

## Perspectives on Generations of Indian Women Reading Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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In an interview, Shashi Deshpande said to Geetha Gangadharan "...we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of human beings. There are no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that 'the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women.'<sup>1</sup> As the women constitute a half of the species and the novelist shares a lot of their experiences in Indian society. It is natural, therefore, to find her novels focused on the problems of women. All of Shashi Deshpande's novels comprise a number of women characters who belong mostly to the middle class though they do not entirely exclude other classes. They are married, unmarried or widows and generally include three generations.

In *Roots and Shadows*, we find women characters belonging to three generations. Akka belongs to the first generation. Narmada, Sunanda, Kaki, Mantra and Kamala belong to the second while Indu, Mini, Lata, Geeta, etc. belong to the third. Their stories are indicative of the challenges the women face and the responses, varying according to their age and nature, they give.

Akka, the younger sister of Indu's grandfather represents the first generation. Born in a traditional Brahmin family, she was married at twelve to a man past thirty. So at a tender age when she barely understood the meaning of sex, she was subjected to the lust of a fully grown and uncaring man. His often violent sexual advances were unbearable to her and what happened then is best expressed by the novelist:

...twice she tried to run away...a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law...whipped her for that and lock her up for three days. Starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband's room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, "Lock me up again, lock me up." But there was no escape from a husband then.<sup>2</sup>

Akka could never give birth to a living child and her mother-in-law blamed her for every miscarriage and "made life hell for her". It is but



usual in those days for a rich man to have mistresses and Akka's husband had mistresses. After fifteen or twenty years of their married life, her husband became specially fastened to a particular mistress. He tried to give Akka's jewels to that woman. So, she had to deposit them in the custody of her father. He could not bring that mistress home as his mother would not permit it and then after her death, he feared Akka's father. But the attachment remained.

However, her life took a sudden turn when her husband, a hefty man had a paralytic stroke which made him helpless and unable to speak. He survived the stroke for about two years. Akka looked after him like an ideal and dutiful wife during the period despite all her traumatic experiences. But that sudden turn in her life enabled her to gain self-esteem and confidence and provided an opportunity to grab freedom and assert herself. She treated her husband kindly and carefully but did not relent when he wanted to see his mistress. She told him adamantly: "Listen to me. It's my turn now. I have listened to you long enough. She came here. Twice. She wanted to see you. She cried and begged to be allowed to see you just for a short while. I threw her out. You'll never see her again." Thus, Akka who was feeble, fragile and timid earlier, mastered the technique of domination.

After her husband's death, Akka returns to her natal home as rich childless widow. Despite her sex, she plays a new role, the role of a patriarch in the family. As the men in the family were weak, dependent and inefficient and lagged far behind her in age, experience and above all, money, she became the prime force holding them together. As Indu recalls, she maintained "an absolute control over her brother's children. Kaka, even after becoming a grandfather, could be reduced to a red-faced stuttering schoolboy by Akka's venomous tongue."<sup>10</sup>

"Venomous tongue" that is how Indu finds it and there are others in the family to hold similar views, though not for the same reason. What they have in common is but the dislike for a person who dominated them. All Akka had her strengths as well as weaknesses and her domination ought to be evaluated in the light of the ends it served. It is but natural for the dominated to be resentful of the person who dominates but it may or may not be detrimental to their interests all the time. It was not easy to hold together people with conflicting interests but Akka was able to do that with her strength and determination. Everybody feared her.

Beneath her sternness, there was something that made them respect her. For one thing, she was not selfish nor mean-minded or inconsiderate.

That is testified by two persons who knew her better. Old uncle says: "I never thought Akka would go before me. She was only a few years older. And as strong as a horse."<sup>11</sup> And Naramada (Arya) remarks: "As long as she was with us, we never felt we had no parents. I didn't feel so orphaned even when Mother died. And because Akka was there, we were still young. Now, I'm both orphaned and old."<sup>12</sup>

As the head of the family, she took decisions which did not please all. That was not unexpected in a family united only in "a readiness to revile others, to misunderstand, to see the worst."<sup>13</sup> She was realistic enough to promise money for the dowry and wedding expenses of Mini. But when Hemanth failed his first year in college and approached Akka, she did not fail to realize his worth and said, "Why do you need a degree? Take up a job and start earning...." It hurt him but it was the best advice under the circumstances as permitting him a second chance to study would have meant sheer wastage of time and money.

Sumitra charges her with partiality for boys—"Akka kept all her softness for boys."<sup>14</sup> But the above incident suffices to refute the allegation. As a matter of fact, Sumitra, a mother of three daughters and no son, misrepresents the case. She had demanded twenty thousand for the dowry of her daughter Lata but Akka did not comply. She had refused with a sharp comment: "What is wrong with you people? Your husband has been earning a good salary all along. Don't tell me you haven't saved up enough for your daughters' marriages! Expenses! Don't talk to me of expenses! If you had spent less on saris and paints for your face and lips and nails...you wouldn't have to ask others now."<sup>15</sup> Harsh words indeed, but not removed from reality which demonstrate her dislike for the cunning parasites.

But Akka had traits that made her highly annoying to the young. As long as she lived, Indu "thought she was an interfering old woman."<sup>16</sup> She appeared "ruthless, dominating, bigoted and inconsiderate" to her. Not only that, she mistook her for a "narrow minded" woman, "thinking only of herself. Never of others."<sup>17</sup> Naren does not attend the funeral of Akka, because Akka did not like him and he too hated her.<sup>18</sup>

What did they dislike so much in Akka? First of all, Akka was a staunch believer and upholder of the caste norms. Naturally, she did not like her nephew's marriage with a woman who belonged to a different caste. It appeared to Akka that Indu's mother had trapped "such a quiet boy." To Indu, however, Akka's words were "profanation and desecration", to Indu who viewed her parents' love as "something sacred."<sup>19</sup>

Sticking to her superstitions, she refuses to get herself admitted to a

hospital. She was worried about the kind of people she would come in contact with. "God knows what caste the nurses are," she said. "Or the doctors, I couldn't drink a drop of water there."<sup>15</sup> So she was consistent in her bigotry to the end of her life. Even for the sake of life she would not compromise with her belief, with her orthodoxy. That was naturally disgusting to the enlightened people like Naren and Indu.

Caste is not the only obsession with Akka; she is a product of patriarchy. She has assimilated the value system of patriarchy and attempts to inculcate the same values in the family. Herself a victim of the system she perpetuates the same to the extent she can. She believes that young girls ought to be submissive, restraint in speech and movement and far from assertive. That is why she is hard with the girls but her intention in it is to prepare them for married life by turning them acceptable to the male. She deems everything else secondary or even immaterial. When Saroja wanted to learn music, Akka put her foot down. She said:

What—learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like those women? Are we that kind of a family? Isn't it enough for you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two *arati* songs? What more does a girl from a descent family need to know?<sup>16</sup>

Her strict rules do not permit a young girl to talk to a boy freely. So when Indu is detected talking to a boy in a lone corner of the college library, Akka reprimands her, because "it's bad enough being talked about."<sup>17</sup> When Indu defies her and marries Jayant who belongs to a different caste, she disapproves of it the way she had her parents' marriage: "Such marriages never work. Different castes, different languages....It is all right for a while."<sup>17</sup>

Akka is but a villain in the eyes of the protagonist Indu. But she is surprised to receive a summons from Akka on the eve of her death. Having left home full of hatred for the family and specially for Akka, she has sworn never to go back. Akka surprises her even more and disarms her by treating her kindly when at last she comes back after twelve years.<sup>18</sup> But Indu as well as the readers of the novel are intrigued most to find that Akka has bequeathed all her money to nobody else than Indu, who disliked her and defied her all along. We wonder why. Indu herself offers an explanation of the riddle: "A family...it's like any other group. There are the strong and the weak. And the strong have to dominate the weak. It's inevitable. And Akka thought I was one of the strong ones. That's why she put the burden on me....I have to carry the burden. And to do that, I had to be hard. If I'm soft, I'll just cave in."<sup>19</sup>

In absence of any other explanation, we have to admit it. However, it implied that Akka admired the strength she found in Indu despite differences in education, awareness and social outlook. She realized that only a strong person like Indu could find the best course for a family full of "mean and petty and trivial and despicable people". Though her obsession with caste remained to the end and she refused to get herself admitted to a hospital on caste grounds, she showed her willingness to make an exception in case of Indu. She wanted to see Indu and her husband (a man of a different caste) together and converse with them.<sup>20</sup> That concession shows Akka's respect for the intelligence and determination of Indu. To sum up, Akka ought to be viewed as a "cohesive force"<sup>21</sup> and "a prop"<sup>22</sup> in the family as Indu realizes at last.

The story of Akka reveals some remarkable facts about the condition of Indian women in the 19th century. Child marriages were the norm in those days and girls were married before they attained puberty. Thus we are informed that Akka "grew up" six months after her marriage and went up her home. As their husbands were often much older and lustful, such marriages subjected girls of tender ages to marital rape. Marriage to such brides meant a trauma, a punishment. Akka spent every night in her marital home crying and nobody cared to know why. That is why she tells Arya before the latter's consummation of marriage: "Now your punishment begins. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels".<sup>23</sup>

Even the word 'punishment' seems a euphemism if we consider the horrors involved. Rosalind Miles remarks: "Child marriage all too readily reveals itself as a sophisticated form of female infanticide, for millions of these girls died from gynecologic damage or in childbirth every year. As late as 1921, the British Government Official Census of India recorded that 3,20,000 child brides had died during the previous twelve months."<sup>24</sup> She concludes her remark with two proverbs—'Early to marry and early to die is the motto of Indian women' and 'The life of a wife is two lifetimes.'

Such marriages have not altogether disappeared. The practice of marrying girls before puberty still continues in certain parts of India. That is traditional and believed to be sanctioned by religion. But that was not so in ancient India. There are hymns in the *Rigveda* which indicate that people of both sexes married at an age when they were able to choose their spouse and to shoulder the responsibilities of the household and the consummation took place immediately after the marriage.<sup>25</sup> Vashista and Yajurama in their codes permit the marriage of the girls three years



puberty.<sup>26</sup> Gautama ordained that a girl was free to choose her spouse three months after attaining puberty.<sup>27</sup> Sushruta, one of the famous authorities of Indian medicine, opined that people of both sexes ought to abstain from marrying until they attain perfect growth which happens at 25 in case of the male and at 16 in case of the female.<sup>28</sup> It was much later (a few centuries before Christ) that the codes of Parashar, Samvarta and Brihadayama threatened the parents with sin if they failed to get their daughters married between 8 and 10.<sup>29</sup> The other thing notable in the story of Akka is the attitude of her mother-in-law: "...twice she tried to run away...a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law...whipped her for that and locked her up for three days. Starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband's room. The child...cried and calling to her mother-in-law saying, "Lock me up again, lock me up." But there was no escape from a husband then."<sup>30</sup>

Then, Akka became pregnant even before she was out of her teens. Her immature, undeveloped body failed to give birth to a living child. She had miscarriages and her mother-in-law "blamed her for it and made life hell for her."<sup>31</sup> That is surprising and painful to learn. Her mother-in-law as a woman was expected to lend a sympathetic ear to her, to provide solace to her but she ill-treats her. We wonder why. Some scholars believe her mother-in-law had "turned her expression of aggression 'in words' that is, towards her daughter-in-law."<sup>32</sup> I confess, that is not so clear to me. However, such behaviour is reminiscent of the logic of those who defend ragging because they too have suffered at the hands of their seniors. Maybe, Akka's mother-in-law deemed it quite normal as she too had suffered similarly. But over and above all, Akka's mother-in-law was the product of patriarchy, a system that taught women that whatever the circumstance, a wife's sole duty, nay, even the justification of her very existence consisted in serving the sexual needs of her husband and to assure the continuity of his line by bearing children. She had no choice in respect of sex and reproduction. She could not control her body as marriage turned it into a property of her husband. Besides the social convention, religious sanctions too is easily available to the lustful husband. Thus, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, permits a husband to beat with hand or stick an unwilling wife if he fails to allure her with clothes, ornaments etc. and apply force for sexual intercourse.<sup>33</sup>

Then, we come to the third point. When Akka had been married for more than fifteen or twenty years, her husband took a mistress. He would have brought her home but for fear of his mother. "That is, Akka's mother-

in-law had no objection to her son's extra-marital affairs as long as the mistress remained out of the home. That shows two things. First, the society had as it still has two standards of morality. As for wife, she had no say in matters vital for her life and health. As for husband, he could force his will on his wife and take some other women if he felt dissatisfied. Second, hypocrisy reigned supreme in the society as there was no objection to having a mistress, only admitting her in the home mattered.

The second generation of women in the novel comprises the two daughters of Akka's elder brother and the wives of his four sons. They are but minor characters in the novel and do not have a prominent role in the story. However, they represent majority of the women of their age—neither educated nor very intelligent, bound to all that tradition implied to enjoined and living the life of ordinary mortals.

Narmada (Arya), the eldest child of Akka's elder brother, was married early according to the custom of the times. Fortunately, her husband was a "decent man."<sup>35</sup> So her married life was not a punishment as Akka lived. However, she was ill-treated after the death of her husband and, therefore, her father brought her home. She is childless, past sixty and dependent on her natal home.

Even since coming back, she has worked from morning to night everyday expecting nothing. She does the household work and yet finds time to give a hungry child something to eat, soothe a crying child, or rebuke a tired, irritable young mother of her burden.<sup>36</sup> Fatigue and sad experiences cause headache to her at time but do not blur her vision.

When Indu and her cousins were babies, she bathed them all and never got them mixed up.<sup>37</sup> Indu has been her favourite since childhood and remains so even after. When Indu comes to attend the summons of Akka and stays to attend the wedding of Mini (Padmini), she rubs oil into her hair, scrubs her with soapnut powder and pours water on her.<sup>38</sup>

With "her rituals, her fasts and her self deprivations," she leads the chastened life of a widow.<sup>39</sup> Yet, she is but a second-class citizen in the kingdom of widows, as the novelist puts it. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her, as she is not a shaven widow. She could have become a nun but for the stout resistance of her brother Anant.<sup>40</sup>

She is old-fashioned and believes that women ought to circumambulate the idol, stand devotedly in front of it with folded hands and closed eyes and pray for safety and long life of their husbands. Even her widowhood has not shaken her faith. She holds that a wife is fortunate if she does not lose her husband.<sup>41</sup>

Her conservatism is best expressed in the shock she had at the thought of her nephew Sharad going into the hotel business. "To her, there are still very few respectable careers. The law, teaching, working in a governmental office, and what to her are the new fangled ones...medicine and engineering."<sup>42</sup> Though her nephew qualifies for none of these, she would not like any other career for him. Eventually though, Indu's wisdom prevails and Sharad prospers in the hotel business.

Initially, she opposes inter-caste marriages but experience teaches her to give up her rigid attitude. This is because she cannot shun dear ones. When her brother Govind married a woman of a different caste, she did not like it like the rest of the family. But her utmost concern is not the tradition, but the happiness of her brother. So later she remarks: "What difference did it make? She could have made him happy."<sup>43</sup> The demise of Govind's wife proves a catalyst for her thought. Had her sister-in-law lived longer, her intelligent brother would not have become a wanderer. Indu too like her father marries inter-caste later. Atya is at the time mentally prepared to ignore the caste if it brings happiness to Indu.

Her softness for Akka is irritating to Indu who is ignorant of a lot of things. Akka was kind to her and permitted her to sleep in her room. She feels "both orphaned and old" after the death of Akka and remembers Akka's services to the family.<sup>44</sup> At last, she succeeds in removing Indu's hostility toward the dead woman by telling her Akka's story.<sup>45</sup>

After Akka, Atya belongs to the trio who have become "past anachronisms" as they are "struggling to survive in increasingly alien, hostile environment," who are "struggling to keep the fabric of the family intact." She has something in common with old uncle and Kaka: A lack of the sense of 'yours' and 'mine'.<sup>46</sup> She is characterized by her "undemanding affection."<sup>47</sup> And were one to divide people into two categories of the giver and the taker, one must place her among the giver, as Indu puts it:

The idea of selling the parental home to a promoter who wants to build a hotel on the site seems horrible to her. Its destruction means dissolution of the united family which provides security to helpless workers like her. Eventually, the house was sold to Shankarappa and Atya was undone. She takes her to her house where she is unhappy at first but soon adjusts herself in the new place.

Narmada's youngest sister Sunanda is diametrically opposed to her. She is cunning and manipulative. With pallid, slightly, concave face she got married to the first man who proposed to her at the age of sixteen. She was called lucky for that, she was taught early that "being a bride

she could neither assert, nor demand or proclaim". So, adopting herself to her circumstances and environment, she has become "cunning, greedy, devious and unscrupulous."<sup>48</sup> Her cunningness, however, does not stand in the way of submitting to superstitions. Thus she believes a wife should not pronounce her husband's name: It "shows disrespect.... They also say it shortens your husband's life."<sup>49</sup>

Sunanda is not modern like Indu as she herself confesses. Her out-datedness is revealed in her unplanned motherhood. Her husband Vinayak contributes nothing to the family, has no job and no earning and yet she has five children. Having children to her is not "something you should think and plan about. You should just have them."<sup>50</sup> That makes her "pure, pitiable animal" as the novelist puts it.

Though she looks helpless and feeble, she is ahead of others in looking after the interests of herself and her children. Even in the crowded house on the occasion of Mini's marriage, she could manage "mattresses, blankets and pillows for all of them; for her and her children."<sup>52</sup>

Her self-interest causes her to plead against spending money for Mini's marriage. Mini is her niece and she is well aware of the reasons for Akka's disunion. Yet, she opposes on the ground of the disqualification of the groom and his family: "If you ask me, Indu, it isn't worth it, giving all that money to that family.... Instead of spending so much money that marriage, wouldn't it be better to spend it on this house...our father's house?"<sup>53</sup> Her concern is deep, she is "frightened and desolate" as the house provides her a much-needed security but it betrays her utter disregard for Mini as she offers no alternative.

The self-seeking woman does not hesitate to besmear others when it suits her interests. Thus she forgets all Old Uncle has done for the family and charges him parasitism: "He doesn't have to bother about jobs and money. He knows he'll always get enough to eat and drink in this house." This is an outrage on the part of a person who is herself a parasite. Naturally, it arouses "diabolical anger" in Indu.<sup>54</sup>

From the same view, she accuses Kaki (Anant's wife) of depriving her of what her mother had promised for her son, Krishna. As a matter of fact, Sunanda's mother breathed her last before Krishna's birth and the name was but a concoction of the greedy Sunanda. Kaki rejected her when she presented a single silver tumbler to Krishna on his naming day. If Kaki would have ill or nothing, she presented the same to Sharad on his thread ceremony soon after.<sup>55</sup>

One characteristic of her crafty nature is her attempt to extract money



for her irresponsible husband and twice S.S.C. failed son. Her husband needs some capital to get into partnership with a businessman and her son wants money to start a repairing shop. Akka was intelligent enough to recognize their worth and Indu too does not fail to evaluate them correctly. Needless, she pays no heed to Sunanda.<sup>56</sup>

The characters of Narmada and Sunanda illustrate two aspects of joint family system. On the positive side, it provides refuge to the weak and the unfortunate like childless widows and old people. It also gives love and care to young ones. On the negative, it breeds parasites like Sunanda and Vasant who need not bother about the size of the family and the means to support it as they find it easy to exploit others.

Kaki, Sumitra and Kamala—the wives of Anant, Madhav and Vinayak—are the other women who belong to the same generation. Kaki is the traditional type of woman. As two of her sons, Hemant and Sumant are employed, she is worried about the marriage of her only daughter Mini and the career of her son Sharad. As soon as that is done, she wants to go on pilgrimage: "to Kashi and Badri and what not."<sup>57</sup>

She is outspoken by nature. She takes to task Sumitra and Madhav Rao for failing to come after Akka's death and for deciding to come on the thirteenth day. She is disgusted with Sunanda's charge of stealing silver vessels and resents frequent questions about the income from land and mangoes. She does not hesitate to complain to Indu against her father's long absence from home.<sup>58</sup>

Initially, she has doubts if Indu will agree to pay for Mini's marriage. So, she entertains rather half-heartedly the idea of Mini's marriage with Naren as he would not demand dowry. When Naren refuses, she proposes to give her daughter in marriage with the groom selected previously by Akka and spend the money on the marriage instead of maintaining the family house. She dreams of a small house: "With a small kitchen. A gas cook on. Shining pots and pans lined on shelves."<sup>59</sup>

Why is she least concerned about the family house? "Since I came into this house, my lot has been work, work, and yet more work. As long as we are here, there'll always be parasites. People come and stay here and they have a right over this house.... And who has to foot the bill for them? Us... None of them ever share the work."<sup>60</sup> That reads like an epitaph for the joint family system. All trying to reap the benefits of it and not contributing to maintain it has assured its death. The novelist is pointing out calling the three who wanted to keep the joint family intact 'anachronisms'. Sumitra, the wife of Madhav, is the daughter of a man who was a

surgeon and ended up as Director of Medical Services. Her husband is a top ranking Civil Servant. She is convent educated, speaks English most of the time. She is proud of her privileged position in the society and lives a "different, superior and exclusive" life even in the joint family.<sup>61</sup>

She refers to her husband as 'the saheb' all the time.<sup>62</sup> She carefully avoids mixing her own clothes with those of others and washes every thing in the house when a guest leaves. It is horrible for her to use public toilets and deems it necessary to tell one and all that she travels first class like her father.<sup>63</sup>

She indulges in platitudes and maintains a show of urbanity. But she is hardly liberal in money matters. Her husband paid taxes for his family home last year but Anant dares not ask him again lest Sumitra "eat(s) him up alive".<sup>64</sup> Her son Sunil, a third class B.Sc. failed to extract money from Akka and she bears a grudge against her for that. Then her attempt to get an amount of twenty thousand for dowry too fails and ends the negotiations for Lata's marriage. She misrepresents her independent minded boy doing his Business Management, unnecessarily rebuked by Akka. In case of Lata, she hides the fact that negotiations broke off because of the dowry and seems to have refused the proposal as the groom's family was 'not that cultured'.<sup>65</sup>

Thus we find that education has given her little positive. She is vain, greedy and hypocritical. She talks about things like 'dignity of labour' which she hardly practices. Prosperity has not made her generous. Dowry and other expenses on Mini's wedding appear sheer wastage to her, but she would have spent ever more for the wedding of her daughter, had she conceded. She spends a lot on dress and cosmetics, a fact Akka is proud and resented. As a matter of fact, she represents a section of the society to do women who are neither intelligent, nor honest and devoid of any sense of values.

Kamala, the wife of Vinayak, has three daughters. Her husband is a famous doctor in a small town. She is not as reserved as Sumitra and is more kindly. However, she is unhappy about the fact that she has only one son. While her husband is proud of his "bouncing, healthy girls," she is more concerned about their marriage which requires money. She shares with her husband the idea that Anant had "to flatter and fawn" to get money for Mini's wedding. Bitterly she remarks: "Akka kept all her money for her boys." Hardly accurate as a statement of fact, it is indicative of her inequality. First of all, she deems it her misfortune to have daughters and secondly she wants to shift her financial burden to others.

The third generation of women in the novel comprises Indu, Mini, Lata and Geeta. As the last two are but names in story, we have to discuss only the first two. Mini as we have noticed earlier is the daughter of Anna while Indu is the daughter of Govind. None of the cousins is beautiful. That is the only similarity they share. They differ in intellect, education and temperament.

Tradition brings up girls with an oppressive sexist bias. It teaches two things to them from the very beginning. First of them is that girls are but birds of passage and they have to leave their parental home soon for marriage. The second lesson they learn is that they have to become good housekeepers in order to become eligible as suitable brides and later good wives. As Mini says to Indu:

...ever since we were small, we were told...you'll be going away one day to your own home. They said to you and me, never to Hemant or Sumant or Sharaad or Sunil.<sup>69</sup>

So she seriously believes that she has to marry somehow to get home as the parental home is not her. Adhering to the lessons taught, she has also acquired the capability to look after a house as she puts it:

There's only one thing I'm really good at...looking after a house.<sup>70</sup>

As for her education, she admits her failure frankly: "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."<sup>71</sup> That is a shortcoming that makes her dependent and non-chooser.

She is well aware of the groom Akka has chosen for her. His "ugly features and crude mannerisms", his failure to pass through the college, his ugliness are no secret to her.<sup>72</sup> She knows that her guardian has to pay a dowry of rupees ten thousand for the marriage.<sup>73</sup> But as the groom belongs to the same community and owns a lot of property, and he has consented to the marriage proposal, the sensible and pragmatic girl finds it pointless to bother about the disqualifications of the bridegroom. For her it was marriage that mattered, not the man. "She thinks she is 'fulfilling her destiny' by getting married."<sup>74</sup>

Mini is realist and her thinking is based on practical considerations. She is past twenty-four. If girls remain unmarried at such age, people ask questions and even pity them. She is tired of such interrogation. Marriage will give her a husband to look after her and put an end to those questions. That is no mean relief to her. That is why she says: "I don't care what size

of a man he is. Once we are married, and he becomes my husband, none of his flaws will matter."<sup>75</sup>

There is the other consideration too. The entire process of marriage negotiation is tiring and taxing to the patience of both the guardians and the prospective bride. The guardians have to seek grooms and to send the bride to the groom and wait. If it does not match and is returned, they are disappointed. If it matches, they come to interview the girl. They ask questions; observe her gait, dress, speech, manners, etc. Sometimes, someone in the family wants to see the girl and they have to arrange the meeting again. Sometimes the girl is rejected as not enough and sometimes too fashionable, sometimes she is found too short or too tall. When it happens time and again, it is but natural for the girl to feel humiliated, to think she has committed a great crime by being born a girl. So, she wishes to get married at the earliest in order to save her parents from the agony. As Mini says to Indu: "And finally, if everything was fine, there was the dowry... And now, when someone has agreed, can I refuse and make Kaka through all of it all over again?"<sup>76</sup>

Mini's marriage like most of the marriages in the country is arranged. Such marriages are not based on love and far from romantic. They are rather based on cold calculations and expediency. So Indu remarks: "Behind the facade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-calculated bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?"<sup>77</sup>

Indu is the protagonist of the novel who discovers through experience her roots (as a woman and a writer) and shadows (as a daughter and a commercial journalist). Intelligent and educated, she is devoid of superstitions and questions traditional behaviour. For example, she does not believe that circumambulating the tulsi and praying for longevity increases the life of a woman's husband or pronouncing his name shortens it. "That's just to frighten the women. To keep them in their places."<sup>78</sup>

She questions the established norms and refuses to become a replica of an elderly woman around her. To put it in her own words:

As a child, they had told me that I must be obedient and uncompromising. 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.... I had laughed at them, and sworn I would never pretend to be what I was not.<sup>79</sup>

As a modern woman Indu disparages traditional marriages as they are not



based on compatibility but religion, caste, community and dowry etc. and leave "human emotions".<sup>80</sup> Women married that way and devoted to their husbands are but an enigma to her. She wonders if they are "martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools".<sup>81</sup> As a mark of protest against the tradition, she marries outside her caste and leaves the house of her father's family.

Her married life begins with love, but does not sail smoothly. There are problems in her career of journalism and there are problems in her conjugal life. Part of these problems is caused by others while part of them is the product of her fault. For the sake of her husband Jayant who wants to maintain a high standard of living and needs money for the purpose, she has to compromise and "Write the kind of things that are acceptable, popular and easily sold." She is disgusted with flattery and dishonesty but Jayant comes in her way.<sup>82</sup> Problems of her conjugal life are far deeper and agonizing. As Jayant is shocked to find passion in her, she is compelled to pretend passiveness, to deny her womanhood and thereby experience loss of self-esteem.<sup>83</sup>

It is at this critical juncture of life that she is summoned by Akka and returns to her natal house after more than a decade. Akka dies soon after meeting her and leaves her property to Indu. Indu has now to resolve her own problems as well as to fulfil her obligations toward the family. Eventually she succeeds in both respects. Her meeting with Naren proves a catalyst to her to a large extent. Naren is a harsh critic of her writings who exposes the hollowness of her writings mercilessly. That helps her make up her mind about her literary career. Then, Indu has an extra-marital affair with Naren. It proves but an episode in her life as Naren passes away soon. But the affair makes her conscious of the fact that a woman need not be ashamed of her sexuality or hide it. She realizes her mistake in trying to do, speak, dress and behave the way it pleases Jayant. It amounts to a denial of her own identity which is neither pleasing nor honourable.<sup>84</sup>

Once she realizes that it is no use hiding her own feelings or feeling ashamed of them, she gains the courage to tell Jayant that she is going to resign from her job and start the kind of writing she always wanted to do. That is, she will not write what is acceptable, popular and easily sold but what comes out of her inner self.<sup>85</sup> Then, she reveals her strengths and weaknesses to her husband and the result is positive and promising according to her own admission: "There is an ease in our relationship as was not there before. If my feelings have cooled down to some extent,

have gained something else in return. I no longer fight my need of him. I am not ashamed of it. I know it does not make me less of a human being."<sup>86</sup>

Akka has placed her in somewhat peculiar condition by leaving all her money to her. She has remained so hostile to Akka for a long time and despises the family as "mean and despicable."<sup>87</sup> Under the circumstances, she can use that money to enrich herself or give it to strangers. Hatred suggests both of these courses to her but her mind eventually leads her to decide otherwise. She feels bound by an obligation and to fulfil that she must be hard.<sup>88</sup> So she takes decisions which are not very pleasant to her kith and kin but in practice benefit them. She decides to pay for the wedding of Mini and the family house is sold to a promoter. The money obtained from the sale is distributed in a way that enables all to have small houses of their own. Sharad prospers in his hotel business. Arja, the childless widow comes to live with Indu and Jayant and adjusts herself well in course of time. Though nobody favoured the idea of spending money for an outsider like Vithal, Indu recognizes his merit and Vithal is "one of the first to benefit from Akka's trust".<sup>89</sup>

The above analysis reveals certain facts about the social progress. We have to recognise that resistance to change is generally strong. Women of the second generation are as conservative and superstitious as Akka. At the same time, even the most conservative are compelled to concede to the demands of the age. Thus, Akka cannot shut her eyes to the necessity of sending the girls of the family to college as boys want to marry graduate girls. Govind belonging to the second generation marries inter-caste and Indu, his daughter does likewise. Sumitra is convent-educated and proud of her 'culture'. By the third generation we find that adult marriages have replaced child marriages and the girls are striving to assert their rights and confronting the problems of their sexuality. Love marriages and inter-caste marriages are leading them a step ahead but they are also bringing them before new challenges of adjustment with male egotism and assertion of their own identity. The novel also shows that women need not blame men for all problems as at least some of them come from their own silence, deception and self-denial.

#### REFERENCES

1. Indian Communicator, 20 November, 1994
2. *Roots and Shadows*, p. 70
3. *Ibid.* p. 71
4. *Ibid.* p. 22