

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND SHADOWS: A MIRROR OF INDIAN BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITIONS

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ABSTRACT

*Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Academy Award winning Indian woman writer in English, has ten novels, two novellas, four books for children and a large number of short stories to her credit. Her novels are deeply rooted in Indian soil, context and society. She has been concerned about the issues and problems of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy with its beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, mythology, philosophy and culture. She strongly believes that everything that is Indian guides and controls the life in a variety of ways. As a man is made by the race, the moment and the milieu, Indians are made by Indian society, culture and philosophy. Indian culture plays a constructive role in moulding the life of Indians. Deshpande's novels are women-oriented. Her women protagonists, by and large, find themselves to be the victims of beliefs, superstitions, orthodox customs, conventions and traditions which are in favour of men. Since the beginning of her career as a short story writer, she has been writhing about educated and career-oriented middle-class Indian women who are shaped and developed by everything that is Indian - Indian beliefs, superstitions, customs, conventions, traditions, philosophy and culture. The present article is an attempt to highlight the influence of Indian beliefs and superstitions on the life of middle-class Indian women projected in Deshpande's novel, *Roots and Shadows*.*

Key words: *fettered, horoscope, humiliation, pronouncements, retribution, superstitions, meditation*

Shashi Deshpande, a popular Indian woman novelist in English, gives an authentic representation of Indian life with its norms and values, customs and conventions, beliefs and superstitions in her novels. Her novels are rooted in Indian soil and context, in everything that is Indian. They mirror a middle-class India with special focus the woman who is destined to undergo great suffering and humiliation in a male-dominated Indian society. She has been basically concerned with exploring the inner psyche and consciousness of an educated and career-

oriented middle-class Indian woman, a victim of Indian patriarchy with its beliefs and superstitions, who is aware of her smothered and fettered existence as an inferior member of an orthodox Indian society. Indian life, in particular, and the life of a middle-class Indian woman, in particular, has been shaped and developed, rather suppressed and subjugated in an orthodox Indian society with its beliefs and superstitions since time immemorial. Indian philosophy, culture and civilization, too, play a significant and deciding role in the life of the individual. Culture, in particular, is something that signifies a social, religious and mythological heritage of the people of India; and Indian heritage is something to which Indians respond knowingly and unknowingly, consciously and unconsciously.

Indian beliefs and superstitions, legends and myths, epics and legends, films and fairy tales have a deep impact on Indian way of life. The generation represented by the people like Old Uncle, in *Roots and Shadows*, is inspired by the great Indian heroes like Tagore, Gandhi, Vivekananda and many others with their philosophy, principles and teachings. Old Uncle, with a sense of pride, asks: “Tell me, Indu, who are your heroes? I don’t mean you personally, but all of you, your generation. We had Tagore and Gandhi, Vivekananda, Aurobindo . . . and so many more. Who are yours?” (Deshpande 100). He suggests that people need to have certain heroes to give a proper direction to their life and that life can be shaped and guided by certain beliefs. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, *That Long Silence*, has been a great admirer and lover of Indian film music, in general, and the songs of Rafi and Lata, in particular. Her life has been shaped and developed by Indian myths and epics. She is happy to follow the footsteps of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, the mythological characters, Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri following death to reclaim and win back her husband, and Draupadi stoically sharing her husbands’ travails. She struggles to be an ideal Indian wife by following her husband blindly like Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband in the epic, ‘*The Mahabharata*’. She, a typical Indian wife, accepts her husband as a sheltering tree. The story of a sparrow and crow, too, gives a particular shape to her life.

There has been a two way relationship between films and human life. Films, to a large extent, reflect life, on one side, and men and women are tempted to imitate life being reflected in films, on the other side. They strive to interpret the meaning of their lives in the light of films that they watch and songs in them. Sumi, in *A Matter of Time*, forgets herself when she hears the clown’s song; ‘*Jeena yahan, marna yahan, iske siwa jana kaha*’. The song is a kind of riddle for her. She puzzles over the meaning of the words of the song. The clown with his tragic end keeps on troubling and torturing her. She begins to consider every individual a tragic and doomed victim. She is so much under the influence of movies that it is she, who, after watching Satyajit Ray’s ‘*Charulala*’, chooses the name for her second daughter after the heroine. Saru’s younger brother, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is named after Dhruva, a mythological character who was pushed off his father’s lap by his step-mother, and who,

full of anger, sorrow and humiliation, became the constant North Star by giving himself up to a steadfast meditation. Indian myths and legends, movies and songs in them seem to be deeply rooted in our life thereby shaping and developing Indian life both positively and negatively. Hindu Indian women, to a large extent, strongly believe in the strength of *tulsi puja*. They believe that the *tulsi puja* on the part of the married woman makes her live as a *Suhasini* and helps the unmarried girl to have a good husband. Human fate is believed to be written on forehead.

We are far away from the realization of the higher truth relating our life. It is always beyond our perception. Our belief in the strength of Indian mythological characters enables us to move on with our lives with courage and confidence. The belief that Meerabai drank poison and yet lived, that Purandaradasa was converted by God in the guise of a mendicant, that Saint Tukaram's poems, rather his *abhangas* remained safe and sound and emerged intact from the river *Indrayani* after thirteen days, that the marriage of Shiva and Parvati was a magical and awe-filled story of love of a man and a woman, are the inseparable part of our lives. The very fabric of Indian sensibility has been kept intact by these beliefs. In a response to Premi's question in the novel, *A Matter of Time*, 'why did you do it, Gopal?' Gopal is once again reminded of the Yaksha's question to Yudhishtira. To Premi, he says: "You remember the Yaksha's question to Yudhishtira: what is the greatest wonder in this world? And what Yudhishtira's answer was! We see people die and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever. Yes, it's true, that is the greatest marvel this world . . . In fact, it's the secret of life itself. We know it's all there, the pain and suffering, old age, loneliness and death, but we think, somehow we believe that it's not for us. The day we stop believing in this untruth, the day we face the truth that we too are mortal . . . it will become difficult, almost impossible to go on . . . It happened to me. I stopped believing . . . I could no longer believe that there is a meaning to my life". (Deshpande 133-134). His belief that his life has no meaning makes him leave his wife and daughters.

Indians believe that death is certain to all. Nobody can avoid it; nobody can escape it. Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* believes that we have to go on living until it is time for us to go. She is reminded of the parable of Buddha with his trust in the ultimate truth that death is an inescapable human condition, that it is certain and inevitable, and that it is the only truth in human life. Aru, in *A Matter of Time*, wants to mend the wall between Gopal and Sumi, her parents, strives to put their world right. Gopal considers Aru's desire to put the world right itself a problem. To Surekha, a lawyer, he says: "When I was her age, I wanted to put the world right too. I was sure the revolution is the answer . . . My father told me to read the story of Nahusha. I didn't know it then, I didn't even know it was in the '*Mahabharata*'. I read it much later, after my father's death, and now I know why he wanted me to read it. It tells us that every revolution carries within it the seed of its own destruction. One

oppression only replaces another”. (Deshpande 214). The story of Nahusha makes him believe the fact that the seeds of destruction are in the revolution itself.

Indian life, to a large extent, has been moulded by the two great epics - ‘*The Mahabharata*’ and ‘*The Ramayana*’; and other Indian myths and the thoughts and principles of Indian thinkers and philosophers. Indian children are being told the stories from the Indian epics. Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, remembers the story Old Uncle had told them as children, the story of Bhishma lying heroically on the bed of arrows made by Arjuna. On her return to her parental home, standing in the door, Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is reminded of the Krishna Sudama story, the story in which poor Sudama is greeted warmly by Krishna and Rukmini. The photographs of Gandhi and Nehru and of Krishna as a crawling infant take her back into her childhood. She, later, learns from her father that her mother who was on her death bed wanted him to read ‘*The Mahabharata*’, and ‘*The Ramayana*’. She wanted him to read the episode of Duryodhana waiting for the Pandavas to come and kill him. The episode gave her the courage to face her death with courage. Most Indians believe that if you utter the name of ‘Rama’, the mythological king of Ayodhya, the immortal soul of the dead goes to the heaven.

Indians look at the concept of retribution, that of punishment in their own way. Saru feels that she has been punished in the form of her sorrows and sufferings because she has done wrong to others. She admits: “. . . I deserve it after all. Look what I’ve done to him. Look what I did to Dhruva, and to my mother. Perhaps if I go on suffering . . . It’s because I wronged her that I’m suffering now”. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 204). Jaya remembers how her grandmother used to frighten children with her dire pronouncements: “Tell lies now and you’ll be a lizard in your next life, steal things you’ll be a dog, cheat people and you’ll be a snake”. (*That Long Silence* 128). However, she is mature enough to know that people do not have to wait for another life for punishment and that an act and retribution follow each other naturally and inevitably in one life only. She knows and believes: “Dasarath killed an innocent young boy whose parents died crying out for their son. And years later, Dasarath died too, calling out for his son”. (*That Long Silence* 128). Old Uncle, in *Roots and Shadows*, has his own philosophy of crime and punishment. He says: “We have to pay for the sins of our ancestors”. (Deshpande 137). People, who go to bathe everyday in the tank near the Shiva temple, blindly believe that sins can be washed away. It is Naren who says: “To wash away my sins . . . what else? I have a ritual dip every day like a good Brahmin. Hold your nose, loop up your sacred thread, and wash away your sins”. (Deshpande 172). Sunandaty, with her own faith says: “But you always pay for your wrongs. That’s why I say. And it’s true. Look how much trouble they had getting Mini’s marriage fixed up”. (Deshpande 133). She means to say that it is difficult for Mini’s parents to fix up her marriage because of their wrong doings.

Beliefs can play a constructive and a destructive role in human life. Superstitions, however, are bound to play only a destructive role in it. Superstitions, social ills, refer to any belief or practice which is not explained by any logic. Any faith or practice which is not questioned and challenged on the basis of facts or truth is a superstition. Since superstitions don't allow the people to think logically and rationally, their strange irrational and illogical behavior leads them to heavy losses in terms of money, health, and peace of mind. Though, Indian society is fast progressing, there are many Indians who nurture superstitions. Indians, who believe in God, like Saru's mother and many other Indian women, regularly visit temples, churches and other religious places to pray and worship God with the hope and belief that God will help them to realize their worldly requirements. It is believed that if an unmarried girl worships and prays the 'tulsi', she gets a good husband and that if a married woman does so, the 'tulsi' will keep her husband safe and sound. Deshpande is concerned about the sordid reality of human life with special focus on the life of Indian women caught in the trap of beliefs and superstitions, customs and conventions. She believes that a middle-class Indian woman is crushed between her desires and aspirations, on one side, and restrictions imposed on her by orthodox beliefs, conventions, traditions and superstitions, on the other side. She also believes that is of the view that Indian society rooted in traditional beliefs, superstitions, customs and conventions has been biased against women. The woman's move towards liberty and modernity is hampered by the rules and regulations, norms and values, beliefs and superstitions deeply rooted in Indian society. The present article is an attempt to highlight the reflection of Indian beliefs and superstitions with their impact on the life of middle-class Indian women in Deshpande's novel, *Roots and Shadows*.

Indu, the protagonist of the novel, *Roots and Shadows*, is against beliefs which treat Indian women inferior to their male-counterparts. She gets irritated when she is told that if she calls Jayant, her husband by his name, it not only shows disrespect but also shortens her husband's life. Unable to control her anger, she exclaims impatiently: "That's just to frighten the women, to keep them in their places. And poor fools, we do just that. What connection can there be 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". (Deshpande 32). She is surprised to see women piously circumambulating *tulsi*, devoutly standing in front of it with folded hands and with their eyes closed. The conversation between Atya and Indu in the novel, (Deshpande 32), speaks a lot about the beliefs and superstitions of Indian women:

What's it for?

You'll understand when you get married,

What'll happen then?

You'll have a husband. And the *tulsi* . . . if you pray to her... she'll keep him safe.

Didn't you pray, Atya?

I did, child. But it was not written on my forehead that I should be so fortunate.

What's written on mine, Atya?

Lots of good fortune, my darling.

Indu does not fail to understand what Atya means by a good fortune of a woman. Fortune of a woman is believed to be decided and determined by *tulsi* and *tulsi puja*.

Anant-kaka is in a hurry to get rid of his daughter, Mini whose horoscope has a flaw in it. Indu considers him a poor man whose family, Mini, in particular, has been a burden for him. He is pleased with the man chosen by Akka for her. According to Akka it is a perfect match for Mini. Anant-kaka, too, says: "It's a good alliance . . . Yes; I think we've been lucky. Considering the family, status and all that, we've been quite lucky . . . He has two legs, two arms, two eyes, two ears . . . I'm just telling you he's a normal human being. So what if he's little dark? So what if he's not too bright?" (Deshpande 47-48). Indu is shaken with laughter to learn Kaka's list of his would-be son-in-law's virtues. According to the horoscopes it is a perfect couple. Madhav-kaka has a different opinion. He says: "Not perfect . . . But what couple could be perfectly matched? Tell me, Indu . . . you chose your own husband. Are you a made-for-each-other couple? . . . Marriage itself is a difficult enough business. For two people to merge into one identity, it's . . . almost an impossibility. But given certain things in common, languages, customs, rituals, backgrounds . . . all this makes it easier". (Deshpande 98). He means to suggest that common language, common customs, common rituals, common background ultimately lead to a happy marriage. Indu bitterly reacts against this and says that human emotions are more important than everything else. A happy marriage depends upon sharing emotions and feelings of each other. It is ridiculous to think about everything, the families, the background, the castes, the communities, the customs, the stars, the *gotras*, and the horoscopes. Like superstitions, Indu thought, caste-system was another social evil in India. She rightly said: "We Indians can never get away from caste. If we've rejected the old ones, we've embraced the new ones. Do I think of myself as a Brahmin? . . . But I'm the educated, intelligent, urban, the middle class. We have our own rules, our own pattern to which I adhere as scrupulously as Atya and Kaki observe their fasts and *pujas*". (Deshpande 58).

Indian tradition believes *kumkum*, green bangles, black beads to be the symbols of wifehood; it considers wifehood auspicious while widowhood inauspicious. Mini, a young girl with romantic ideas, is excited at the very thought of marriage, as if marriage is the only goal of her life. It's a great achievement even for her mother that she is getting her daughter married. Looking at Mini's beautiful and glowing face, Indu thinks: "I knew she was fulfilling her destiny. To her, it was the marriage that mattered, not the man". (Deshpande 4). The home is crowded with invitees; it is filled with the smell of flowers, food and incense sticks. Kaka has been enjoying his role of a genial host while women have been working continuously in the kitchen. As ritual follows ritual, there are ripples of excitement with an undercurrent of tension. Indu recollects: "In the afternoon, all the women in the family were equipped with green glass bangles. Mini's delicate wrists, loaded with bangles, looked like the symbol of the change in her. They had lost their girlishness and seemed heavy with womanhood. She seemed to be conforming to the romantic image of the blushing bride dreaming of her bridegroom". (Deshpande 3). Indu rejects the romantic image of a bride dreaming of and eagerly waiting for her bridegroom. She believes that the image has always been false not only for Mini but for most brides in India.

Indu remembers a little gift given to her by her Kaka and Kaki on her wedding. She recollects: "Kaka . . . the only one in the family who had come for my wedding, apart from my Father, of course. Perhaps it was the first time Kaka had defied Akka. But he had said nothing about that. On the day, however, he had awkwardly pushed a small packet into my hands . . . I had opened it and found a piece of green silk, green bangles, packets of *haldi* and *kumkum*, all the symbols of a happy wifehood. I had been incredibly touched". (Deshpande 40). Indu, like Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, considers herself unfortunate as she and her husband, Jayant were never invited to her ancestral home during the festivals only because she had married Jayant, the man from a different caste, against the wish of Akka. She feels sorry that Jayant is deprived of all the privileges of a son-in-law.

Though, Indu was away from her parental home for ten years, it is not easy for her to forget the pattern of life that she had experienced before her marriage. In her childhood, she was trained to brush her teeth and wash her face before having a cup of tea. She now goes to the tap near the raised washing stone in the backyard. She prefers it to the bathroom with its slimy stone floor and huge copper vessels which were rarely cleaned. She thinks to herself: "When had they last been cleaned? There had to be an eclipse or a *Diwali* for the bathroom vessels to get a cleaning". (Deshpande 34). This has been a common practice followed in Indian families. She remembers her friend who was back from abroad telling her: "You know, Indu, even there, I used to remove my stockings and shoes and wash my feet in the bath tub before going to bed". (Deshpande 34). This, according to Indu, has been an Indian way of life. It is difficult for Indians to escape the compulsions and traditions of the past that shape and modify the present. Indu knows: "We flatter ourselves that we've escaped the compulsions of the

past; but we're still pinioned to it by little things. If not, why do I hesitate to have a cup of tea before washing and brushing? Why do I dislike the thought of a meal before I've had my bath?" (Deshpande 34). Jayant, her husband, sarcastically calls it her natural fastidiousness. With a smile, he says: "You're the same after all. Same taboos, same fetishes, under a different name". (Deshpande 35). Jayant does not appreciate her fastidiousness. However, Indu comes from a typical Indian household with cups without ears, saucers that never matched and with no spoons.

Indu is against the baseless conventions and traditions, meaningless rites and rituals. She thinks to herself: "A birth, a marriage, a death . . . we Hindus have elaborate rituals for all of them. They seemed meaningless to me, the rituals that Akka's husband's nephew, Shridhar, performed, his newly shaven head drooping piously. I hoped no one would do such things for me. Yet I knew it was unavoidable. Your religion claims you at last, however little you believe. We try to fool ourselves that we are not like other living things. For us, we think, death is not the end. It is the beginning of something else . . . But they don't really go anywhere, our dead. Here, where we were all gathered to perform Akka's final obsequies, I could feel her presence very strongly among us . . . It is one of those memories that will stay with me all my life". (Deshpande 58-59). After Akka's death, as her body has been taken away for her funeral rites, Indu remembers: "Outside I could hear the shuffling sounds of bare feet on the floor. They were leaving. Someone began to moan as a hoarse voice uttered the name with which Akka would be speeded on her way to heaven. *Ram, Ram, Shri Ram*". (Deshpande 21-22).

The woman who dies before her husband is believed to be fortunate. And if a widow does not shave her head after her husband's death, she is treated as a second class citizen. Indu is shocked to see Kaku's uncovered head. Kaku, a widow, feels pride to have two good, holy and sacred names, Ganga, the name given to her by her grandmother, and Kaveri, the name given to her by her mother-in-law. She proudly says: "Ganga . . . That was my name in my father's house. Actually it was my grandmother who chose it. She had just returned from Kashi. What a welcome they gave her! . . . Going to Kashi was a real pilgrimage in those days. Now, you just sit in a train and reach Kashi. What merit is there in such a pilgrimage? . . . Another holy river, the Kaveri, my mother-in-law chose that one, both good and holy names". (Deshpande 118). So saying she begins to weep, but she controls herself and wipes her eyes with the end of her sari. In the process, she exposes her head which is "the bare skull, with its short hairs, looked somehow, not only indecent, but obscene when bared". (Deshpande 118). Indu understands why Anant-kaka has strongly resisted the idea of Narmada-tya's becoming a shaven widow after the death of her husband. Indu knows: "She was now a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her". (Deshpande 118).

The woman has deliberately been kept away from the *puja* room during the periods. Indu's ancestral home, too, has a typical *puja* room. She is irritated by the convention that does not allow the unclean woman to get into the *puja* room. She is raged against the rules which make her an outcast three days in a month. She remembers Kaki making a complaint: "It's so difficult to know these days . . . Nobody observes the rules any more. Even Sumitra . . . whenever she comes here, she always says, 'I just finished'. You can fool people, but you can't fool the family gods". (Deshpande 119). These and many more beliefs and superstitions have been deeply rooted in Indian society. Practice of certain rites and rituals for a birth, a marriage and a death, matching of horoscopes believed to be necessary to arrange marriages, playing post-wedding ceremonial games, observing fasts, performing *pujas*, applying *haldi* and *kumkum* as a symbol of wifeness, celebrating *hartalika*, *mangala gouri*, *Bhau-bij*, *Raksha bandhan*, *Diwali* festival, *Ganapati* festival, birth and death anniversaries of the near and dear ones are a few of the inseparable parts of Indian conventions and traditions.

Indu does not like a traditional method and rules of serving the meal. Once when she changes the method of serving food, the result has been disastrous. She remembers: "Since childhood the right method of serving food had been drilled into me. Salt here, chutney and pickles below it, vegetables on the right, *dal* in the centre, ghee only after serving the *dal*. The pattern was rigid and there could be no deviation from it. Once in a contrary mood, I had purposely changed it. The results had been catastrophic. I had fled to Old Uncle, always my refuge then, and cried out, 'Why can't we do it in any other way?'" (Deshpande 14). It is from Old Uncle, a typical old Indian; she learns that we need to have some rules so that life can have direction and discipline, grace and dignity, and that we can always find measures of freedom within these rules. Indu learns the lessons of Indianness and Indian way of life from Old Uncle. Anant-kaka highlights the basic difference between the young and the old. He says: "It's not that, Indu. You people will never understand. For our generation, elders were to be feared, respected, and obeyed. We used to sit up when they entered the room, and touch their feet when we went out; yet there was affection too". (Deshpande 46). This has been really an Indian way of life but Anant-kaka regrets that younger generation represented by Sharad and others was deviating from it. The old dream of the past whereas the modern and young of the future. Old Uncle says: "Affection in a family . . . it should be a living presence". (Deshpande 46). Affection plays a great role in human life; it brings the people together; it binds the people together. Indu is greatly inspired to see Old Uncle's love for and trust in Gods and the great Indian heroes like Swami Vivekananda. It is, perhaps, because of Swami Vivekananda, his hero that he chooses his grand-son the name 'Naren'. Indians are guided by the heroes from Indian myths and the leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda and others.

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