

# Cultural Subjugation in the Two Novels of Shashi Deshpande

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**Abstract**—Shashi Deshpande expresses a miserable picture and the crucial situation of the middle-class woman in a male-dominated society in which she should lead her life with simple humility. A male child is regarded to be a chain of command, and the female child is regarded to be inauspicious in the family. Caught in the matrix of age-old custom or tradition, Deshpande's woman characters cannot break themselves free from the clutches of tradition. Individual revolt and cultural subjugation on the women folk for traditionality has been grown up. They accept the norms of the society without being away from the developing outer world. When they are educated, reality teaches them to shirk the shackles of customs, beliefs, traditions, taboos and culture by strengthening willpower and developing personality. They realize the cultural subjugation is the suppression under which the female's self loses its nourishment. Education provides them a stronghold to come out of their longings, to break the bindings and to pave a path of self-attainment. But the tradition-bound culture does not allow them to move away from its clutches, and they compromise themselves by framing a bridge along the past, present and future.

**Index Terms**—suspension, subjugation, compromise, tolerance, adjustment

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culture has elaborated to be a keyword in the understanding of human behavior, where the study of culture contains the exploration of the representations and lived experiences of everyday life. Human passions find their expressions through varied cultural practices related to the history of the society and geography of the environment.

Cultural subjugation is a forceful undercurrent which does not allow women to have self-identity and a personal life. The parental and marital homes grant a kind of cloistered life depending upon the menfolk for their day-to-day survival. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru is an angry woman questioning and protesting any form of domination. But marriage dictates a different style of life for her. After confronting so many struggles, she tries to attain a selfhood by equipping herself to face the challenges. She equips herself to face the obstacle and presents herself as an image of women's empowerment. Shashi Deshpande portrays the growth of her character from a panic-stricken and helpless woman to a protagonist

with a strong determination who has resolved to uphold her life in her hands.

By tradition a male child is considered to be mandatory in the religious rituals in the Indian family. The Indian psyche prefers a boy rather than a girl, and it is unquestionably acknowledged in Indian homes. A girl child in the Indian family is treated with partiality without any preference or identity. The woman is taught to suppress her desires to become a good wife, daughter-in-law and a mother. It is insisted that the family can be smoothly run only with her self-sacrifices. Tolerance, nurturing, adjustment and self-abnegation are considered to be the good virtues of women whereas men are not to be bound to fulfill these expectations.

If a woman tries to escape from the overload of these responsibilities, she is branded as selfish. The traditional customs and ceremonies are almost connected with the cooking and housekeeping. So, these activities have become the primary duties of a woman to safeguard her household customs, which have to be indoctrinated into the next generation. If she expresses her inability in any of the situations, she becomes a black mark on the ideal of womanhood.

## II. ANALYSIS

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu was advised by the elderly women as a child to inculcate in her the treasured feminine qualities. In their view this kind of inculcation would make the female children eligible to survive in the traditional families. But Indu does not want to follow this model, as she has her own dreams to be fulfilled. Before marriage she is highly independent, rational, logical and intelligent. But after that she demoulds herself to be an extended identity of her husband. It is a shock to her to realize that she too had changed into an "ideal" wife of an Indian man. She lives up to the expectations of her husband. It is analyzed in *Roots and Shadows* as,

*Always what he wants, what he would like, what would please him? And I can't blame him. It is not he who has pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be ... Have I*

*become fluid with no shape, no form of my own. (54)*

Even after achieving her ambition of becoming a writer she does not have the independence to present her views directly. There are forces which make her to present only a glassy picture of the construct in consideration. She loses her interest in writing creative articles. She is all the more angry, when her husband asks her to compromise and commands her not to resign her job. He says, in the novel *Roots and Shadows*, “That’s life! What can one person do against the whole 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).

Indu is quite submissive. She does not question him but instead she silently goes back to her work, though hating it and hating herself for it. Indu wants to keep her specified identity by not following the rules and concepts of an ideal woman represented by the society around her. After her marriage with Jayant she has also come into the circumference of traditional womanhood. Mini has been inculcated with the traditional feminine qualities from her birth. She devotes herself to the satisfaction of the members of the family. Mini is obedient and follows the regulations of the family with silence and submission. Indu recalls Mini’s childhood and says she has been very much a girl in helping with the household chores and waiting on the male members of the family.

*Mini had always been very much of 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. Our words rarely touched. (122)*

Indu is excited about the willpower of a woman of India who spent her whole life slavishly for others without any word of appreciation from them. Mini too accepts that the life of a woman is devoid of choices. Indu could gauge the reason behind Mini’s submission before her parents’ decision of getting her married to a man who was neither properly educated nor mentally sound. Indu states:

*A woman’s life, they had told me, contained no choices. And all my life, especially 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 wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini, who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength. (6)*

In India, a girl’s marriage is consummated only after satiating the demands of the groom and his parents. Vrinda Nabar writes about the dowry system of India in *Caste as Woman*,

*The bride’s father gives according to his means, frequently out of proportion to them, borrowing if necessary, since he believes that his daughter’s prestige and happiness are at stake. Ironically, no one who is party to such a transaction appears to wonder what happiness measured in these terms implies, or whether it exists at all, or is worth acquiring at that price. (160)*

V.S. Mini discusses the novel in the article “Blindly obeying the societal rules and performing the social obligation, an individual loses his power to act freely and think rationally” (160). *Woman* is considered as a mere tool for gratifying a man’s lust in the society. Indu does not like all the conventional beliefs; an ideal woman means that she should not have her own independent identity. So, she denies the traditional institution of marriage and tries to search an autonomous self though it is very difficult to achieve. She firmly bursts out:

*This is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself; there was somewhere outside me a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then, I met Jayant, and lost the ability to be alone. (34)*

The real problem of the suppressed and subjugated woman among male domination is a kind of nightmarish experience. It is depicted by Saru,

*The hands became a body. Thrusting it upon me. The familiarity of the sensation suddenly broke the shell of silent terror that had enclosed me. ... I struggled to utter the usual words of protest, to say, No, not now, stop it. But the words were strangled in my throat. The face above mine was the face of a stranger. Bland, set and rigid, it was a face I had never seen. A man I did not know. (110)*

The woman sees marriage as an alternative to the bond formed by the parental family. Any wife has to give up her success and freedom. The joint family which has over twenty members with various tastes and temperaments headed by Akka frames the setting of the novel. *Roots and Shadows*’ Akka is an insusceptible and middle-aged woman, some kind of firm authority for the women of the family. The women in the family never pronounce their husbands’ names and they just respond without any questions. Intelligence, rational ideas and listening to music are not allowed in the house. She feels bitter under all this

suppression. As Indu responds in much mental anguish:

*As a child, they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning ... why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat with grace because you are a girl, they said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive. (37)*

She feels it very difficult to adopt all these traditional ideologies which consider a woman as a plaything among elite sections of the society. She takes a firm decision in her mind that she should not pretend for anything. Akka scolds her for talking with a boy in the library and talking about her dead mother. So, she determines to put an end to her association with the family and goes away from the old house. On her own choice, she marries Jayant, thinking that a modern man could be different from an average Indian man, but after a short time she has a thought of leaving her husband in order to discover her true self.

The strictly demanded qualities of devotion and submissiveness are generally imbibed through traditional indoctrination. A married woman is not supposed to pronounce her husband's name, and it is considered to be non-customary to eat any meals before serving it to her husband. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru's classmate Padmakar says: "She cannot talk about anything but servants and children. And prices ... she never has her food until I go and have mine; she cooks just what I like, and she never calls me by my name" (120).

The indoctrination in the family is not accepted by the listener whole-heartedly. They follow the customs of the elders with resentment under compulsion in which there is always an impending danger of repulsion. Dr. Vimala shares this view: "The rigidity of do's and don'ts prescribed by the domineering mother makes her grow wilder and defiant later; she goes to Bombay to study medicine in spite of her mother's opposition" (32). Saru's choice of a boy from an unaccepted community is a sign of her rejection and repulsion. She marries Manu with an acceptance of a permanent break in the relationship with her parents.

*What caste is he? I don't know. A Brahmin? Of course not. Then, cruelly ... his father keeps a cycle shop. Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they! (96)*

Indu is conscious of the unfairness towards women in the society. She highlights so many small incidents in everyday life. Men are not even aware of the household chores performed regularly by women. One such scene is described by her as boring, disgusting and frustrating,

*I went into the house avoiding the hall, ugly now with all the aftermath of an eaten meal. And women like Kaki even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. Martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools. (7)*

As a representative of a new generation, she has many baffling questions before her. The educated women are also bound by the traditional practices. They are sandwiched between the upcoming modernity and strongly framed tradition. In a time of introspection, she asks herself: "Is she her own self?" or "Is it a tragedy never to be free and complete?" (206). She gets no satisfactory answers. Ultimately, she goes back to her parents' home to find out the roots but finds the shadows instead.

### III. DISCUSSION

According to Indu, one should listen to the direction of one's own conscience and be true to oneself in speech as well as action. Indu has the ambition to be perfect in herself; to achieve this perfection, she violates old rules. The novelist artistically represents different phases of women in various roles. She juxtaposes the contradiction of two sets of women who are active in the current Indian society. One set is presented by Akka, Narmada, Sumitrakaki, Kamalakaki, Atya, and Sunanda Atya; another is presented by Indu. Comparing the new generation with the old, a woman's life meant nothing for the latter.

But many Indian families in the society consider women as inferior creatures, pleasure-providing products or childbearing machines. The male ego is explicit in the character of Manu in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* when he resents the economic and social status of Saru. She denies to accept a secondary place in marriage in any situation. This novel shows how Saru faces the trauma and her husband's frustration. It explains the husband's inferiority complex and gender discrimination. In order to conquer male ego, Manu tortures and shows his male domination through sex, and he attacks Saru brutally in the nights only.

*Roots and Shadows* highlights the agony and suffocation that toughens heroine Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She seems to be alienated when she denies accepting the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage of one's own choice gives only disillusionment when she looks at her educated and ostensibly progressive-minded husband. He is in no way better than the ordinary Indian man. She feels contempt for herself when she comes to realize that she unconsciously imitates the ideal Indian wife. This novel shows Indu persistently exploring herself as an individual. The practice of customs and

meaningless rituals is continued only to perpetuate the mythical superiority of men.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* together present a compelling critique of cultural subjugation in patriarchal Indian society. Through the experiences of Indu and Saru, the novelist exposes how tradition, marriage and familial expectations silence women and erode their selfhood. Yet both protagonists resist in their own ways — asserting identity, questioning norms, and striving for autonomy — reflecting Deshpande's vision of women who, despite compromise, never fully surrender their inner selves.

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