

Widows in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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AMITABH ROY

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. There were people in Bengal who advocated immolation of widows, misinterpreted the Vedas and went to the extent of distorting the text of a hymn (*Rig Veda*, X.18.7). Though the Vedic society practised remarriage of widows and the Vedas favour it unreservedly, they had no qualms of conscience in hiding the truth. Echoes of their misinterpretations are heard to this day strangely enough in the writings of some progressives like Dr. Sukumari Bhattacharya.¹ Such resistance to progress, however, failed and the agitation led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy bore fruit in 1829 when immolation of widows was banned legally. The ban permitted them to live but not to remarry. The remarriage of widows was legalised in 1856 as a result of the agitation led by Vidyasagar. The legislation, however, remains confined to paper if that is not accompanied by practice, which requires social awareness. Pandita Ramabai in Maharashtra and Swami Dayananda in the Punjab and Hindi-speaking regions attempted to improve the lot of widows by propagating for their remarriage. As a result, though the remarriage of widows is not much in vogue in Hindu society today, there has been undoubtedly some change for the better.

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad (Karnataka) in a Brahman family and she has lived mostly in Maharashtra and Karnataka. Eight of her nine novels appeared during the last

eighteen years of the twentieth century (1982-2000). Four of those novels refer to the lot of widows and we can safely assume that they reflect the reality she experienced in Maharashtra and Karnataka during the last century.

In the *Roots and Shadows*, we find two widows Akka and Atya. Akka summons Indu and meets her after eleven years before breathing her last. She is dead by page 20 of the novel but pervades almost the entire work by her strong personality. Besides Indu, she is the only character that impresses us most. She is remarkable for both positive and negative elements of her personality.

It is the negative aspects that come to our notice first and even Indu who is so familiar with her thinks that they constitute the whole of her self. We find her superstitious to the extent that she refuses hospitalization for herself. 'God knows what caste the nurses are' or 'the doctors. I couldn't drink a drop of water, there' says she to explain her position.² That is absurd and annoying to us.

She seems irrational and unkind at times. She rebukes Indu when she learns that Indu was seen talking to a boy in a corner of the college library: "...three people have spoken to me about it since yesterday. And to your Kaka as well. No girl in our family has ever been talked about. You have to promise such a thing won't happen again."³ Obviously, her stand sounds untenable and cruel to Indu. Naturally, when Akka's husband's half-witted niece Kusum who was her "servant, companion and scapegoat...all in one" commits suicide and Akka shows "neither grief nor remorse", Indu believes "it was Akka's personality that had driven her into that well".⁴

She is conservative in social outlook and therefore disapproves intercaste marriage of Indu's parents "who had overcome the then almost insurmountable barriers of caste and lived a tragically short but intensely happy life together".⁵ Akka sticks to her hard position that marriages must not disregard caste and language boundaries: "Such marriages never work. Different castes, different languages...it's all right for a while. Then they realize..."⁶ Akka's harsh remark about it leads Indu

to plan for leaving. Again, when Indu marries a man of a different caste, only her father and one of her uncles (Anant) dare attend the marriage, as they are scared of Akka.⁷

But all that is said about Akka is not necessarily true. Despite Kamala's statement to the contrary, we find little evidence to hold that Akka has "all her softness for boys".⁸ She is prudent enough to turn down Sunil's request for money who instead of seeking a job according to his ability, goes on wasting money for worthless diploma.⁹ Similarly, when Vasant approaches her for money pretending to need capital for business partnership, she does not give money to that 'waster'.¹⁰ When Hemant fails his first year in college, Akka asks him to take a job and start earning.¹¹ Such decisions are unpleasant to the persons concerned but they are wise ones beyond doubt.

In a society where the male dominate, Akka presents a strange phenomenon. A rich childless widow, she comes back to her brother's house and maintains absolute control over her brother's children. That is an achievement in itself. That could not have been possible without some abilities. Moreover, she aims at the happiness of all in the family as one of the characters (Atya) declares.¹² Her brother's children do not feel orphaned even when their parents die as she loves and cares them well.¹³ That is what gives her the moral warrant to dominate and dictate them.

Akka is particularly kind to her brother's widowed daughter Narmada (or Atya). The latter always sleeps in her room until Akka dies. Similarly, she is considerate about Padmini. She like Padmini's father is worried about Padmini. She is neither bright and well educated nor beautiful. Her brothers are not expected to care for her after the demise of elders. So she decides to get her married to a groom who belongs to their caste, comes of a good family and has got money.¹⁴ His features are coarse and mannerisms crude and he does not possess a degree and yet Akka promises a dowry and consents to pay wedding expenses.¹⁵ That is not pleasant to people like Sumitra who deem it as sheer wastage but they do not offer any alternative nor dare shoulder any responsibility.¹⁶ It vindicates Akka and demonstrates that she had no other option under the circumstances.

Akka's indifference and remorselessness seems to be rooted in unhappy experiences of her married life. A small and dainty girl at twelve, she was married to a tall bulky man past thirty and had to suffer a lot. Her turn came at last when her husband had a stroke. The submissive woman began to dominate since then and her husband could not entertain his mistress or carry on his excesses any long. The newly acquired habit to dominate came in handy when she returned to her brother's house. The greatest testimony of Akka's wisdom lies in the choice of her heir. Despite differences in social outlook and tense relations resulting from them, she gives all her money to Indu because she knows her 'shoulders are strong'.¹⁷ Few people have the eye to notice the merit in people they disagree with and Akka is undoubtedly one of them. Indu lives up to her expectations in handling family affairs and making the best use of money bequeathed by her. For example, she does not entertain the foolish idea of Sharad to enter a medical college by paying donation and he prospers in the hotel business "with his glib talk and air of assurance and smartness".¹⁸ Then, as it has become difficult to maintain the old house of the family, she takes the bold step of selling it to a promoter. Atya is the only helpless person displaced by the decision. She takes her to her own house where she lives happily.¹⁹

Atya is the other widow in the novel. She is the eldest sister of Indu's father, Govind. Her real name is Narmada. She is past sixty and childless. As she was ill-treated after her husband's death, her father brought her home. Since then, 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 relieve a tired, irritable young mother of her burden".²⁰ When Indu and her cousins were babies, she bathed them all and never got them mixed up.²¹

Indu has been her favourite since childhood and remains so ever after. When Indu comes to attend the summons of Akka and stays to attend the wedding of Padmini (or Mini), she rubs oil into her hair, scrubs her with soap nut powder and pours

water on her.²² Fatigue and sad experiences cause headache to her at times²³ but do not blur her vision.

She is old-fashioned and believes that married women ought to circumbulate the tulsi, 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 also thinks that a wife is fortunate if she does not survive her husband.²⁴

She is kind and mild-mannered 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'. With her traditional outlook she could not become one but for the stout resistance of her brother Anant.

Akka is kind to her and permits her to sleep in her room. She in turn remembers her services to the family well and removes Indu's hostility toward Akka by telling her the story of her early life.

To sum up, if we divide people in the world into two types as Indu does, Atya can rightly be placed among the givers.²⁵

The Binding Vine does not consist of any widow speaking strictly. But it reports a strange case of widow-phobia. Baiajji's mother was a shy, withdrawn woman. However, she was abnormal in that she feared widows and widowhood too much. That abnormality led her to believe she was a widow. She gave up everything married women with her husbands living are expected to wear and adopted all the rituals of the widows. As her family did not permit her to wear the coarse clothes of a widow, she preferred to remain nude. Her husband locked her in a room as a result. Sakubai, who looked after the locked woman and her family, eventually became the mistress of her husband. Whatever the reason, the mad woman burnt herself after that.²⁶ The story shows how far obsession with the idea of widowhood may go.

There are two widows in *That Long Silence*: Aiji and Mukta. Aiji is the mother of Jaya's father, Vasu. She is a shaven widow and has no possessions but the two saris she wears. Her room is bare. The large bed she slept on during the life of her

husband remains without mattress. The two wooden chairs with arms in her room have no cushions and their sharp nails hurt skin, clothes and hair of the person who sits on. The bed is but a memorial of her husband and chairs are meant for men who cannot sit comfortably on the ground. Ajji sits on the bare ground and sleeps on a raw mat at night.²⁷

Despite self-denial, Ajji is kind, careful and attentive to the family. Sitting in her room, she calls out her sons, daughters and grandchildren. She has a lot of self-control. The only time she sheds tears is when her youngest son Vasu leaves her for a separate home after his marriage. She is a stern mother-in-law who does not tolerate any negligence of duty on the part of her daughters-in-law. She rebukes Shanta for neglecting her youngest, hydrocephalic son.²⁸

Ai is the other widow in the novel. She is the mother of Jaya. She is remarkable for her white and bony forehead. She disliked her mother-in-law and left her. She lived at Saptagiri with her husband for twenty years and went to Ambegaon after his death. She did not keep anything of her married life there but a large framed photograph of her husband. She hung a sandalwood garland round it some time but did not care about it after that, with the result that a swarm of mosquitoes gathered there. Later even when Jaya removed the garland, she did not notice its absence.

Though she had almost forgotten about the photograph and the garland, we cannot infer that she had forgotten her husband. When she holds Jaya's hand and caresses it saying, 'How like your father's your hands are, Jaya', it is obvious her husband remains ever in her thoughts.²⁹ Jaya accuses her for making her children homeless by selling her home but she had her problems. She had to clear the debts left by her husband and needed money for normal expenses too. So, there was no alternative before her as Kamat rightly explains.³⁰

Then, we find Mukta, the widow of Arun. Her husband fell out of a train and died. She was pregnant at that time. Her daughter Nilima was born later.³¹ Kamat, who was one of the few friends Arun had, helped her. When even her father was

hesitating, Kamat encouraged her to do teacher's training and take up a job. That was so necessary for herself and her child. So she is a teacher now and bringing up her daughter well.³²

She is a helpful neighbour to Jaya but reserved. She does not want to disturb her and reminds Nilima to be careful about it. She remembers Kamat with gratitude. She has got the traditional trait of widows in that she has more days of fasting than those of taking normal meal. Her piety seems meaningless to Jaya as Hindu women fast to avoid widowhood and there can be no use of it as she has become already a widow.³³

We also learn about the plight of a girl of thirteen. Jaya's father told the story to his friends. As the child did not get her head shaved, she was humiliated and disgraced in public. 'They called her a whore, the daughter of a whore'.³⁴

Small Remedies presents the unusual character of Leela. She is a social worker and trade unionist. She was married to Vasant and lived happily with him. Even after her husband's death she does not go to her parents but stays with her in-laws. She helps educate her brothers-in-laws.³⁵ Much later she marries again. Her second husband is a Christian doctor, Joe who has two children from his previous marriage—Paula and Tony.³⁶ Paula with her hatred for Hindus is a difficult child to handle. Moreover, she has to bring up Madhu; her sister's daughter after the death of latter's parents. She shoulders all these responsibilities well and does all she can to keep Joe free from all worries. After the death of Joe, she returns to Maruti Chawl to spend her days among the working class. However, threatened by real estate mafia, she goes to Dadar and dies there in a one-room flat.³⁷

The above survey reveals several important facts about the widows in Indian society. The widows have suffered and they still suffer, partly due to social prejudices and partly due to their own inhibitions. Superstition or sheer habit sometimes leads them to self-mortification. 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. Even the mild ones among them like Atya

prove immensely helpful to a joint family. And if they rid themselves of the age old outworn restrictions, they do have the capabilities to make themselves happy as well as others around them and to serve society too at the same time. The word 'abala' meaning the powerless generally applied to women in Indian languages is hardly suitable to them and it is nothing but a criminal folly to brand them as inauspicious and a burden to society.

NOTES

1. *Vedavani* (Hindi monthly), Vol. 57, No. 6 (April 2005), pp. 10-13.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *Roots and Shadows*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 51.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 46.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
26. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Binding Vine*, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 96-97.
27. Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 26.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
35. Deshpande, Shashi. *Small Remedies*, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 233-34.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.