping window into the world of Indu, the protagonist, who struggles to establish her identity beyond the assigned roles of being a mother, daughter and wife. She establishes herself as an autonomous being, free from the restrictions caused by our tradition bound society and culture. She is eventually able to rise above her own fears, constraints and guilt. But Deshpande weaves Indu's struggle amid the mesh of other women characters on the margin.

The writer has very artistically delineated the traditional and submissive women like Akka, Narmada Atya, Sunanda Atya, Sumitra Kaki, Kamala Kaki and Padmini alias Mini. To these women, the purpose of a woman's life is nothing but "to get married, to bear children to have sons and then grand children" (RS 109) and the ideal woman is the one who merges her identity with the identity of her husband: "A woman who sheds her 'I', who loses her identity in her husband's" (RS 53). A female in such a setup of family "could neither assert, nor demand or proclaim" (RS 123). She has to adapt herself to her circumstances and environment, even though her natural potential and inclinations are diametrically opposite to societal expectations. Shashi Deshpande wants to shake us out of our complacency by exposing the double standards followed in our male dominated society; suggesting different norms for man and woman. Woman has been assigned a peripheral position in society. Culture assigns her the role of a mother or daughter or sister or wife. In addition, she has to manage her job. She has to justify every role. Society expects her not to deviate from the traditional norms, following which she is divided between her natural and cultural roles. Both these push her to the periphery and woman stagnates at her secondary status. She cannot be her real self; cannot exercise her capabilities, inner latent ability to grow, to take decisions. She does not enjoy freedom, cannot get rid of obligations of women hood. So, the family and society becomes a trap for her which prove to be stifling and suffocating. This hinders her growth as an individual.

The writer paints on the canvas numerous female characters along with Indu and their hazardous journey in a patriarchal set up of society. We come across a large Maharashtrian Brahmin family and myriad women characters spending infinite time in a monotonous way with their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments and anguish. The writer's concern is to show that Indian woman has to struggle against the indoctrination of centuries which mould her into subjugated woman as desired by the society. Through the character of Akka, we find an example of deprived woman hood. Akka wields absolute authority over her brother's house after her husband's death and behaves like a ruthless tyrant. She is very strict and even the male members of the family submit before her. Akka is the youngest sister of Indu's grandfather and her formidable personality never allows people to peep into her life. Indu finds her to be a callous woman lacking in compassion, who has not only internalized the subtleties of patriarchy but also derives a perverse pleasure in actually using power. Her

wealth automatically yields her power and this she maintains throughout her life. We can say that she has become a symbol of male authority. She is very particular about how a girl should behave at home and outside. She is against cultivating relations with the boys in college. She is against learning music from outsiders and singing in their presence : “What learn music from a strange man! Sit & 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 arti songs? What more does a girl from a decent family need to know?” (RS 54). She is an orthodox lady who believes in untouchability. When she is ill, she does want to move to the hospital because of her fear of getting polluted if the nurses of the other caste would touch her.

Akka seems to be a sadist to Indu initially though later on she comes to know about the traumatic and pathetic story of Akka, who had to bear the cruelties and tyranny of her husband and mother-in-law. It is only after her death that Indu is illumined regarding the life of Akka from Narmada Atya. Akka was married at the age of twelve and her husband was thirty years old. He was tall, bulky and having coarse features. On the other hand, Akka was small, dainty, pretty girl with a round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. When she was thirteen years old, she had tried in vain to run away from the house twice but she was beaten and starved by her mother-in-law. She experienced claustrophobia and her wishes were buried in the depth of her heart. Atya tells Indu : “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” (RS 70). Akka’s husband enjoyed polygamy and he had a weakness for women. A frightened childlike Akka could not satisfy the lust of such a cruel man. He had so many mistresses. Later on, he had developed illicit affair with a woman and he was crazy about her. He even tried to give that lady Akka’s jewels. But he could not bring that lady at home because of his mother’s fear and Akka’s father. Akka tells her: “Now your punishment begins, Narmada, you have to pay for all those saries and jewels” (RS 71). Akka’s mother-in-law tortured her for not giving birth to a child. She suffered from miscarriages many times but despite being a woman, her mother-in-law never supported her; rather she blamed her every time.

The writer wants to reflect upon the victimization of child brides and the process of early marriage as a potent weapon used by patriarchy to confine women to the margin. For child-brides, sex was a kind of punishment. They were not supposed to speak against the system. Tara Ali Baig rightly observes: “Arch traditionalists that women are it is they who have successfully and brutally established man’s ascendancy over women in society” (Qtd.in Sharma 18). The writer’s concern is to show the disparity in the social conduct of a man and a woman. A man can have a number of mistresses to satisfy his lust but a wife cannot have relations with another man. It will be called adultery. Though Akka is a sufferer on this account but we come to know about the other side of her character when her husband is struck by total paralysis. Though she serves him as an ideal wife, taking full care of him for two years but avenges herself of all that she had to bear by not allowing his mistress to meet

him. This shows the sadistic impulses in the character of Akka, when she tells Narmada with a vicious pleasure that she had thrown his mistress out when she had pleaded to be allowed to meet him. Earlier the claims of traditional marriage were heavy on her and there were no escape routes. Now there was a change in her personality. Earlier she was weak and timid but now her husband was dependent on the mercy of Akka. She declares, "If that's what you want, you can go on wanting. She won't come here. I won't let her... It's my turn now. Have listened to you long enough. She came here. Twice she wanted to see you just for a short while. I threw her out. You will never see her again" (RS 72).

Akka had now learnt the art of domination. She had grasped the principle of survival of the fittest and took full control of the family in her own hands. Now she had realized that the world was made up of two kinds of people and the powerful people always ruled over the weak. Pallavi and Rashmi Gaur aptly remark:

Deshpande's narratives bear the authenticity of women's signature. She had rejected the masculine dialect and the masculine perception of virtue, relationship, content and laid bare before us the subversive role of tradition in perpetuation, the secondary role of women and emphasized the need of discrediting its legacies if women have to emerge as liberated & emancipated beings. Akka, in order to establish her supreme power over her family, hides her weaknesses and emerges as domineering woman and becomes the epitome of obduracy. (Indra Mohan 6-7)

Though Akka herself has suffered a lot at her husband's house but she imposes a strict code of conduct on the other women of the house. The writer focuses on the customs and rituals meant for women. They are involved in various rituals to ensure the longevity of their husbands. Another aspect of the marginalized status of women explored by the writer is the heart touching condition of the widows. It was a common practice for the widows to have shaved heads. These women were considered inauspicious and many people did not eat the food cooked by them. When Atya was widowed, Kaka had stood against the idea of her becoming a shaven widow. But for this, she was given the status of second class citizen' in the world of widows.

Shashi Deshpande has also given us an insight into the victimization of Mini who is gnawed by the rigid system of marriage which is not based on compatibility but so many other factors like caste, religion and dowry. Deshpande highlights the marginalization and displacement of women within their respective families. The shadow of male dominance thwarts their progress and their wishes are buried in their heart. They spend their whole life slavishly. Mini too becomes a similar slave. Right from her childhood, she is devoted to her family. Being an obedient and submissive girl, she has never broken any rules and regulations set for girls by the family. She has been brought up under strict vigilance and restrictions. Since she knows her duties very well. Indu recalls Mini as a child: "Mini had always been very much of a girl, the way a girl was expected to be, helping the women with small odd chores from a very young age, waiting on her father and brothers and being generally docile" (RS 114). Though Mini realizes the futility of conventions but she is not able to come out. She is going to marry a rich person who is a man with coarse features and crude mannerisms. He has no virtue or capabilities except his wealth. She realizes that being a woman she does not have any choice:

What choice do I have Indu? Millions of girls have asked this question millions of times in this country. Surely it was time they stopped asking it. What choice do I have? Surely it is this, this fact that I can choose, that differentiates me from the animals. But years of blind-folding can obscure your vision so that you no more see the choices. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so that you can no more move out of your cage of no-choice. RS 116-117)

For Padmini alias Mini, like the other Indian girls, getting married is important while the type of groom does not matter. Kaka says: “What’s wrong with the boy? He has two legs, two arms, two eyes, two ears...he’s a normal human being. So what if he’s a little dark? So what if he’s not too bright...” (RS 52). Further, we come to know: “may be the boy is a little ugly, may be a little stupid... but everything else is fine” (RS 55). A girl is seen as a commodity and displayed as a showpiece before every one; she is at the mercy of visitors who will either reject her or select her considering her outer appearance only. In spite of the financial crisis, the parents of the girl have to bear the expenses of serving those who come to see her. As soon as the boy says yes, they immediately settle the marriage. Mini too meets this fate. Her feelings reflect the mental trauma most Indian girls of marriageable age undergo:

You don’t know what it has been like. Watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhav kaka running around after eligible match. And then, sending the horoscope and having it come back with the message, ‘It doesn’t match’ and if the horoscope matched, here 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 is not modern enough’. And If I dressed up well because someone said the boy wanted a smart wife, they would say, ‘she’s too fashionable for us. RS 117)

The writer brings to our notice the hypocrisy and double standards practiced by society. Women, like Mini, who are completely devoted to the tradition and household work, remain satisfied with whatever they get. Their conditioning to assimilate traditional ideology starts from childhood itself. Mini too had learnt to merge her identity and desires with those of her family and conceal her real self. Akka educated Mini not because she wanted her to develop into an individual being but she feels that educated girls get a good match. Mini tells Indu :

Of course I’m marrying him because there is nothing else I can do. I’m no good at studies. I never was. I went to school because... I had to. And then to college because Akka said I must go. Boys prefer graduates these days, she said. So, I went. But I failed and it was a relief to give it up. There’s only one thing I’m really good at....looking after a house. And to get a home, I have to get married. This is not my home, is it. (RS 117)

Vrinda Nabar has aptly summed up the problem of girls like Mini. “Moreover, even if we concede that the girl is an alien in her father’s home, it is manmade laws and social strictures that make her so. Right from birth, a girl is made to feel like a bird of passage in her father’s name” (56-57). Now Mini thinks that her husband’s home is her real home. Her parent’s increasing worries to settle her marriage had filled her with a sense of guilt,

guilt for being born as a girl. She develops such feelings that she is a burden on her family as she is ready to marry 'any man'. The Indian woman is conditioned to accept her husband with his weaknesses and infirmities. She tries her level best to mould her personality to live upto his expectations. Her predecessors act as archetypes for her. Though the feminine qualities imposed on them are difficult to maintain, still they are not able to free themselves from its bondage.

Thus Shashi Deshpande concerns herself with plight of Indian women. She shows great sensitivity and awareness in describing the world of silent, subservient, docile, obedient and submissive women without any awareness of individual identity juxtaposing the questioning educated and career oriented protagonists engaged in self-analysis. The writer gives an insight into the psyche of varied Indian women all of whom feel oppressed in the patriarchal setup. Deshpande, also seems to realize that the condition of women has not yet improved much. They are still a subjugated race with their attitudes, perceptions and thinking highly misshapen by social and sexual stereotypes. There is no doubt that in the western society women are more aware of their conditions than their counterparts in India. In a male dominated society, quest for identity remains a burning question which perturbs woman. Today, most of the women writers are engaged with the question "Who is she?" and "where is she getting to?" Each of them is involved with such crucial problems as to how society sees women, how women see themselves and how they should direct their lives and attitudes for a meaningful fulfillment of their dreams and aspirations. Deshpande is mainly concerned with the weak position of women in modern male-dominated society.

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