Man and his place in society have always been a matter of concern to a writer. A true artist must have the capacity to have an insight into life and should be aware of his surroundings and environment. He cannot afford to live in an ivory tower when humanity is writhing in pain. Shashi Deshpande was born and brought up in India and in an Indian family. She lives in India and she was never educated abroad, though, she has visited England. She writes for Indian readers and none of her characters are foreigners, though she is writing in English. She is concerned about Indian people and explores the complexities of their lives.

Inhibitions and superstitions are universal phenomena though they vary from country to country. Preference of male children, discrimination against girls and denial of freedom to choose the partner of life, restrictions on the choice of occupation — these are some of the ordeals a woman in India passes through. Her early life generally means a preparation for a marriage but not a decent education and preparation for a career.

Gender discrimination takes a major role in Indian society. The mother sees Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* only as a burden to be eased, a problem to be solved, a responsibility to be dispensed with and a person who has no right to pick up any choice in life. Saru expresses her cares in an unpleasant manner:

Don’t go out in the sun. you’ll get even darker.
Who cares?
We have to care if you don’t, we have to get you married.
I don’t want to get married.
Will you live with us all your life?
Why not?
You can’t.
And Dhruva?
He’s different. He’s a boy. (45)

Saru’s mother is in favour of her brother Dhruva. It gives Saru an insecure childhood. She feels she is unable to tolerate the preference shown towards her brother and jealous of her brother when he gets all the parental care and attention. Her mother believes a girl to be a liability and boy an asset. As Sarabjit Sandhu aptly remarks:

The mother is very attached to her son. Her attitude is a typical one — after all, he is male child and therefore one who will propagate the family lineage. It another sense, also, the male child is considered more important than a girl, because he is qualified to give “agni” to his dead parents. The soul of the dead person would otherwise wander in fervent. (19)

Saru’s birth itself was an unpleasant one for her mother. She painfully utters the words of her mother: “But of my birth, my mother had said to me once … ‘It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible’. And somehow, it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rains” (TDHNT 169). The same discrimination is pictured by Deshpande in her novel That Long Silence also. In the case of Jaya, it is evident in her mother’s attitude towards her and her brother Dinker. Her mother is much interested in the welfare of Dinkar. At the same time, Jaya is not at all cared for by her mother. Jaya remarks ironically about her mother’s special care of her son “Dada was Ai’s son” (TLS 41).

Women, like Mini in Roots and Shadows, who are always involved in the fetishes of traditions and household work, have no other option but to remain satisfied with the things provided. Women are also toned or conditioned to merge their aspirations and desires by the elder women of their family. She has been prepared for looking after the house and Akka’s desire to educate her is not to
give her an independent stand but to get her a good match because of her education. Mini accepts:

   Of course I’m marrying him because there’s nothing else I can do. I’m no good at studies. I never was. I went to school because . . . I had to. And then to college because Akka said I must go. Boys prefer graduates these days, she said. So I went. But I failed and it was a relief to give it up. There’s only one thing, I’m really good at . . . looking after a house. And to get a home, I have to get married. This is not my home, is it? (RS 125)

   In this connection Vrinda Nabar comments in *Caste as Woman:*

   “Moreover, even if we concede, that the girl is an alien in her father’s home, it is man-made laws and social structures that make her so. Right from birth, a girl is made to feel like a bird of passage in her father’s home” (56-57). As long as society remains patriarchal in its role, allocation and division of labour, the culture of the second sex is found to be eclipsed. When stereotyping of women in any form and any shape is noticed, Indu does not forget to remind all people around her that she has ‘grown up’ implying that she cannot be treated at par with other women in the family.

   A woman’s mind is shaped by hammering constantly that she is weak both physically and mentally and is subordinate to man. In *Roots and Shadows,* the dominant culture and the marginalised culture are displayed in the form of suppression of the later by the former. In fact, it enters the psychology of unconsciousness that subjects woman to silence so as she does not identify herself with the masculine imagery. Indu is very conscious of the unfairness prevailing in the society with regard to women. There are so many small incidents in everyday life which are simply taken for granted but Indu highlights these incidents and makes one look a new at them and wonder at the injustice. Men are not even aware of the drudgery and the disgust involved in the countless household chores performed regularly by women. One such scene is graphically described by Indu:
I went into the house avoiding the hall, ugly now with all the aftermath of an eaten meal. It disgusted me to see the strewn plates, the scattered remnants. And yet, for a whole life-time, the women patiently cleared up the mess with their bare hands after each meal. And women like Kaki even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. Martyrs, heroines or just stupid fools. (RS 67)

Domestic chores as Indu describes, can be terribly tiresome, boring and frustrating. Simone de Beauvoir observes: “Few talks 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 wearies herself out making time. She makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present” (470).

Even in choosing the occupation, the Indian women have some restriction. Manu in TDHNT cannot tolerate Saru’s importance in the role of a doctor as her earnings and professional status is greater than his. It is the gender imbalance sits in opposition at one end — the male end — and emotional provision, at the other end — the female end. The mathematical equations trend to operate in the field the ideal social reality. As Saru in TDHNT observes: “a+b they told us in mathematics is equal to b+a. But here a+b was not, definitely not equal to b+a. It become a monstrously unbalanced equation, top sided, unequal impossible” (42).

Saru, a professional woman dislocates the binary of husband as provider and protector versus wife as recipient and protected. Saru’s employment is acceptable only because it supplements her husband’s income. The story of Saru clearly depicts a duality deeply entrenched in the psyche of Indian society which sways societal definitions and expectation of the public and private roles of women. Consequently, women are expected to be both traditional and modern in domestic and public spheres. Saru’s economic independence makes her husband
feel insecure. Though she tries to conform to her husband’s expectations, his male pride is questioned when an interviewer from a woman’s magazine asks Manu, “How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?” (TDHNT 200). This remark shows the dualistic approach of the Indian society to women’s employment. These complex situations in Saru’s life focus on the pathetic state of Indian middle class working women:

My mother had no room of her own. She retreated into the kitchen to dress up, she sat in the dingy room to comb her hair and apply *kumkum*, she slept in her bed like any overnight guest in a strange place. And I have so much my mother lacked. But neither she nor I have that thing ‘a room of one’s own’. (TDHNT 135-36)

Through this narrative, Deshpande questions the assumption that the employment of the wife can serve as the means of her economic independence and self-actualization. At the same time, the profession of women does not entail the potential to reduce the gap between men and women. While Saru’s income provides a higher living standard to her family, her contribution remains unnoticed. The hierarchic nature of marital role is acknowledged by Saru in the following words:

Don’t ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive – secretary, principal–teacher role. It can’t be traumatic, disastrous. And, I assure you, it isn’t worth it. He’ll suffer, you’ll suffer and so will the children. Women’s magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That's nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it’s unequal in favour of your husband. (TDHNT 137)

Manu tells Saru, face to face, that no partnership can be equal. Moreover, he tries to instil in her mind the fact that a wife can never equal her husband even if she occupies a higher position professionally. This makes her think very deeply about life: “. . . the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so
the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me inches taller, made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband” (TDHNT 42).

Indu in Roots and Shadows submits before Jayant’s decision to continue with the job but not opt for a career as a writer. Indu hopelessly and unwillingly acquiesces to his decision and continues with her job. Deshpande uses an apt image of a worm crawling in to a hole to describe the State of Jaya, in That Long Silence a budding writer doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian housewife. She is “Scared of writing and Scared of failing” (TLS 148).

Woman in India is taught to be submissive and shun anger, not to speak aloud as that is ‘unwomanly’. Indu of RS recalls:

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. 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)

The Indian woman has to marry the groom chosen for her by her guardians on traditional considerations of caste, status and property. The marriage takes place only on payment of dowry even if the groom is good for nothing. Girls like Mini in the RS who are neither beautiful nor brilliant have no choice in this respect. Indu wonders “… have they been without wills, or have their will atrophied through a life time of disuse?” (6)

What follows after the marriage is even worse. Life becomes hell if the husband is alcoholic or ill tempered. They cannot control their bodies. As husband does not take meals with wife, he does know if she is getting adequate food. They often die of diseases without timely and proper treatment. Even
talented women like Indu and Jaya who marry beyond caste for love suffer a lot due to the inflated ego of their husbands.

Rituals and fastings take a vital role in the life of Indian women. They are taught to practice all these even in their girlhood days. “A birth, a marriage, a death…. We Hindus have elaborate rituals for all of them,” (27) says Indu in RS. Then she goes on observing the following on the ritual for death: “For us, we think, death is not the end. It is beginning of something else. And so, we gently ease the dead, with formality and ceremony, into that something else.” (58)

TLS refers to Pujas and fasts women traditionally observe in India because the husbands are their “sheltering tree” (32). These acts of self-mortification are practiced in order to avoid widowhood. Some of these are specifically mentioned in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. They are: Tulsi Puja, Mangala-Gouri Puja, Hartalika and Haldi Kumkum. According to Hindu mythology, Tulsi was a woman who became an indispensable part of Vishnu’s worship by her selfless devotion. She is enshrined as a plant-deity in Hindu households and commands daily worship by women. Apart from that, the cult of Tulsi is also associated with a festival called ‘Tulsi Lagna’, that is, the marriage of Tulsi plant with a tree. To Madhu in Small Remedies it is only the best kind of marriage nobody can get hurt. But the elders celebrated it with great éclat and enthusiasm like a real wedding almost. Recollection of sitting under the stars and listening to the priest chant his mantras is really a means of happiness and wonder to them. On the other hand, the modern girls like Indu and Leela are attracted towards only the decoration of the Tulsi with bridal wear, green bangles, mangalsutra and all that stuff. Lata in ‘Small Remedies’ says “As a girl, I also thought it very funny, this marriage between a plant and tree. You know, making a bride of the tulsi plant – decorating in with bridal wear, green bangles, mangalsutra and all the stuff” (SR 210).

Haldi (turmeric) and Kumkum (red powder) are used as auspicious marks on the forehead by Hindu women and also offered to goddesses. There is also religious ritual called Haldi Kumkum ceremony. Haldi, Kumkum, fruits, attar etc.
are offered to women in it. That is the occasion for women to exchange well wishes of happy married life. Shashi Deshpande refers to this in her novels *TDHNT* (100), *TLS* (19) and *TBV* (122) which is celebrated every Fridays in the temple. Deshpande exhibits the traditional women who are afraid of the deities. They believe dropping of the Devi’s offerings – the brass tray with flowers, coconut, haldi, kumkum – would be not only a heinous crime and sacrilege but a catastrophe as well and also they would be cursed with so many awful things by her. When everything is done perfectly, they feel warm and secure. Alladi Uma observes:

> The Hindu mind has created schematic Goddesses, on the one hand Durga is difficult to know or to approach, on the other, as mother of the universe, they epitomize tender love … Kali, often thought of as Evil, Death, Destroyer, Devourer, is also creator … (Uma 4)

Deshpande mentions the following rituals to exhibit the Indianness of the novel. We come across Mangala–Gouri Puja in *TLS* (37), *SR* (210) and *TBV* (79). Mangala Gouri Puja and Chaitra Gouri Puja are religious rituals connected with the cult of Gouri, the deity worshipped as the model of womanhood. When she is worshipped in the month Chaitra it is called the Chaitra – Gouri Puja but when she is worshipped by a married woman at the completion of a year of her marriage that is called Mangala Gouri Puja. Hartalika which is mentioned in *TLS* (133) is a day of fasting in which all women in certain regions of south India have to perform. They have to do that before the Ganapati festival every year.

> Women perform a ritual called ‘bhau-bij’ in Maharastra. (*SR* 204). The ‘Upanayam Ceremony’ (*SR* 314) is also well known all over the country, as is the custom of coconut offering to deities. (*TBV* 103). Circumbulation of tulsi plant or peepul tree is typically Indian. (*TLS* 67). So are the festivals mentioned in her novels- the Ganapati festival, Dussehra and Diwali. (*RS* 46). Which bring back the members of the family for the reunion and to be merry.
Joint Hindu family or extended family is also a specific feature of Indian society. Old people strive hard to keep it intact as it “gives us a background, an anchor, sometimes to hold on” as the old uncle in RS (104). The anchor, however, does not help the weak and meek like Kusum but favour the successful like Dilip in TLS. Deshpande’s novels delvelop deep into the turmoil of the extended family.

The plight of widows in Hindu society remained at the centre of several discussions, debates, controversies and even agitations for about three decades in India. The voice articulated about widows in the novels of Deshpande, we can assume, reflect the reality the novelist experienced in Maharashtra and Karnataka during the last century. In the RS we find two widows- Akka and Atya, Ajji and Mukta in TLS and Leela in SR Indian tradition subjects widows to hardship. Their heads are shaven, good clothes and ornaments are forbidden to them and they are expected to take a small amount of vegetarian food. They spent their days in prayer and fasting and yet they are deemed inauspicious and debarred from all social ceremonies. Atya was not a ‘shaven widow’ and therefore, “second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her.” (RS.118). The widows have suffered and they still suffer, partly due to social prejudices and partly due to their own inhibitions. Many of them are weak and helpless but that is not true about all of them. As a matter of fact, they do have the potential to become the controlling head of the family like Akka.

Thus Shashi Deshpande makes her novels distinctly Indian in character.
WORKS CITED

Primary Source


Secondary Source


