

**Man-Woman Relation in Shashi Deshpande's Roots and Shadows**

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*Roots and Shadows*<sup>1</sup>, Shashi Deshpande's first full length novel, is about the complex man-woman relationships within marriage and outside marriage. Here we find the struggle of the protagonist Indu, an educated, middle-class woman, within marriage with her husband Jayant along with her relation with Naren. Besides this man-woman relationship, we find other man-woman relationship like the one between Akka and her husband along with his mistress.

Indu, the protagonist of the novel has to return to her ancestral home after eleven years, which is occasioned by her cousin Padmini's marriage being performed in their ancestral home. She leaves home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loves. She returns on being summoned by *Akka*, the domineering matriarch, on her deathbed. *Akka* has made her the sole heiress to her property, and the atmosphere in the household becomes tense due to resentment by the other family members for having been excluded from the will. Deshpande presents with vivid details a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household, and thereby bringing out the myriad man-woman relationships. Besides their greed, their jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments, and their anguish have been laid bare.

Among the myriad women characters the old tyrannical matriarch *Akka* gets special mention. She is rich and childless, and returns to his brother's house after her husband's death. She exercises supreme control over her brother's household, as her venomous tongue reduces Indu's grandfather *Kaka* into a speechless, submissive character.

It is from Narmada *Atya* that Indu comes to know about *Akka's* sad and tragic married life after her death. *Akka* was married at twelve and her husband, tall, bulky with coarse features, was well past thirty. In contrast *Akka* was small, dainty, and pretty with a round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. She went to her husband's house after six months. By the time she was thirteen, she made two abortive attempts to run away from her husband's house. Her mother-in-law whipped her and kept her starved by locking her up in a room for three days and there was nobody to save her or speak on her behalf. Then she was sent to her husband's room. She cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, "Lock me up again, lock me up."<sup>2</sup> But much against her wishes she was forced to go into her husband's room. *Akka* had told Narmada that there was no escape for her from her husband. She had even told Narmada that before the consummation of her marriage she was told: "Now your punishment begins Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels."<sup>3</sup> It appears from this that this man-woman relation was devoid of any sensibility or sensitivity. It was a regular suffering for her.

For child brides man-woman relation holds no sense; sex was a kind of punishment against which they were helpless and continued to suffer in silence. Thus Deshpande, underscores the point that for child brides marriage was not a happy man-woman relation but a violent yoking together of two people which at least had nothing to do with love. The other aspect of this man-woman relationship is manifest in the way *Akka* controls her husband after he is struck by total paralysis. Although she takes exceptional care of her paralyzed husband for two years, but avenges herself of all that she had to forbear (undergo) by not allowing his mistress, whom he adores, to meet him. Her sadistic nature is also evident when *Akka* tells Narmada with a vicious pleasure that she threw his mistress out when she had come to meet her husband. Narmada further tells Indu that later that night she finds *Akka* in tears who tells her that after marriage there was hardly any night when she did not have to cry. Thus, Deshpande makes a strong statement on the arranged marriages, which are outright criminal in nature. A husband can have a mistress with impunity for his own physical and mental needs, without taking into account the wife's physical and mental needs. Neena Arora aptly remarks: "This condemnation is dictated by man's interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration."<sup>4</sup> Such relations make no sense if marriages do not lead to satisfaction of mutual needs.

While *Akka* has undergone great agony at her husband's house, on her return to her father's house after her husband's death, she imposes a rigid code of conduct on women in the household. She insists that a woman should never utter her husband's name, for it means not only disrespect towards him but also shortens his life span. But Indu, an educated upper middle-class woman, resents as to what connection there was "between a man's longevity and his wife's calling him by name? It's as bad as praying to the *tulsi* to increase his life span".<sup>5</sup>

*Akka* belongs to the old order, and so obsessed with untouchability, and refuses to move into a hospital for fear of getting polluted by the touch of nurses belonging to other castes. She is very meticulous about how a girl should conduct herself in society, and reprimands Indu for talking to a boy in the library. She looks down upon such relations between two people of the opposite sexes, and looks upon them with suspicion. She is also dead against the idea of Naren's mother wanting to learn music. She says:

What learn music from a strange man! Sit and 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 *aarti* songs? What more does a girl from a decent family need to know?<sup>6</sup>

Thus, she is against any contact that a woman may make except the husband.

Indu on her part is pained to realize that despite her education and exposure, she was no different from the women that circumambulated the *tulsi* plant to increase their husbands' life span. Even her husband who is educated and apparently a modern man, is only a typical husband for whom she has to remain passive and submissive. Despite this her own marriage goes haywire.

In the novel we find many instances which show that Indu has been playing the role of wife to perfection to keep Jayant happy and satisfied. Despite her reluctance, she has to continue the wearisome job of writing for a magazine just to keep Jayant pleased. She is against working for the magazine as she gets disillusioned by her experience with a so-called social worker, who had received an award for social services. Indu was so much impressed by that “soft spoken ...seemingly sincere and dedicated”<sup>7</sup> woman that she wrote an article on her. But later on she is surprised to read an article which was “a story of shameless exploitation of ignorance, poverty and need. A story of ruthlessness and unscrupulousness in the pursuit of fame, power and money, all of which had come now”.<sup>8</sup> When she shows the two stories about the same woman to her worldly-wise editor, he rejects the latter story knowing full well that it was true. Her conscience does not allow her to continue doing such writing. But when she tells about her intention to discontinue writing, Jayant steeped in his middle-class values merely says: “That’s life! What can one person do against the whole system! No point making yourself ridiculous with futile gestures. We need the money, don’t we? Don’t forget we have a long way to go.”<sup>9</sup> Thus she continues to write what suits the magazine and not her own conscience. Gradually she realizes the absurdity of the existence, as she has to compromise against her conscience with the values of a hypocrite society where only success mattered. But all this could not have gone for long. Circumstances bring her to a point where every individual has to do some introspection. If *Akka* had not called her she wouldn’t have had time to do some rethinking about her relation with Jayant, wherein she had effaced herself much just to prove that her marriage was a success. But her belated realization is manifest in her private conversation with Naren where she bares it all. Her relation with Naren is yet another aspect to her relation with her husband. It is only with Naren that she is able to open herself up without any inhibitions. It was the height of hypocrisy she practiced just to show off that Jayant and she belonged to the smart young set. She tells:

We are rational, unprejudiced, broad-minded. We discuss. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption and family planning. We scorn the corrupt. We despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked – and our hearts bleed, Naren for Vietnam, for the blacks, for the Harijans – but frankly we don't care a damn not one goddamn about anything but our own precious selves, our own precious walled-in-lives.<sup>10</sup>

She had become aware of the prevailing injustice in society since her childhood. No effort was spared to indoctrinate her to play the role of a meek and submissive daughter, wife, and mother. She tells Naren: “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”, because “you are a female. It is the only way for a female to live and survive”.<sup>11</sup> Even her womanhood is thrust upon her brutally and gracelessly, when she is told, “You’re a woman now... You can have babies yourself”.<sup>12</sup> She begins to hate herself as “for four days now you are unclean. You can’t touch anyone or anything”.<sup>13</sup> That was how she had been introduced into the beautiful world of womanhood.

Jayant who hates any display of passion on Indu's part denies her even the most basic sexual need in marriage. Even in the privacy of their bedrooms, she is not let to shed her inhibitions. She tells Naren: "Jayant, so passionate, so ready, sitting up suddenly and say, 'no, not now', when I had taken the initiative."<sup>14</sup> Being so snubbed by Jayant she feels humiliated and disillusioned. In a choked voice, she tells Naren: "When I'm like that he turns away from me. I've learnt my lesson now. And so I pretend. I'm passive. And unresponsive. I am still and dead."<sup>15</sup> So her lot is not much different from the other household women. Like them she too has become "still and dead".

Indu, who had considered herself smart, educated, independent and clever, comes to the painful conclusion that she was no better than her *Kakis* and *Atyas* who led their miserable existence in their respective man-woman relationships.

Quite a few incidents in the novel prove Indu's awareness of the inequity women had to reconcile with in their relations with their husbands. The drudgery of performing the countless household chores exclusively comes into their share which they perform without any protest or feeling, which makes their lives miserable, and that too goes unrecognized. Indu feels appalled at the sight of scattered plates and littered remnants lying about after the meal. She becomes conscious of the exemplary patience and courage women have shown to clear up the mess after every meal: "And women like *Kaki* even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. Martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools."<sup>16</sup> What the novelist wishes to convey is that such behaviour on the part of women to keep surviving such man-woman relationship in marriages is utter foolishness. They are neither martyrs nor heroines but only stupid fools if they accept a subordinate position voluntarily without making any fuss over it. Indu, calls the household chores tiresome, boring and frustrating like the job of Sisyphus. Simone de Beauvoir has to say this:

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition; the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time. She makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.<sup>17</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir refers to this striking conflict that every girl at puberty has to undergo as "she cannot become 'grown up' without accepting her femininity; and she knows already that her sex condemns her to a mutilated and fixed existence, which she faces at this time under the form of impure sickness and a vague sense of guilt".<sup>18</sup> Indu is conscious of the inferior position women have been condemned to in marriages. She says to her *Kaka* in fun, "Can you imagine them sending up a cup of tea for me? Women and children should know their places."<sup>19</sup> The shaven-head of a widowed domestic help reminds her how a widow was reduced to a total non-entity and had to remain shaven-headed all her life after her husband was dead. Indu's *Kaka* was dead against this idea and the widowed *Atya* "was now a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her".<sup>20</sup> Their lot never changes, neither before marriage nor after it.

Here at her father's house, she is nostalgic about Jayant. She has a sense of incompleteness. She is aware of the fact that she is incomplete without Jayant and certainly not different from the breed of women she had forgotten after leaving home. All the time she misses Jayant and wants him to be by her side. She feels unhappy and incomplete in Jayant's absence. She feels incomplete in yet another sense as her academic and economic success does not make any worthwhile impact on the other household

women: “To get married to bear children to have sons and then grandchildren they were still for them the only success a woman could have.”<sup>21</sup> She has come far enough in life in comparison to her *Kakis* and *Atyas* but back home she becomes agonizingly aware of her unenviable plight, as her marriage has not put her in a class apart. A woman after marriage becomes so used to her husband that without him they feel great uneasiness and wish to be back home

Although she is happy and feels great to be back home after an absence of eleven years, but all the while she wishes to be one with Jayant. She is not at peace here without him, and is nostalgic. She feels herself incomplete without Jayant by her side. She thinks, “This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself.”<sup>22</sup> All along she had moved in life on her own, married a man of her choice, but still feels that she has not been able to realize herself fully without Jayant. She cannot imagine being totally free and independent without being complete in herself. The compulsive circumstances had made her diminished and passive as any other wife. She is obsessed with Jayant: “When I look into the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I undress I think of him. Have I become a fluid with no shape, no form of my own?”<sup>23</sup> She had changed herself for the sake of Jayant just to keep him happy and not to go against his wishes: “A woman who sheds her ‘I’ who loses her identity in her husband’s.”<sup>24</sup> Pitting her against the woman of the older generation, Deshpande has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of Indian women. The one is representative of Narmada, Kamala *Kaki*, Sumitra *Kaki*, *Atya*, and Sunanda *Atya*; and the other by Indu. Indu’s academic achievement, economic independence and her independent attitude have not changed her lot. In all such man-woman relationship it is invariably the man who calls the shots and woman has to follow in his footsteps. Their only aim remains “to get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren”.<sup>25</sup> Indu, representative of the new generation with a rational temperament tries to follow her own conscience but fails miserably as practically it is not possible to be complete in oneself.

Besides, much discussion has been done on Indu-Naren relationship. Much critical controversy has been raised about the author’s motives regarding the incestuous relation between Indu and her cousin, Naren. It is Naren to whom she tells every little detail of her married life. She is comfortable with Naren, and pours out her heart to him, leaving nothing to surmises and guesses. Naren who was so natural to her and the easy compatibility that develops between the two, makes her take the most controversial step of surrendering herself to him not once but twice in the novel. She indulges in the act with much wild abandon and cherishes it later without any guilt consciousness. She thinks:

I can go back and lie on my bed. I thought, and it will be like erasing the intervening period and what happened between Naren and me. But deliberately I went to my bed and began folding the covers. I don't need to erase anything I have done, I told myself in a fit of bravado.<sup>26</sup>

She makes it a point not to disclose her relationship with Naren to Jayant as she doesn’t consider anything wrong in it, and considers it as a private matter between herself and Naren. Different reviews have made different remarks on this. P. Bhatnagar laments:

Indu's casual and matter-of-fact attitude to what she had done is shocking. Have our morals really gone so low that woman commit this sin for nothing, just to prove that they do not lack courage? Is this really representative of the modern Indian woman? <sup>27</sup>

Yet another critic, P. Ramamoorthy does not view Indu's adultery as something negative but as something that is born of the predicament of the compulsive circumstance woman like Indu find themselves in. To Indu it is an exercise of autonomy within marriage. He observes:

This sheds a brilliant light on Indu's awareness of her autonomy and her realization that she is a being, and not a dependent on Jayant. The novel gains its feminist stance in Indu's exploration into herself but it also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human existence.<sup>28</sup>

In such man-woman relationship it is the woman who has to bear the brunt. But practicing adultery of this kind may or may not be proper, as that depends on the disclosure of the fact. Perhaps Deshpande is merely giving expression to a fact which is integral to such marriages. She is trying to shake the readers out of their complacency by thrusting in their face the double standards being practiced in such relationships.

The novelist also throws light on the problems that middle-class families encounter in their search for suitable grooms for their marriageable daughters. The case in point is that of Padmini, where the parents get her married off in desperation, and the stoic resignation with which the girl accepts her lot is exemplary and commendable. The groom here is no match for her. She is dainty and beautiful whereas he is very coarse. Such forging of man-woman relation appears to be very unjust and savage. Padmini's acceptance of a groom with "heavy, coarse features and crude mannerism", <sup>29</sup> makes her wonder whether woman had any other choice but to accept and submit unconditionally. But that leaves a woman nowhere if the same fails. She thinks: "The woman had no choice 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."<sup>30</sup> Like Padmini, for the other Indian girls also, it is marriage that matters and not the man. The search for a man is so difficult that parents become anxious and desperate and, at one nod from the man, settle the marriage. It's a violent yoking together of two bodies, which certainly is insensible and insensitive. Indu wonders what the reasons could have been behind Padmini's acceptance of a man who was no match for her. Padmini's reply to Indu's question is reflective of the mental trauma girls of marriageable age have to undergo:

You don't know what it has been like. Watching *Kaka* and Hemant and even Madhav *Kaka* running around after eligible men. And then sending the horoscope and having it come back with a message, it doesn't match? And if the horoscope matched there 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's not modern enough.' And

if I dressed up well, they would say, “She’s too fashionable for us. Or too short. Or too tall. Or too something.” And *Kaka* trying to laugh and talk to those people, while his eyes looked so... anxious. And I, feeling like as if I had committed a great crime by being born a girl. So we would have to go through with it all over again. And finally if, everything was fine, there was the dowry.

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In view of the fact that arranged marriage is not a marriage of two souls, Deshpande raises the seminal issue of arranged marriage if it still holds any import. Indu reflects Deshpande’s views that an arranged marriage was nothing “but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?”<sup>32</sup> But in human terms it is horrific.

Such man-woman relation in marriage proves to be a great bane for both, and both lead a lonely and hellish existence. Here, the novelist exposes the hypocrisy and double standards prevalent in society. The easily available Naren, one who had been chosen by Indu for Padmini, is not considered a suitable match for their daughter; instead they pay a handsome dowry for one who has nothing but his family’s social status. Here Shashi Deshpande does not make any direct statements but raises the issue subtly to be pondered over by the readers.

Indu’s experiences teach her that one should listen to the voice of one’s conscience and go by it. Freedom in such relations can be gained if one dares to do what one believes is right and tenaciously follows it. This alone can bring harmony and fulfilment in life, and in turn prove beneficial to both.

Indu decides to go back to Jayant with the hope that she would do what she thinks right and not be dishonest to her inner self. She reflects:

Now I would go back and see that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty.  
Nevertheless I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me.<sup>33</sup>

Shashi Deshpande conveys the message that forced or love marriage when go stale, leave nothing but frustration which leads to extramarital relationship.

The novel is about the complexities that beset man-woman relationships. Here we find the unenviable plight of the protagonist Indu, within marriage with her husband Jayant along with her relation with Naren. Besides this man-woman relationship, we find other man-woman relationship like the one between Akka and her husband along with his mistress. Through the story of Indu the novelist has exposed the different kinds of man-woman relationships and laid bare to our gaze the complexities in these relationships which are not only born of the differences in their inherent natures but also due to the impervious circumstances they find themselves in.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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