WOMANHOOD AND PATRIARCHY IN SHASHI'S ‘ROOTS AND SHADOWS’

Introduction to the Author:
Dr. S.Meena Priya Dharshini is an Assistant professor in the department of Women’s Studies, Mother Teresa Women’s University.

Abstract

During recent decades, a galaxy of Indian women novelists has started writing about Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. Such women novelists writing in India are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayandara sahgal, Attia Hossain, Deshpande, P.P.Jabuala, Namita Gokhale... Above all Shashi Deshpande shows vision of feminity in her novel. She has dealt graphically with problems that confront a middle class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. But hers is not the radical and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the matrix of all menace. This paper attempts to define Shashi’s work ‘Roots and Shadows’ as a feminist discourse and also details womanhood and patriarchy in this work.
WOMANHOOD AND PATRIARCHY IN SHASHI’S ‘ROOTS AND SHADOWS’

I call with the firm tone of humanity for my arguments
Sir, are dictated by a disinterested spirit – I plead for my
Sex nor for myself. Independence I have long considered
as the grand Blessing of life, the basis of every virtue and
independence I will ever square by contracting my wants
though I were to live on a barren health.
-Mary Wollstonecraft.

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a study of a ubiquitous male control
over every aspect of a woman’s existence Sarah observes:
Man has subjugated woman to his will, used
Her as a means of selfish, gratification, to
Minister to his sexual pleasure, to be
instrumental in promoting his
comfort: but never has he desired
to elevate her to that rank she was
created to fill

Feminism strives to undo this tilted and distorted image of woman whose crises for
freedom and equality have gone and still go, unheard in a patriarchal social structure, Kamala
Das writes:
I don’t know polities but I know the names
Of those in power and can repeat them like
Days of weeks or names of months (Ramamurthu: 148-9)

Feminist writing aims at the advocacy of the once neglected and marginalized voice of
woman to be pitted against phallocentricism of the received literary tradition. Such work is
found in works such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s ‘A vindication of the Rights of woman. Olive
soheiner’s women and labour Virginia Woolf’s ‘A room of one’s own and Simon De
Beauvoir’s Second Sex. Showalter sees the following phases in the history of woman’s writing:
Feminine phase: Women writing, imitating male norms
Feminist phase: Radical and separatist positions
Female phase: Focused on female experience and female writing

What immediately draws our story, however, shows that Indian society is patriarchal and the whole representation is genderized so much so that women are graded second class citizens by their sex.

During recent decades, a galaxy of Indian women novelists has started writing about Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. Such, women novelists writing in India are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hossain, Deshpande, R.P. Jabvala, Namita Gokhale.....

Shashi Deshpande shows vision of femininity in her novel. She has dealt graphically with problems that confront a middle class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. But hers is not the radical and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the matrix of all menace.

Roots and Shadows, Deshpande’s first novel won the Thirumathi Rangammal prize in 1984. The novel projects the inner world and thoughts of Indu. She is a revolutionary woman. She is seen to be acting against dominance right from her childhood. At her ancestral home, she hated obedience and passivity as a girl child. After the death of her mother, she was brought up by her aunts as her father left home.

Indu refuses to be cowed down by Akka, the rich family tyrant who dominated this family. Here, we see that feminism not only raises a voice against male dominance, but also against women who cherish the values of patriarchy. As a revolt, she married Jeyant who belongs to other caste and breaks traditions. After years, she went to her ancestral home at the time of her Akka’s death. To her great astonishment, Akka has left all her property to her. For Indu, it is the time of questioning, of rethinking her life, her journalistic career, her marriage and her hard-won independence. She meets Naren, her cousin and feels that he understands her more than Jeyant. She shared her problems and everything with him. But at last she returned to Jeyant with a complete new self.

Deshpande portrayed Indu as an indomitable new woman, as an educated and lives in close association with the society, brushing aside all its narrow conventions. Married to Jeyant, Indu freely moves with Naren and uses the words like ‘kiss’, ‘rape’, ‘deflowered and orgasm’.

Through the character of Indu, the novelist has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service, but Jeyant does not
approve of it. Indu’s self-alienation increases as she becomes aware of the conflicting demands made on her by her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer.

In spite of serving the family, women own emotional needs remain unfulfilled. This is seen in Indu’s feeling of isolation which finds an expression in the words, “I am alone” (10) and again her disorientation is expressed in her questions. “Our own people? Who are they? Where do I draw the boundary?”(RS).

Women are left with no choice in their lives. There is shadow of male dominance over every aspect and faced of their lives which towards their progress. As a woman, Indu hardly left with any choice. Her life is acutely circumscribed. She says, “A woman’s life, they had told me contains no choices and all my life especially in this house, I had seen the truth of this”.

Marriage is not the same thing to a man as to a woman. The two sexes are different from each other though each one has the necessity of the other. But 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 equal footing.

A woman like Indu is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. The husband is impervious to her emotional urges. Instead, it is she who has to cater to the needs of his urges and drives. Patriarchy makes woman merge herself into others and neglect her own self. Her identity is lost and she has to live according to her husband’s needs. Jeyant betrays Indu neither hopes for harmony and integration for peace and happiness nor is he a sheltering tree to her.

Womanhood restricts woman and puts her on the periphery. Indu loathes womanhood, which is trust upon a girl for its association with the idea of uncleanliness. In order to assert her right to an independent existence, she longs to escape from the burden and responsibilities of womanhood. In an act of unreflecting defiance against patriarchy. She believes that the woman should deprive herself of the satisfaction that comes from bearing a child. She does not believe in mothering.

Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman but Indu plays the role of an ideal housewife but it restricts her development. She is even denied the scope of giving free play to her artistic potential. Thus marriage leads her to aimless days, infinitely repeated life that slips away gently towards death, without questioning its purpose.

Indu recognizes her displacement and marginalization as a woman. The authoritative and dominating male does not only suppress the female voice but also brought silence, dullness
and repulsion to the houses women live in. women can neither express them nor choose for themselves. They can neither love nor hate but be content with the gift of silence. In silence Indu pines for love almost frantically: “I want to be loved, I want to be happy”.

Patriarchy reduces woman to the state of an object. A woman’s experience is primarily defined through the interpersonal, usually domestic relationships. Her identity exists largely as ‘being-for-others’ rather than ‘being-for-itself. Thus she turns herself into an object and most particularly and object of vision a sight. Indu experiences herself as a woman given to physical narcissism in her self-reflexive concerns with her body: often looking in the mirror.

Male dominance reduces a woman to state of total surrender. Indu feels that she has become so fluid that she has no tangible shape, no form off her own. It is Indu minus the ‘I’.... that’s what marriage is. A trap a cage? A cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... and it’s not a joke, but a tragedy” (59).

As members of the subordinate sex, women are characterized by obedience and submission. Indu says that as a child. She was asked to be obedient and unquestioning and as a girl she was told to be meek and submissive.

Many sexual and gender roles are imposed upon women in a patriarchal, male-bastion culture. Such relative identity or rather ‘received role models’ dishcarten and problematises Indu’s self-perception. Such a world reduces woman to mere thing or a mindless body because her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed. Deshpande also expresses the male prejudice against female children. Indu’s father had parted her 15-day old baby with the family he hated and despised. He had not even come to see her until she was more than a year old.

Through this novel, Shashi Deshpande is not only conscious of the problems and dilemmas of women but also tries to suggest a solution. Only a woman can break the age old traditions and beliefs binding her feet with falter. Indu ultimately decide to do what she wants to. She decides to resign from the job and do the kind of writing she had dreamt of doing.

Bibliography