

Universal Experience of Female Tribulations in an Indian Milieu:

A Study on Deshpande's Novels *Small Remedies* and *Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract

Though sexual politics is not something new but a universal experience of women, third wave feminism has acknowledged the differences like colours, ethnicities, regions, etc. and has started analysing how the experience of women is something that cannot be universalised but is different for women depending on their cultural background. This paper analyses the experience of middle class women in Indian scenario and how the gap between traditionalists and the educated middle class women in India leads to chaos and confusions in the society and how it imposes great pressure on the women to act according to the rules of the patriarchal community in the society using the selected novels of Sashi Deshpande. It also examines different forms of gender-specific discrimination targeted against women in Indian society.

Keyword

tradition, roles, Indian women, society, individuality

1. Introduction

In cognitive psychology, the general argument is that a person's behaviour may change constantly by the environment. When a woman in a society is born she is forced to behave in certain manner and is conditioned to be ideal daughter, wife, mother, etc. The society around her constantly reminds her of these roles. On the other hand, when the individual moves out of the societal bonds through education, job, etc. she may find an identity of her own, which is different from the one that has forced upon her by the society. At this point of time begins the tension between the individual and the people around her who are the perpetrators of the tradition and roles.

2. Individual verses Society

Thus says Iqbal Kaur that all the problems are there because of the incommunicability between the being and that surrounds the being. The gap between the individual and society leads to disharmony and tension, and this would further lead to anguish and alienation. When comes to the case of a woman who tries to move away from the suffocating conventions and dogmas of the society, she definitely has to face indifference, resistance and hostility.

The convention that infested the Indian womanhood evokes many tensions in the mind of a woman who wants to move away from these roles to pursue her goals in her life. The spirit to fight within her does not allow her to be a subservient, whereas the conventions demand her to be so. This contradiction adds many chaos and confusions in her life.

The emotional chaos in the minds of the protagonists and their reactions to various subjects related to women, caught between tradition and modernity, are the main concerns of Sashi Deshpande's novels. *Small Remedies* and *Roots and Shadows* are two among her most celebrated novels, which record the story of women who choose to follow a path of their own. The novels portray the suffocating experience of women, like Indu and Savitribai, in a society reigned by the age-old customs and traditions. The novels also view the institutionalisation of various roles of women as a daughter, wife, mother, daughter in law, etc. Shashi Deshpande suggests through her fearless and outspoken characters that women can achieve great things in their life if they choose to be not of a kind and learn to find a space to establish their self without fear.

3. Different Roles of Women in Indian Society

Indu in *Roots and Shadows* feels the pain of being born as a woman. She remembers that right from the childhood she has been constantly reminded by others of the family that she is a girl. Simone de Beauvoir says in her *The Second Sex* women are not born, they are made through the process of gendering. The society attributes certain roles to the female and make sure that they act accordingly. This plight of women to be the actors of a pre written script is portrayed in these novels. Indu thus says, "As a girl 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). This shows how a girl child is conditioned right from the childhood to be a woman. The "why" in this passage shows the questioning attitude of Indu. The answer of her family members stands as the representative voice of the society that perpetuates patriarchy. From her childhood Indu has rebelled against the stiff rules of her authoritarian and traditional family. She leaves her home to study in the big city and becomes a journalist. She marries Jayant, a man of her own choice. She even shows the courage to leave him when she understands that he is not different from any other traditional husband. At a point she declares that "I would be most emphatically myself. Indu" (143). All these are more than enough to mark her as an irreverent woman in a society that has got caught in the hands of tradition.

4. The Institution of Marriage

Deshpande then focuses on how the institution of marriage not only limits woman with the role of a good wife, daughter-in-law, mother or a widow but also allows men to own her body. Som, husband of Madhu in *Small Remedies* and Jayant, husband of Indu in *Roots and Shadows* are typical Indian husbands. As members of the Indian patriarchal society, they expect a certain standard of behaviour from their female

partners, the unconscious expectations that a society place upon a woman. The rift begins when the woman fails to keep in track with these expectations and when she tries to listen to the voice of her conscience. The knowledge that Madhu in *Small Remedies* had enjoyed sex before marriage upsets her husband and this further leads to a strained relationship. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* is interested in creative writing, but Jayant does not want her to write. Thus in order to please him Indu modifies her life wholly. She even believes that a woman's good fortune lies in dying before her husband. She thus tries to play the role of a perfect wife and at a time she says, "when I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant when I dress...What he would like. What would please him...?" (49). Eventually, she realises that she is living her life for him and not for her and she feels a sense of insecurity. This insecurity and restlessness give way to think for herself and her individuality and thereby to establish her identity.

Apart from the protagonists most of the women characters in her novels show how they are oppressed and suppressed at different levels in different ways. Akka in *Roots and Shadows*, seems to be an agent of patriarchy but later we see through the eyes of Narmada Atya that she herself is a victim of child marriage and gender oppression. The shaved head of a widow, reminds Indu of the plight of all widows. Those who do not follow this tradition are considered outcasts. Thereby she reminds how in Indian tradition, once entered into the trap of the marriage, even after the death of her husband, a woman cannot escape from the sufferings that come through different practices and customs.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Mini's father, Anant is aware that with his weak financial position, he will not be able to get his daughter married. Thus he agrees to marry her to a man who is not suitable for her. But in order to save her father from further complexities, she agrees not to show her disagreement. When Indu asks her uncle to look for a better match, Anant rejects her idea and says that "may be the boy is little ugly, may be a little stupid...but everything else is fine (51). This also clearly shows the little role a woman has in selecting a groom with whom she is expected to spend the rest of her life.

In *Small Remedies* Deshpande shows how married life limits women characters like Madhu, Lila, Savitribai, and Latha in different ways. Savitribai manages to come out of all the stresses to pursue her wish to become a good singer. She succeeds in attaining that goal and happily accepts her identity as a successful singer and forcefully rejects her bitter past. Madhu observes this attitude of Bhai and comments "In showing me her album she is presenting me with her own illusion of her life. A life of success and achievement. Nothing lacking; no unreconciled child, no dead daughter" (*Small Remedies* 78).

The role of woman as a mother is another important position the society has taken for granted. A woman is considered as a mother only if she is self sacrificing and self denying. Thus Savitribai's role as a mother is considered a failure by the society. Since she has given more importance to her dreams than family, her child Munki, like Adit, son of Madhu, becomes a pawn in the power game between the woman and the society, and this destroys the mother-child relationship.

Deshpande portrays the different levels of oppression faced by women in the society and has tried to emancipate some of her characters from the clutches of tradition, especially the unjust prejudices and

discrimination that have the ability to kill the dreams of a woman. Indu's reunion with Naren and her extra marital relationship with him offer her an opportunity to find expression for her frustration in life and gives her a right over her own body. Similarly Bai showed the courage to break all the shackles of a family life and ran away with Gulab Sahib, the tabla player, and realises her ambition. This helps her to become a successful singer which would have been impossible if she continued to be an obedient wife and self denying mother. Deshpande also juxtaposes traditional women who are the emissaries of the patriarchal society and the modern, educated, and empowered women who prioritize their own personal opinion and dreams.

5. Conclusion

Thus when analyse the two novels of Deshpande *Small Remedies* and *Roots and Shadows* as the portrayal of women in an Indian milieu, we see as Jasbir Jain says that there is a constant "struggle between male ego and female desire for freedom" (*Breaking the Silence* 36). Both the novels explore the psyche of the Indian middle class women trapped between their own aspirations and the compelling and demanding forces of patriarchy. Any woman who wants to come out of such shackles has to be prepared to be treated as an immodest, impudent and sinful woman, but finally it does worth if she manages to overcome all these challenges and achieves her dream and thereby establishes her identity.

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