



A perception of the souls of *roots & shadows* and *sat pagla akash man*: a comparative study

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ABSTRACT

The Twentieth century has brought forth the realisation of the need to emancipate, develop and grow oneself in every area of human life. Women too have not lagged behind in this. Novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Kundanika Kapadiya have captured this dream of woman to break the shackles of tradition, custom and patriarchy and stretch the horizons to fly in the limitless skies.

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Introduction

Power relations are extremely widespread in human relationships. Now this does not mean that political power is everywhere, but that there is in human relationships a whole range of power relations that may come into play among individuals, within families, in pedagogical relationships, political life etc... Taking sexuality as an example, it is clear that a number of liberations were required vis-à-vis male power.

-Michel Foucault

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a study of the ubiquitous control over a woman's existence. The male has controlled her mobility, sexuality, productive and reproductive powers, and her social, economic and political rights. Virginia Woolf thus commented:

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.

Feminism surfaced in the West as a movement in support of the equal rights and opportunities for women. It strives to undo the tilted and distorted image of woman whose cries for equality go unheard in the patriarchal world. In modern literature, Feminist approach is quite popular. Feminism is often political when women stake a claim to their rights and privileges. Sensitive women writers do not lose sight of their plight in our society and feminist agenda is based on the principle of Similarity and Difference- Similarity because women are human beings like man and therefore, ought to be granted equal rights; and Difference because women are different from man and therefore, ought to be granted the right to represent themselves. Feminist writing tries to subvert, if we take Derrida's words, a whole, dense, enigmatic and heavily stratified history.

In *Toward a Feminist Poetics* Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

1. Feminine: In the Feminine phase (1840–1880), “women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature” (*New*, 137).
2. Feminist: The Feminist phase (1880–1920) was characterized by women's writing that protested against male standards and values, and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.
3. Female: The Female phase (1920—) is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, “women reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature” (*New*, 139).

Hence, the last stage shows a complete independent and balanced development of women's literature freed from the influence of the Male dominion. As Sylvia Plath writes:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Indian Women Novelists

Indian fiction has been enriched by several women novelists. They have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. While doing so, they have analysed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their image and roles towards themselves and society. As John B. Alphonso-Karkala observes:

They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world.

Such women novelists writing in Indian English are:

- Kamala Markandaya
- Anita Desai
- Attia Hossain
- Santha Rama Rau
- Shashi Deshpande
- Namita Gokhale
- Nayantara Sahgal
- R. P. Jhabvala
- Anjana Appachana

Indian feminist writers in Gujarati are:

- Kundanika Kapadiya
- Meera Bhatt
- Varsha Adalja
- Ila Mehta
- Dhiruben Patel

Feminist writers in Hindi are:

- Matrai Pushpa
- Mannu Bhandari
- Alka Sarvagi
- Usha Priyamvada

Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande is a very widely read post-independence Indian English writer who shot into limelight in 1977 with her shorter fiction. She writes consciously about the issues that concern the educated middle class woman in Indian society. She began her career with short stories but proved her sustained creativity with the novel form. Her novel *Roots & Shadows* won Thirumati Rangmal Prize in 1984; *That Long Silence* the Sahitya Academy Award in 1990; and *The Dark Holds No Terror* the Nanjangud Tirumalamba Award in 1990.

Deshpande's novels contain what can be regarded as the staple material of feminism: women's sexuality, gender roles, self-discovery and self-emancipation. Regarding the feminist trend in her works, she says,

My feminism has come to me very slowly... mainly out of my own thinking, experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it.

Defining her feminism, she replied once to her Interviewer Geetha Gangadharan:

I am a feminist in the sense that we need to have a place for all of us as human beings... no superior and no inferior... two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simon de Beauvoir that the fact that we are humans is much more important than our being men and women. This is my idea of feminism.

The three stages of Showalter are found in Deshpande's novels:

1. Limitation
2. Protest
3. Self-discovery

Indu: The Protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots & Shadows*

As a feminist novel, *Roots & Shadows* (1983) vocalises the feminist discourse all through. And this time it is not the fabrication of the male protagonist, but the pure protean voice of woman herself. There are three groups of Indian women in Deshpande's novels:

- Those who follow tradition as a virtue. , e.g., Narmada, Kaki, Sumitra, Atya, Akka and Sunanda.
- Those who realize their position but can do nothing. , e.g., Mini.
- Those who assert themselves. , e.g., Indu.

The first group belongs to the uneducated. They bank out the age-old superstitions and beliefs. It would be hard to change them. They are remarkably traditional in their manner and outlook. Akka, too, belongs to this group but without the selfishness, narrowness, powerlessness, languor and mawkishness of any of them.

In the second group, none shines as brightly as Mini. Educated and to some extent aware of the situation in which she is placed, she is deeply bound by the tangles of her society out of which she cannot come out with an independent voice as Indu can.

Unlike the above-mentioned two kinds of women, at the other extreme stands **the indomitable feminist**, Indu. Indu, the central character of the novel, is the New Woman who journeys across the hostile masculine world represented by her ancestral home. The novel projects her inner world and thoughts. She is independent, uninhibited and the influence of the family cannot imprison her. The class and caste consciousness of the Akka family is nothing to Indu but putting a dead albatross around the neck of the people. As a young girl, she has emancipated herself from the impinging influence of the family by running away from it. She hates and challenges Akka's domination on all matters. She reacts:

No, there was only one thing she wanted, and that was to dominate. (68)

Indu revolts against Akka and decolonizes herself by marrying Jayant who is of a different caste and speaks a different language. One may ask: Why Indu, a feminist herself, is so critical of Akka who is also a woman? The answer here is that feminism does not mean a feminine reaction against whatever is masculine. It is a theoretical position in which the law of Patriarchy is upset, whether that is cherished by man or woman. In spite of being a woman, Akka's laws are in strict conformity with the masculine laws. Indu's non-conformity with Akka does not emerge from her personal hatred or prejudice but is directed at her authoritarian ideas, worn-out conventional views, mumbo-jumbo religiosity and superstition.

This does not indicate that woman's participation in our culture is welcome. On the contrary, they are kept in dark. In Indian society, to be a clever woman is a "disgrace". Sharing Indu's views, Old Uncle says,

For a woman, intelligence is always a burden.

Indu, we like our women not to think. (33)

To demarcate and divide the society on sexual lines is an age-old social practice in Indian society. Indu was left by her father when she was hardly fifteen days old and did not return to her for one year though she lost her mother at her birth. Deshpande exposes male prejudice against female children. Madhav Kaka does not know which classes his daughters are in while all his energies are reserved for his deceitful son, Sunil.

In Indu's ancestral home, the partition between male and female worlds is distinctly visible. Women do not participate in important discussions, not even Akka. But Indu thrusts upon others when there is a discussion about how the big house is to be maintained and as to how Akka's money left to her is to be distributed. Although Indu is an educated, successful journalist, it is not without opposition that they admit her to that discussion. To them, she is just a woman, more so a married woman, an outsider. To them she has no right to inherit either money or property because she is a married woman. Among the uneducated women folk, she is a childless woman, no matter how educated and successful she is in her profession.

A woman's mind is shaped by hammering constantly that she is weak, both physically and mentally and is subordinate to

man. Here, the dominant culture and the marginalised culture are displayed in the form of suppression of the latter by the former. Indu says,

As a girl, they had told me to be meek and submissive... You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace... It is the only way, they said, for a female, to live and survive. (158)

Deshpande brings out the boiling and broiling problem of marriage through Indu. A marriage is no longer a sacrament; it is a convenient arrangement for man. Indu observes,

What was marriage after all but two people brought together after a cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue. (3)

And again,

It's a trap... That's what marriage is... A trap or a cage?... A cage in which two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... and it's not a joke, but a tragedy. (9)

Indu tries to live up to the expectation of Jayant. She becomes a fluid with no shape or form of her own. Whatever she does, she does to please Jayant. A married woman like Indu is left with practically no choice save whatever her husband feels and desires. Her feminine instincts are curbed and suppressed. Indu can neither express herself nor choose for herself. She can neither love nor hate but be content with the "gift of silence" that marriage has brought her. A woman like Indu, is allowed no direct influence upon her husband. He is impervious to her emotional urges. Instead it is Indu who has to cater to the needs of his inner urges and drives;

I found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to hear. I had my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage. (38)

Indu fails to establish an emotional rapport with Jayant for "it shocks him to find a passion in a woman. It puts him off." (83) She confesses to Naren:

A woman who loves her husband too much, too passionately, and is ashamed of it. (83)

Indu not only brings forth the problems of subjugation and marginalisation of woman, marriage, patriarchy and loss of identity, but also provides a solution to them. According to her, the solution lies within the woman herself, in her thinking. In order to free herself from the shackles of the society, woman had to free herself first from her mental fears and develop an exact understanding of the situation. She realises that marriage had stunted and hampered her because she had regarded it as a "Trap" and not a bond. She remarks:

But what of my love for Jayant...? Restricting bond? Was it not I who made it so? Torments... Had I not created my own torment? Perhaps it was true... There was only one thing I wanted now... And that was to go home... The one I lived with Jayant. That was my only home.

Thus, Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self that frantically longed for self-expression, finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Naren, with whom she develops an adulterous relationship, is nothing more than a mere shadow to her. He has no permanent place in her memory. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realisation and discovery of her authentic female

self. Indu decides to go back to Jayant but no longer wants to make marriage a restricting bond. She is determined how to assert her individuality as a part-taker in the endless cycle of life. She has recognised the miracle of life:

If not this stump, there is another. If not his tree, there will be others. Other trees will grow, other flowers will bloom, other fragrances will pervade other airs... I felt as if I was watching life itself... Endless, limitless, formless and full of grace. (184)

The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. Her self-discovery is the frightening vision of the female self's struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval and decides to live a meaningful life with her husband. In her home is she able to discover her roots as an independent woman, a wife and a commercial writer.

Kundanika Kapadiya

The fiction of Indian languages has embraced the portrayal of the New Woman. The female protagonists are quite conscious of their identity. They are neither meek nor submissive. There is a marked difference in their attitude as compared to the portrayal of woman in early literature. Thus, the spirit of liberation is present in the heroines of contemporary Indian fiction. Meena Shirwadkar comments:

The writers in these languages came out rapidly from the shadow of historical romance and presented the reality of the life of woman. So, the woman, the family, and the writers' views were all changing, resulting in a variety of realistic images." (Shirwadkar: 24)

Kundanika Kapadiya occupies a unique place as a feminist novelist due to her much discussed novel *Sat Pagla Akash Man* (*Seven Steps in the Sky*) written in 1984. It is the Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1985. The novel begins with the words of the "Introduction":

All are unequal in the world; women are more so.

The writer gives us a detailed Introduction to the novel, a kind of spectacles for the readers with which they can read it. From ancient times, the place of women has been lower than that of man. Woman is deprived of the freedom that is enjoyed by man. She is considered weak, both physically and mentally. She is exploited in a place like India where we believe in woman as a 'Devi' or a 'Goddess'. It may be largely because of our male dominated society. And this is the global picture; women have been treated as objects of aesthetic beauty and showpieces.

As a feminist novel, *Sat Pagla Akash Man* depicts the problems of women like their education, marriage, pregnancy, job, self-reliance, the authority of husband and mother-in-law, dowry, disillusionment in love and love marriage, helplessness, fraud and rape. Though all these problems have been presented through various characters, Vasudha is the central character.

Vasudha: The Protagonist in Kundanika Kapadiya's *Sat Pagla Akash Man*

The novel is about the central character, Vasudha, and the incidents that occur in her life. It's about the journey she goes through in her life. She is a young girl of 18 years when she gets married to Vyomesh. On the evening before her marriage, she thinks about marriage and her helplessness of having no choice except accepting to marry Vyomesh. But still she dreams

But one day she will live in tune with her wishes. She will say "yes" if she wants to, and

“no” if she doesn’t. She will compose her song and sing it.

Vasudha suffers a lot in her married life. She has a husband and a Faiba; she has to live and work according to Faiba’s commands. She always takes care of Vyomesh but he never asks whether she is happy with him or about her interests. Vasudha likes to watch the sky in the evening sitting on the terrace. She has books of many eminent authors. She likes music and songs. However, she has to forget all her interests. There are conflicts in her mind always going on. She thinks her to be not enough courageous.

Vasudha has brought many books with her from her parental home but she never finds time to read them. She thinks that when a girl is married, she is given many jewellery and domestic things but not given any book or no bride groom even asks for it in dowry. Marriage, according to her, is a union of two bodies and not of souls. She feels that she is

Like a bird in a golden cage, it is not hungry and thirsty. The sad thing is that the bird knows the world outside.

When a girl is married, her life gets restricted. After marriage, Vyomesh’s life doesn’t change whereas Vasudha’s life changes altogether. The novelist asks the questions through Vasudha:

Why do women get married? For love? Or for roof? Or for protection?

Women want love but what do they get in the garb of love? Women want roof but do the houses become theirs? If a husband is angry “Leave my house at this instant”. If he is pleased, he says, “You brighten my house”. The woman only brightens it. The husband’s house is only for work. The parents’ house is only for rest. So which is her home? Women want protection and for that a social wall is erected around her. The wall has no windows to look at the sky.

During her pregnancy, she thinks that this seed is from a man and she is providing only a facility to grow it and yet he has no physical responsibility for bearing this child. When they will grow, they will identify themselves as Vyomesh Mehta’s sons all their lives. There will be no mention to their mom who carried them, gave birth and nourished them.

Vasudha spends 32 years with Vyomesh and looks after him and his family. She has given her best years to their sons who are now settled in their lives. But Vyomesh has not changed yet. At the age of 50, she thinks the time has come to live according to her wishes and to take her own decisions. There comes a turn when Vasudha becomes conscious of her condition and ponders over it. There rises a smouldering fire within her and from its light she sees the reality of her relations. Eventually she treads the path of emancipation. She leaves her home and starts living in Anandgram. She flourishes and becomes popular there. Vasudha’s decision to leave home may seem to be destructive to the stability of all homes but the novelist’s aim is to point out a particular flaw in the social fabric.

In the novel, Vyomesh represents the patriarchal mentality. Most of the men have this kind of attitude. Vasudha is the victim of this visible or invisible justice. Many women have seen a reflection of their own selves in her character. Vasudha and Vyomesh belong to the middle class and they are placed in common day to day incidents. We see these things around us.

Through Vasudha, the novelist indicates that equality means the refusal of the authority of man, but not his companionship. Both man and woman are incomplete without and both need the help of each other. She says:

In the emancipation of woman, life without man is not imagined, but a prosperous life is prophesied in which both live in harmony... This kind of relationship may be formed on the basis of equality.

Here equality means that the woman should be given equal political, economic, social and legal rights in family. She should be given equal opportunities to develop her intellect and other faculties. The society and the family should have a structure in which both have equal participation in labour and property. In such an equipped environment, woman will not be an object, but a “person”.

A Comparison

Both the texts, Shashi Deshpande’s *Roots and Shadows* and Kundanika Kapadiya’s *Sat Pagla Akash Man* have many similarities and dissimilarities. Both have female novelists. Both have women as central characters. They depict their struggles. Both have been published in the same decade.

What can be perceived here is that Kapadiya’s feminism is a well-prepared attack on patriarchal society. She herself says in the Introduction to the novel that she has thought and collected data for 30 years before writing such a novel. In Deshpande we see, she writes about women what or as it is. Her feminist concerns are not so severe as that of Kapadiya.

Both the novels revolve around their protagonists. And many similarities and contrasts are brought out when we delve deep into these two characters. To enlist a few similarities:

- Both depict female experience and world.
- Both suffer from clutches of patriarchy.
- Both believe that marriage is a union of bodies, rather than souls, and a convenient arrangement.
- They think over their position and dilemmas.
- They suffer identity crisis.
- They have emotional urges which are not satisfied.
- They awaken to find out solutions.
- They react against traditions.

However, there are also some differences in the thoughts and attitudes of these two characters. Here is an attempted analysis:

- Indu acts right from the beginning; Vasudha suffers for 32 years.
- The former rejects motherhood as a reaction against patriarchy; the latter is a mother of three children
- Indu finds freedom within the circle; Vasudha goes out of it.
- Indu returns to Jayant with a new self, whereas Vasudha goes away to find a new home.
- Indu can be compared with only a particular strata of educated women. Vasudha, however, can be more generalised.
- In case of Indu, the urge comes from within; whereas in Vasudha, it comes from without.

Thus, we become aware of a number of characteristics that are common to both the central characters. They also differ in certain matters. One striking contrast, however, in both these novels that deal with woman’s emancipation and equality, is that when Kapadiya raises questions, she tries her best to give possible answers to them and with options. She offers solutions like “Sachi Stree”, “Kalyan Mitra” and “Anandgram”. In Deshpande, woman stays where she is and tries to fit herself in it. In fact, she gives no solution other than retaining her own position.

Hence, it can be remarkably noticed that the canvass on which Kapadiya chose to portray gave her more opportunities

and scope than that of Deshpande's, which in its turn being small can't provide her with more opportunities.

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