

A Journey from Ignorance to Self-Realisation a Comparative Study With Reference To Shashi Deshpande's "Roots And Shadows" And Sivasankari's "Palangal"

P. K. Gomathi

Hod/Assistant Professor, Department of English Sengunthar Engineering College, Tiruchengode

Abstract: Most of the research scholars in India and abroad are fascinated by Comparative Literature as it provides them the essential scope to read and comprehend the customs followed by people in their place of origin as well as in their neighbouring countries. The readers and the scholars who are interested in Comparative Literature are gifted with an opportunity to understand the nature of man, his personality, the environment that decides his life style and the reasons for his odd behaviours at times. It can be hailed as a voyage towards the province of better understanding of Man who is ever a prey to society, tradition and customs that are followed with or without a motive. During the course of such investigation it is quite interesting to note that human nature is the same everywhere irrespective of their environment and socio-cultural background. Women writers in India depict their views about the role of women as a girl child, wife, mother and widow in a family. Their main objective is to make the readers explore into their works to recognise the social values in India and the patriarchal outlook on life. Shashi Deshpande and Sivasankari are two such contemporary writers whose themes own socio-cultural significance.

Key words: identity, marriage, patriarchal, society, suffering

I. Introduction

Comparative Literature gives an option to know the existing set up in the society and an opportunity to compare it with the life style of ancestors of our country and neighbouring nations and in turn makes the readers to think about a solution to some problems like child labour, child marriage, the denial of right to girl children in patriarchal society and depression of educated middle class women instead of their fine economical status. Such studies would definitely help the people to consider the changes to be introduced in the society to renovate the life style of those who are denied of such rights. The reason for the attraction towards comparative studies is given by Susan Bassnett in her book "Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction" as:

Most people do not start with comparative literature, they end up with it in some way or other, travelling towards it from different points of departure. Sometimes the journey begins with a desire to move beyond the boundaries of a single subject area that might appear to be too constraining, at other times a reader may be impelled to follow up what appear to be similarities between texts or authors from different cultural contexts(1).

India is a nation with an assorted collection of fantastic feats of writers writing not only in English but also in regional languages leaving heaps of treasures for any comparative scholar to trap the sources with ease. Shashi Deshpande daughter of the prominent Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Shriranga was born in Dharwad, Karnataka. Her novels written in English are deeply rooted in Indian culture. Sivasankari is a popular Tamil writer and activist whose aim is to present the role of women in the Indian society. The conflicts faced by their protagonists are similar to the one encountered by many women in Indian society.

A parallel study of their works is a thought provoking from a sociological perspective. Shashi Deshpande and Sivasankari are writing in two different languages, English and Tamil respectively and are hailing from two different geographical locations, but from India which is celebrated for its cultural diversity. It will also assist the readers to appreciate the universal human perception. Both try to show how child marriage, dowry system, the denial of right even to eat the freshly cooked food, the training given to children to adapt to situations, the denial of education and restrictions make the women to raise their voice against the existing set up.

Shashi Deshpande's and Sivasankari depict the grief and depression of girl children, the role of mother and their family members in their life. The position of women from the early 20th century is narrated to facilitate the readers to get a clear perspective about the risk of child marriages, the work of women in the kitchen, the communication gap between husband and wife and its consequences. Both of them are of the idea that men are alone not the reason for the suffering of women. Rather than by men folk, the young women are advised to

follow certain rigid codes by the elderly women in the family and ill-treated as slaves by the mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. The young girls are left with gloomy childhood memories. The main cause of suppression of women is another woman in a patriarchal society. Shashi Deshpande and Sivasankari narrate the search of women for identity in every generation in relation to modern reality. It is quite interesting to read their novels because their protagonists struggle to live with a peace of mind with their life partners but they never lose their hope in the marriage institution. Their struggle crafts them as strong individuals and imparts courage to face any crisis. They try to find a solution within their limit.

Shashi Deshpande's novel "Roots and Shadows" and Sivasankari's novel "Palangal" have brought out the problems of women who belong to different sections of society. Both portray the status of women within the conventional social structure. Shashi Deshpande's novel "Roots and Shadows" begins with the wedding of Mini, Indu's cousin in their ancestral home. Indu recalls the life of Akka an old aunt of Indu's who was made to suffer when she was young due to the betrayal of her husband. Through the character of Akka, Deshpande successfully portrays how women though suffered once because of the patriarchal set up never deviate from their ancestors. She who had once desired to be freed from the marriage bond, on her return to her father's house implements a rigid code of conduct on the other women in the household. She insists on their not uttering the 'husband's name' as it would shorten the latter's life span. Indu being an educated woman resents such traditional practices. P. Madhurima Reddy rightly observes:

The novel presents a typical facet of deprived womanhood through the character of Akka, who is the youngest sister of Indu's grandfather. Akka returns to her parental home as a rich widow after the death of her husband and starts looking after her nephews and nieces with the care and attention of a truly compassionate mother. She becomes the presiding deity of the family who confers peace and security on her willing subjects but deals ruthlessly with the rebellious and the recalcitrant. Akka's authoritative nature never allows people to peep into her life and understands her (1).

Akka represents the old order, and is passionately obsessed with caste and the moral conduct of girls. Even when she is on her death bed she refuses to go to the hospital because as she puts it, "God knows what caste the nurses are or the doctors. I could not drink a drop of water there." ("Roots and Shadows" 24) She also puts her foot down when Naren's mother wants to learn music, saying: "What learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like THOSE women? Are we that kind of family? Isn't it enough for you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two aarti songs? What more does a girl from a decent family need to know?" (55)

Once she was the prey of gender oppression but she enforces the same victimization as far as her influence extends. Akka lives in the midst of a vast diversity of discourses, but never changes her attitude as far as her family circle is concerned. As Deshpande aptly remarks in Writing from the Margin;

The women in my novels, like the women in India today, or indeed like women or humans anywhere, have so many forces working on them – and all at the same time. There's history and culture, there's religion and customs, there are individual and family faiths and beliefs, family traditions and histories. And last not but the least, there are people around us and their expectations and our relationships with them. (160)

In "Palangal", Sivasankari deals with the life style of our ancestors. It is a saga of three generations of Tamil Brahmin women and the novel spans nearly a century. The women lived from 1907-1931, 1940-1964 and 1964-1985 have varied living experiences Even the orthodox widow of the early twentieth century emerges as a strong personality and a sense of duty and devotion to family is her main focus. Each succeeding generation of women is stronger and more modern and freed than the preceding generation. "Palangal" is a captivating account of how slowly women acquire their right to education.

Sivasankari gives an account of Hindu tradition, rituals, customs and the life span of a woman Sivakamu, from her child marriage at the age of seven to her husband's demise and an account of the revolt of the next generation girls against the curbed freedom. The role of elders, the hectic workload of women, the difficulties faced by them because of child marriages, lack of awareness about family planning, the crude methods adapted by them to terminate the child in the womb, the domination of mothers-in- law over their daughters-in- law and the sufferings of widows allure the attention of comparative readers as both Shashi Deshpande and Sivasankari write with the idea that literature can open up the mind.

In Deshpande's "Roots and Shadows" Akka got married when she was twelve to a thirty years old man. In Sivasankari's "Palangal" the grandfather of Sivakamu declared that his granddaughter Sivakamu was seven years old and she could marry eleven years old Suppuni. In those days girls were given in marriage to thirty to forty years old men as their second and third wives. So Pattamma, mother of Sivakamu felt happy about the proposal and thought that her daughter Sivakamu was clearly fortunate to marry Suppuni. When compared Sivakamu's married life with Akka's life in Deshpande's "Roots and Shadows", Sivakamu was privileged.

The law in India supported child marriages until 1978 and it was also one of the reasons for child marriages. Hindu Child marriage Act was passed in 1927. This bill states that no marriage of Hindu girl shall be

valid unless she has on the day of her marriage completed her twelfth year and the boy fifteenth year. Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, popularly known as Sarda Act passed, raised the age at marriage to 14 years for girls and 18 years for boys and in 1978 it raised the legal age at marriage from 15 to 18 for girls and 18 to 21 for boys. Even now child marriages are reported by the newspapers though the law views at the crisis severely.

Law can only give guidelines but the necessary initiation should bloom from the society. Both Akka and Sivakamu are the victims of child marriage Akka emerges out as a strong individual after her return to her father's house and Sivakamu gathers courage to face life after the sad demise of her husband.

Shashi Deshpande and Sivasankari speak about the workload of women in the joint families. Women work endlessly. Their readiness to work should have come to them through the constant instructions given by the elderly ladies like Akka in *The Roots and Shadows* and Sivakamu's mother in Sivasankari's "Palangal". Women work ceaselessly for Mini's wedding. Indu observes:

I could hear voices slurred with sleep coming from the courtyard behind the kitchen, and I knew the women hadn't slept the whole night. They had been chopping, rolling, pounding, getting ready the festive lunch that would follow the puja that day.... Doves of women worked continuously in the kitchen, against a deadline it seemed they couldn't possibly meet, turning out mammoth quantities of food and endless cups of tea and coffee. (*Roots and Shadows* 13-14)

As flocks of women working for Mini's wedding in *Roots and Shadows* for Sivakamu's wedding Pattamma and her sister-in-law worked and served everyone with care to avoid any criticism about their reception. Both the writers try to convey that women of all ages in India are trained to work without a complaining attitude because they believe it as their responsibility and not as their destiny.

Deshpande and Sivasankari depict how the marriages are fixed after the horoscopes. Even at present the society turns deaf to the wish of a bride. Mini's wedding in *Roots and Shadows* and Sivakamu's wedding and Sundaram's daughter Mythili's wedding in "Palangal" are fixed by the astrologers.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu is displeased with the choice of the bridegroom for Mini. Indu is convinced as:

'...You know Padmini's horoscope has a flaw in it.' (*Roots and Shadows* 51)

'What's wrong with the boy? He has two legs, two arms, two eyes, two ears...' (*Roots and Shadows* 52)

Padmini is past twenty-four now. And there's her horoscope. And the problem of finding a family with a status comparable to ours. And when everything clicks, there's the dowry hurdle. What am I to do? Let the girl stay unmarried? (*Roots and Shadows* 55)

May be the boy is a little ugly, may be a little stupid...but everything else is fine. (*Roots and Shadows* 55)

Shashi Deshpande conveys her idea through Indu about weddings at India in the following words: "The Indian way. The husband. A definite article. Permanent. Not only for now, but forever. To be accepted. Stop." (*Roots and Shadows* 118) Sivasankari in "Palangal" gives a vivid picture of the role of dowry in marriages. The custom of giving dowry started long back and it exists even today. Sivasankari narrates the life of people in three eras in this novel. The marriages of Sivakamu, Mythili and Charu who belong to three different periods are fixed after the dowry is negotiated as Mini's wedding in *Roots and Shadows*. B.S. Nagi writes:

It has been found that the quantum of dowry increases with the age and educational level of the prospective brides. Some upper caste parents prefer to keep their daughters uneducated and marry them off young to avoid heavy dowry demand (6).

The dowry prohibition Act 1961 was passed in India. According to this Act, if a person gives or takes dowry then he is liable to be punished for an imprisonment and fine. Among the social evils that prevail and plague Indian society, the dowry system plays the most devastating role. Even then it has extended out its tentacles far and wide in the society distressing almost every section of the society.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Narmada was saved by his elder brother from the crude rituals after the death of her husband as Venkat saved his mother in "Palangal". The people who observe strict tradition consider Narmada as a second citizen in the world of widows and avoid the food prepared by her.

The bare skull, with its short hairs, looked somehow not only indecent, but obscene when bared. And I understood why Kaka had, when Atya was widowed, so stoutly resisted the idea of her becoming a shaven widow. He had won but at the cost of Atya's status. She was now a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her. (*Roots and Shadows* 130)

Kaka's insisted Narmada on not having shaven head is not because of his interest in the rights of women in mind, but to save his sister from being tortured as Venkat in "Palangal". Though Narmada has no children, remarriage is not even once suggested for her. The society neither prefers her second marriage nor her life style without a shaven head. She is treated as a second grade citizen not only among the circle of widows

but also by the society. Sivasankari too mentions how young girls were given as second and third wives to a widower in the early twentieth century. Men in India are blessed with all the boons whereas women are treated with a step-mother attitude. Lata Mani rightly points out:

Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which the tradition was debated and reformulated. What was at stake was not women but tradition. (181)

Both Deshpande and Sivasankari try to explain the condition of women which has not seen a better improvement. Even today, widows are not permitted to take part in functions and marriages. The reason is not only men but a male dominated society.

Sivasankari narrates about how the husband and wife were permitted to meet only on occasions in “Palangal” through Sivakamu’s sister-in-law who belonged to late nineteen thirties. In Roots and Shadows the aunt and uncle of Indu are never given a chance to meet during day time as they live in a joint family. Though Deshpande and Sivasankari do not have any direct influence, they are influenced by the social pattern of living in the Indian society. In the above mentioned two cases the same incident happens in the life of the characters of Deshpande and Sivasankari. The right to meet the husband was prevented before sixty years for Sivakamu and her sister-in-law and the same situation occurs to Indu’s uncle and aunt at present as they are in a joint family. Akka was tortured before sixty years by her husband and Charu who belongs to the present generation is also tortured by her husband. Both the writers try to state that marriages are celebrated as a festival in India but not the married life. The importance given for the occasion is not given to life. All the happiness vanishes off with one day.

Indu revolts against Akka and selects Jayant as her life partner. She is blessed with an improved standard of life than Akka, Narmada and Mini. But she is also displeased in her marriage with Jayant. The marriage of Akka, Narmada and Mini has been fixed by the astrologers and elders but not Indu’s. She commits adultery with Naren as she is always expected to be inert during intercourse by Jayant. At the end after observing Mini’s confidence and Narmada’s narration about her marriage and Akka’s marriage, Indu realises her role in the society. Her understanding instills a hope to lead a life with Jayant without revealing her adultery with Naren. In “Palangal” Charu divorces Suresh as his tortures exceed the limit but she permits her daughter Aparna for a love marriage. When Aparna’s husband dies, she supports her remarriage. Indu gathers courage to face life whereas Aparna never loses hope in the marriage institution.

Deshpande and Sivasankari give due importance to familial relations and suggest their protagonists to untie the knots of the problem to lead a healthy life. They insist on mutual understanding and co-operation among the members of the family. Along with marriage both writers also deal with the issue of widowhood and reflect on how traditional Indian norms make life hell for widows. They do not approve separation and divorce but they condemn those practices that hamper women’s lives.

Shashi Deshpande and Sivasankari try to emphasize the troubles and inconsistencies within their societies through their novels for all to think and act. Their novels are interesting and they educate the society. Rather than advising directly, they put forth their ideas through their narration to reap a better result. The focus on women who were marginal and underrepresented groups in the early twentieth century are narrated by them in an exclusive way along with the experience of modern educated women, her trials, her problem solving skills and her faith in Indian marriage system. The life of women who belong to early twentieth century acts as an eye opener through which life and its intricacies are learnt by the modern middle class educated women. Their optimistic approach discloses all the secrets of solving the diversified problems without escaping from them. Their idea would definitely pave way to construct a better and healthier society as woman stands as its backbone in all the ages.

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