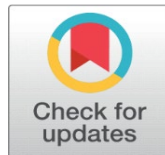
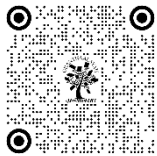


AKKA – THE MATRIARCH CAUSING CHANGE IN ROOTS AND SHADOWS

Dr. Shivani Rushikesh Upadhyay¹,

¹ Assistant Professor, English, Government Engineering College, Rajkot



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ABSTRACT

One of the eminent Indian novelists Shashi Deshpande is highly concerned about the issues involving women. Her art lies in selecting situations with which most Indian women can identify. She introduces a matriarch, Akka, in her famous novel *Roots and Shadows*. This is a revolutionary step in the given Indian scenario. The matriarch is highly influenced by the patriarchal values and earnestly tries to preserve them! The status or position she enjoys in the family is the ultimate truth. She exerts her powers to the fullest. She is simply unforgettable and unignorable. She constantly makes her presence felt, even after her death. She is the binding force of the family. She becomes the agent of change by giving her wealth to her defiant niece Indu. She brings Indu back to her roots. The highly orthodox matriarch takes a reformist decision and invites change in the due course of life.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande occupies a significant place among the Indian women novelists who is concerned with the problems of women and their quest for identity. She is not an avowed feminist and thinks that her novels are not intended to be read as feminist texts. This is evident from what she says: "A woman who writes of women's experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her, roused her strong feelings. I don't see why this has to be labelled feminist fiction." (1985: 33) While it may not have been Deshpande's intention to propound any particular theory, even a cursory reading of her novels displays a tremendous amount of sympathy for women. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of the sufferings, disappointments and frustrations of women makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle.

A close study of Deshpande's short stories and novels reveals an author who is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender, but at the same time highly sensitive to the issues involving women. The relentless probing of man-woman relationship by the author intrigues the reader enough to question her stand on feminism. "Deshpande is perhaps the only Indian author who has made a bold attempt to give voice to the frustrations and disappointments of women despite her vehement denial of being a feminist." (Reddy 2001: 21)

She has dealt with the problems of middleclass educated women very minutely and delicately. She writes to mirror the society as she observes it. Her art lies in selecting situations with which most Indian women can identify. Her focus

is on the woman within marital, domestic relationship. She is, at heart, a realist. As Veena Sheshadri remarks, "She believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be." (Pathak 1999: 195)

Deshpande has never tried to make her women stronger than they are in real life. She has not portrayed any of her female characters larger than life. Rather, she has exposed the negative aspects of their personality truthfully. She has presented women as they are, neither glorified nor vilified.

Her women characters have strength of their own and in spite of challenges and hostilities, remain uncrushed. "Deshpande has created authentic female characters – flesh-and-blood characters – with recognizable credentials. She has successfully delineated their problems and plights, yearnings and aspirations, failures and foibles in the Indian context." (Pathak 1999: 194)

Akka is one such wonderfully portrayed character in her novel *Roots and Shadows*. Though the central character is Indu and the dominant theme is her identity quest, Akka is given significant space and attention by the novelist. She is a fully grown character displaying different aspects of personality. She is simply unforgettable and unignorable. She constantly makes her presence felt, even after her death. The status or position she enjoys in the family is the ultimate authority. Her power to dominate is the final truth.

In traditional joint Hindu families, women were nothing more than puppets, without any identity, voice or name. They could not exercise their reasoning or intelligence and express their genuine individual concerns. They had no choice but to submit, to accept. Patriarchy had existed for such a long time that even the women had internalized it. The women were reluctant to change their conventional mentality. They were highly traditional and did not want or accept any change in the established structure of the society. The traditions were never questioned. Any deviation brought disgrace.

Deshpande introduces a matriarch, Akka, in the place of a patriarch. This is a revolutionary step in the then-prevalent Indian scenario. The matriarch is highly influenced by the patriarchal values! Though herself a woman, Akka never allowed any woman of the family to come out of the cage of patriarchy.

Akka is Indu's grandfather's younger sister. She came to the house long ago as a childless widow. She literally presided over the destiny of her brother's children, ruling over them, their children and their grandchildren with an iron hand. "Akka, a grand old matriarch, is the presiding deity of this institution, who confers peace and security on her willing subjects but who deals ruthlessly with the rebellious and the recalcitrant." (Shukla 1998: 97) She had a quality of arrogance in her voice and an air of superiority in her behaviour. This has always infuriated Indu.

"Akka's autocratic ways and iron rule ruined all the members of the house and reduced them to mere parasites because Akka believed only in surrender and submission. Defiance and disobedience did not exist in the vocabulary of the presiding deity of this house." (Shukla 1998: 100) Indu's non-conformist hatred of Akka is not personal but is directed at her authoritarian ideas, worn-out conventional views, mumbo-jumbo religiosity, superstitions and so on, shared by all simply because they were liked by Akka.

Indu has never been scared of Akka. There has been only resentment and dislike. Akka's anger and hostility leave Indu untouched. Indu thinks about Akka: "I had met a stone wall of refusing- to – understand." (74) Except Indu, all other people admire Akka – always a symbol of a leader, assuring happiness to everybody, as Atya retorts.

"Although Akka is a woman, all her views are strictly in conformity with the masculine laws." (Meitei 1998: 81) Compared to Akka's formidable power all males in the novel – Anant, Govind, Madhav, Vinayak and even Old Uncle – are languid. The masculine world recedes in the background.

In the family, all things, big and small, do not go unless Akka's value is attached to them. Everybody quotes and banks upon her even after her death. But Indu gets fed up with this state of affairs. She shouts: "Akka, Akka. The oracle spoke and I suppose the rest of you applauded her wisdom." (68)

Even her illness has not softened her. Indu openly comments: "You are ruthless, dominating, bigoted and inconsiderate." (30) She (Indu) meets Akka and notices that even in the face of death, there is a quiet dignity about her. "There was", Indu recalls after her death, "a triumphant gleam in them [Akka's eyes] I could almost see her thoughts... I made you come home, didn't I? I brought you back, didn't I?" (18)

In the beginning of the novel, Akka is on her deathbed. She sends summons for Indu who has left the house in anger before eleven years. Indu has got married to Jayant, a person belonging to another caste, without Akka's approval. In three years of their marriage, nobody has ever remembered them fearing Akka's displeasure. Indu has sworn not to

return. But her own circumstances force her to visit Akka. Neither of them shows any repentance or forgiveness. Akka expresses her wish to see Jayant. Indu misunderstands her. Indu thinks that Akka still wants to approve Jayant. But Akka feels hurt as she is genuinely concerned about Indu.

"A final reconciliation takes place between Akka and Indu, but the terms of this reconciliation are Akka's. Even while she is gasping for breath, she chides Indu for her willfulness and immaturity." (Shukla 1998: 97) Indu is mesmerized. "There was", admits Indu, "in spite of her weakness, still that quality of arrogance in her voice that had always infuriated me. As a child it had surprised me that she, so abysmally ignorant, so what-I- considered- stupid, could assume such an air of superiority." (28)

Akka has made Indu the sole heir of her property. Indu feels that Akka has played a game with her. Making Indu her heir, Akka has got the final say. She has trapped Indu in such a way that Indu cannot ever get away from it. She has the last laugh on Indu.

She dies changing the power-equations of the family. On the final day of mourning, Indu feels Akka's presence very strongly among the family. "I could feel her enjoying, as she had always done, having the whole family together; giving her a chance to probe, to scold, to decide, to dominate and to show her power." (61)

After the death of Akka, Indu talks about her to Narmadaatya. She passes bold and offensive comments on Akka's nature, behaviour and decisions. She tries to judge Akka by her own standards. But Atya prevents her from doing so. For justifying Akka's ways, Atya reveals Akka's horrible past to Indu. At this juncture of life, it is crucial for Indu to know about Akka's past. Atya understands the need and presents the painful account of Akka's married life.

Akka was just twelve when she got married. Her husband was well past thirty. She was small and dainty, really pretty, with her round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. Her husband was a tall bulky man with large coarse features. Six months after her marriage, she "grew up" and was sent to her husband's home. What she had to endure there, no one knows. She never told anyone anything.

She tried twice to run away. But she couldn't. Her mother-in-law whipped her for that, locked her up for three days and starved her. Then she sent Akka back to her husband's room. Akka cried and clung to her mother-in-law, "Lock me up again." (70) But there was no escape from a husband then!

Her husband had a weakness for women. How could a frightened child (Akka) satisfy him? Therefore, he always had mistresses. Akka could never give birth to a living child. Every time she had a miscarriage. Her mother-in-law blames her for it and made life hell for her.

After fifteen twenty years of their marriage, he took up with one woman. He was crazy about her. He would have brought her home but for fear of his mother. He even tried to give her Akka's jewels, but she brought them to her father's house. Her husband was frightened of her father and therefore he did not take that woman into his house even after his mother's death.

And then, Akka's husband had a severe stroke. He could not even wiggle a toe. He lived nearly two years after that. Akka looked after him. She kept him spotless. She was calm, very much in control of herself and the whole situation. He could not speak but he constantly tried to say something. One day, Akka could find it. He wanted to see his mistress. But Akka denied it firmly. She said, "If that's what you want, you can go on wanting." (72) Then he again started producing those terrible sounds that were not even human. But Akka, cool and calm, said, "...It's my turn now." (72) She informed him that his mistress came twice to see him but Akka threw her out. She (the mistress) cried and begged to be allowed to see him just for a short while. But all her efforts are in vain. After hearing that, he began to cry like a child. But Akka just looked at him. That night Atya heard Akka crying. When she asked her the reason, Akka said, "Every night I've spent in this house, I've cried like this." (72) She then suddenly laughed and added that nobody had ever asked her the reason for crying so far. After the death of her husband, her father brought her to the ancestral house.

"The story of Akka... provides a different aspect to the general picture of Akka that we get through the novel. It also helps Indu see in Akka not just a tyrant but a tyrant with a past." (Mrinalini 2000: 183) Akka's inhuman experience of marriage makes her comment at the time of Atya's marriage: "Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels." (70-71)

Akka was a highly conservative woman. She was fanatically loyal to her own community. She did not like Indu's father avoiding his responsibilities as a member of the family. She had great disgust and displeasure for Govind's indifference to the family issues. She sternly disapproved the inter caste marriage of Indu's parents. After many years of

Indu's mother's death, Akka taunted Indu about her mother. The episode made it easy for Indu to escape the house. When she heard about Indu's inter-caste marriage, she opined, "Such marriages never work. Different castes, different languages... it's all right for a while. Then they realize..." (69)

Akka, who, like many Indian women, believed that husband's first name couldn't be uttered by the wife because this would shorten his life, is the same ruthless Akka who does not care to fulfill her husband's request at his deathbed. It is the same Akka who refused to go to the hospital because she does not know the caste of doctors and nurses who work there and who decided to leave all her wealth to her grand-niece. This niece and her father are the two who have broken the purity of the caste by marrying outside the community. Yet she chooses her niece to be the recipient of her wealth. It is because of this money that she received from Akka that Indu wants to take up her writing career seriously.

Akka kept all her softness for boys. Sharad knew how to wheedle her all right. She used to pay for his clothes and education. Even Sunil got something from her. The height of her orthodoxy is seen during her last illness. She did not allow the family to take her to the hospital as she strongly followed 'the law of untouchability'. Indu comments on this: "Narrow-minded. Bigoted. And thinking only of herself. Never of others." (30) According to Hemant, Akka was "malicious, trouble-loving, trouble-creating old woman". (90)

Saroja, old uncle's daughter, had a marvelous voice. She wanted to learn music, but "Akka put her foot down." (54) Akka did not allow her to do so. According to Akka, it was disgraceful to sit and sing in front of a strange man like *those* women. She thought that it was enough for a girl from a decent family to sing a few devotional and arti songs.

The critics call her 'matriarch'. She took all the decisions for the family. She ran the family according to her own will and executed all her powers on the family members. "Kaka, even after becoming a grandfather, could be reduced to a red-faced stuttering schoolboy by Akka's venomous tongue." (30) Kaka defied Akka for the first time by attending Indu's marriage.

Akka was a wealthy woman. She supported the family using her personal wealth. But she never allowed the family to waste her money. When Sumitrakaki came to Akka for the dowry for her daughter's marriage, Akka got very much angry. She scolded her badly for asking money, though her husband had a good salary. She taunted her for wasting money on saris and make-up. Once Sunandaatya asked for some money from Akka. Her husband (Vasantrao) wanted to have some partnership. But Akka exploded, "Give that money to that waster of a husband of yours! I'd rather throw it down the drain!" (125)

Akka was a wise woman. She had never trusted or consulted her brother's sons – with whom she was living – for money matters. She gave the family a shock by her will. Otherwise very conventional and orthodox, Akka had taken a bold, radical and modern step of making a written will. She had registered her will keeping her legal advisor Shyamrao with her. As she had a great sense of justice, the decision of giving everything to Indu alone seems unlike Akka. She had seen the same qualities in Indu which she herself possessed. She might have thought Indu capable of handling the property. She might have had trust in Indu's sense of justice. She was very much in her right mind while preparing the will.

Naren speaks about Akka, "... I can admire the old ghoulish at times. After all, she believes in something and nothing can keep her from acting according to those beliefs." (166) When Naren offered to marry Mini, the old witch – Akka – asked him about dowry. Naren expressed his wish to stay with the family in the ancestral house after their marriage. Akka called him Ippy (Jipsy). He, according to Indu, became 'Akka's torment'. He says, ".... the old woman hated my guts. As I hated hers." (32)

Akka enjoyed the supreme position in the family till her death.

"At first, they all looked to Akka for guidance till her death and after that, to Indu who usurps the place of Akka till about the end – like Lily Brisco in place of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. The home and hearth collapse when Akka is dead and nobody can escape from her invisible presence in the form of memory that still reigns – a kind of Jungian archetypal mother. All other characters now become shadowy and children of the lost generation." (Meitei 1998: 79)

While practically everybody in the novel resents Akka's authoritarian behaviour, nobody ever questions her contribution in keeping the family intact despite its contradictions and the clashing aspirations of its members. After all, Akka has had her own share of miseries. She came to this house as a widowed young woman and after the death of her

father, looked after her nephews and nieces with the care and attention of a truly compassionate mother. Indu, whose mother died immediately after her birth, was never allowed to feel motherless.

“True, Akka sometimes becomes ruthless and dictatorial but there is no touch in her character of self-aggrandizement. If she dominated, it was for a cause, for an ideal which had nothing personal, selfish or snobbish about it. She wanted to keep the family intact because the family ensured security and happiness to all its members. Even Indu, the representative of the new generation and one who has a personal score to settle with Akka, concedes that Akka was a ‘cohesive force’ and always struggled to keep the fabric of the family intact.” (Shukla 1998: 102-103)

Her later role as a dominating rich widow in her brother's household has completely hidden her story of suffering and of revenge... whatever it is, Akka's story shakes many of our stereotypical views that the Brahmin widow is a sub-human figure. It is through the money that her husband left her that Akka ultimately becomes so powerful. This money and her will to order others change the traditional image of a Brahmin widow. “It is this Akka, ... who becomes an agent of change, in spite of her adherence to the norms of this world.” (Mrinalini 2000: 183)

Akka is a rigid woman. She is orthodox and does not easily give way to modernity. She is highly authoritative by nature till the end of her life. It is a debatable question why she has given all her property to the most defiant woman of the family. But her step is bold and radical one. “....by making Indu the inheritor, Akka seems to have posthumously caused change in the household; she seems to have initiated movements, crossing of home boundaries.” (Mrinalini 2000: 186) She brings Indu back to home and associates her with the family. By giving Indu economic freedom and assigning her familial responsibilities, she empowers Indu to initiate changes. By declaring her the authority for the ancestral house, Akka indirectly invites new ideas to enter the house. Akka's progressive final decision mirrors the modernity and broad-mindedness of the novelist.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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