

## Man in Woman: Transcending Gender in Shashi Deshpande,s Roots and Shadows



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In traditional societies most of the men and women try to mould themselves according to their socially defined image revealing that they are only a product of patriarchal system. In their outlook and behaviour, they show a suppression of different kinds of human impulses and inclinations, representing certain deviations which lead to a lopsidedness in their personalities. This is because patriarchal societies, like the one in India, have tended to equate rather rigidly the masculine and the feminine with men and women, harming not only individuals but also their families and societies. They teach boys and men to suppress the traits described as feminine just as girls and women are encouraged and forced to deny those which are seen as the qualities of a man. The result is that neither men nor women are able to grow into balanced and harmonious human beings. In pursuit of the 'masculine,' men generally become active, aggressive, and domineering, and women, in pursuit of the 'feminine,' tend to be receptive, subservient and nurturing. In reality, human beings and societies need both masculine and feminine energies and traits. In the absence of any one type of energy and trait, each sex helplessly remains incomplete, unequilibrated and dependent on the other. From this perspective, each person is only half a person, depending on its other half for its very existence.

There are some women who easily transcend the defined boundaries of their gender and tend to exhibit those characteristics which are generally defined as manly or masculine. A certain type of masculine vigour seems to ooze out of them. But it is often suppressed by social norms which they are expected to imbibe and live by. Girls also live in the same socio-cultural atmosphere

in which boys live. Like boys, they too observe their fathers and grandfathers exercising their authority and power over weaker ones. However, they are expected not to acquire the masculine traits of men in their milieu. But this process of suppressing these natural human characteristics fails to erase completely all of those natural impulses and attitudes which are regarded as distinguishing features of manliness. These suppressed traits are, at times, exhibited by women as per the demands of the situations they are in. Like men, they also feel pleasure while dominating others. They also want to control important institutions like society, economic systems etc. as men do. Because of women's natural capacities and energies, like those of men, they, today, feel disinclined to limit themselves to the feminine role or space, and, leaving no domain of work or achievement which men can claim to be theirs and theirs only. Whatever was conventionally deemed the province of men has been encroached on by women. It may be a bit difficult for a traditional man to accept women in their new roles, but this fails to inhibit or prohibit them from doing what they can and wish to do.

In fact, women too can be said to have the capability of performing the same functions and of having similar qualities as are attributed to men. Indian history too speaks highly about them. The thrones were occupied by Queens and Begums as well. Their role in creating legendary figures has been no less crucial. Shivaji was a warrior because he reflected the virtues of his mother, Jijabai. Bahadur Shah Zafar was undoubtedly the last emperor of this subcontinent, but it was Laxmi Bai who led the 'First War of Independence' in 1857. Indira Gandhi played in no way a role less important

than Nehru in the history of modern India. Moreover, the myth of Kali, who killed demons in her dreadful form of Rudra armed with ten lethal weapons, is known to all. Recently, the industrial revolution and expansion of education have helped women to enter territories which were previously only male preserves. Modern women have access to education and have acquired some degree of financial independence. They also appear to be rational, judicious, and determined; they demand equality, freedom and dignity of self. In some cases, they perform the role of the provider and protector of their families. The niche they carve out for themselves in this way places them in a position of higher social status, power and respect. But, at times, like strong and authoritative men, they too tend to become dictatorial, forcing their wishes on weaklings and subordinates. They can defy traditions and also become violent and rebellious to realize their goals. They do not tolerate the power of men over them, rather question and resist. Most importantly they also express their hitherto inhibited sexuality in a rather freer manner. All this goes to underline the presence of abilities and capacities associated with masculinity in women as well. It indicates that masculinity like femininity is not a purely biological category but a structure of consciousness which can exist in women also. Kamla Bhasin sums it up well when she observes, "Masculinity is about power, power over others. Those who surrender are feminine; those who dominate are masculine; but it does not mean that the former are always women, and the latter are always men."

Like most of the modern philosophers, psychologists and sociologists, modern writers like Shashi Deshpande too seem to hold that it is unfair, unrealistic and painful to force every man and woman into the rigid framework and definition of masculinity or femininity. Her belief that human beings always have greater diversity and more choices based on inclination and ability rather than biology is testified by the way she has treated her male as well as female characters. Her male characters, as they have been analyzed in previous chapters, appear to

behave and act under the influence of their traditionally defined images which, ironically, harm them in different ways. The novelist is critical of such men who not only suffer on account of their socially forced roles, stifled feelings and emotions, and authoritative behaviour, but also cause sufferings to others. Along with men, she has also created some women who exhibit the traits generally associated with masculinity. This proves that men and women are not naturally so as have been defined by myths; they are largely produced by their atmosphere and milieu. This becomes more evident when one studies those of her female characters who, like men, appear to be very much a natural part of patriarchal system. They have also internalized its values and obviously derive some benefits from it. They wield power in important fields and display abilities and capacities generally associated with men in patriarchy. Their strength develops due to their experiences. Consequently, they become more confident and domineering. They are also able to exercise their power and authority over others. As in society around us, so in Deshpande's writings, some female characters emerge with powerful masculine energy. Such women, when they go out and experience real life and face critical situations, unconsciously play roles conventionally defined as masculine. How a woman, initially being weak and suppressed, can assume the so-called manly traits of toughness, authority and domination is clearly visible in the character of Akka in *Roots and Shadows*. Like any girl in a tradition bound society, her experiences of early life had been nightmarish, as at the age of twelve she was married off to a man who was much older than her. Child marriage stifles her childhood which unleashes on her the real trauma of being a girl. Her soul withers when she has to tolerate the cruel and beastly sexual advances of her husband, who is a wealthy man and is used to keeping mistresses. In most of her married life, she has tried to escape from her husband's brutality. But during this period, she learns a lesson that the weak always suffer and those in power enjoy. Gradually, out of her sufferings,

there arises a manly power in Akka. Consequently, a change occurs in her personality when her husband, who always dominated and abused her, faces a stroke. She looks after him with great care and keeps him 'spotless', but after holding a position of authority, she neither permits his mistress to see him nor does she submit to her husband's desire to meet her. In this way, circumstances bring a change in her position and personality. Earlier, Akka was feeble, fragile and timid and so he saddled her, but now, he is dependent on her mercy. She displays manly courage in refusing to succumb to his demands. She boldly declares: "It is 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 will never see her again"(71). Since then, Akka has learnt the technique of domination and also become aware of the principle of survival of the fittest. She has learnt that the world is made of two types of people – the powerful and the weak and the powerful always rule over the weak. Akka has survived through her marital relationship as if through a punishment, but, in the end, has gained her strength from it. After the death of her husband, she returns to her parental home as a rich widow and since then saddles the whole family by establishing herself as a dictator. She controls her family members as one controls puppets. Here, she exercises her power and dominance which she learnt to use at her husband's home. Compared to Akka's formidable power, all males in the family – Anant, Govind, Madhav, Vinayak and even old uncle – feel helpless. Her authority is described as: "Since the day Akka had come back, a rich childless widow, to her brother's house, she had maintained an absolute control over her brother's children. Kaka, even after becoming a grandfather, could be reduced to a redfaced shuddering schoolboy by Akka's venomous tongue" (22). In spite of being a woman, her views are strictly in conformity with the masculine laws. She forces her will on all members of the family. The house in which the family lives is in fact a trap especially for those

who have dreams of their own and want to fulfill them. For Akka, dreams are incompatible with her authority and discipline. S.P. Swain agrees, "Her autocratic ways and iron rule ruined all the members of the house and reduce them to mere parasites because Akka believed only in surrender and submission. Defiance and disorder do not exist in the vocabulary of the presiding deity of the house." Thus, in spite of being a woman, Akka projects herself as a supreme force which can bend everything. She is in power and uses it to control others. Kamala Bhasin's observation on women in power appears to be fully applicable to the character of Akka: "It is now generally accepted that women in leadership positions . . . display the same aggression, power and control as men. Women in power have not hesitated to seek militaristic solution to suspend democratic procedures and rights, or to use under hand, unethical tactics to gain their objectives."

The feminine self of Akka remains suppressed when she exercises her total control and authority over her family. However, she not only treats the family like a patriarch, but also fulfills the duty of a patriarch by becoming the provider and protector of the house. In doing so, she assumes the role of the master of the house. Not only this, like a man, she is rational and shrewd. These traits in her personality enable her to deal with all the matters of the house, including the financial ones. She uses all masculine tactics to deal with the family members. After the death of her father, she looks after her nephews and nieces with the care and attention of a father. She seems to have no personal interests in working with dedication for the welfare of the family. The novelist tells:

True, Akka sometimes becomes ruthless and dictatorial but there is no touch in her character of self-aggrandisement. If she dominated, it was for a cause, for an ideal which had nothing personal, selfish and snobbish about it. She wanted to keep the family intact because the family ensured security and happiness to all its members. Even

Indu, the representative of the new generation and who has a personal score to settle with Akka, concedes that Akka was a 'cohesive force' and always struggled to keep the fabric of the family intact. (124)

The courage and confidence Akka shows in handling the matters of her family prove her to be a woman who, defying traditions and definitions of myths, successfully displays the masculine traits in her. Like Akka, the protagonist of the novel, Indu, also exhibits her will and tendencies to dominate others. Being a sensitive, educated and liberated young woman, she is caught in a vortex because of Akka's dominant nature. She calls her a callous woman lacking compassion and mercy. She feels stifled, hence, questions and challenges Akka's authority. She walks out of the house to seek fulfilment in her own personal manner. In her act of rebellion, she proposes to Jayant, a man of the other caste, and marries him much against the will of Akka. She shows masculine courage and determination in leaving the house for the sake of her love. Akka, however, remains unmoved by such spasmodic protests and refuses to slacken her grip as long as she lives. When she falls critically ill and realizes that her end is near, she chooses Indu as the heiress and wills her entire property including the house to her. Indu is duly informed of Akka's coming death. She meets Akka and notices that even in the face of death there is a dignity about her. She comments on Akka's manly qualities and her own need to be like her:

Akka... I thought she was just an interfering old woman. But she was more than that. She was a prop. One of the strong. 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. And now, it is an obligation. I have to carry the burden. And to do that, I

have to be hard. If I'm soft, I'll just cave in. (159)

The home and the hearth collapse when Akka is dead, and nobody can escape from her invisible presence in the form of memory. At first, the family looked to Akka for guidance till her death, and after her death to Indu, who usurps the place of Akka till about the end.

Perhaps, Akka saw in Indu a strong woman who brings into play the latent human impulses for freedom and self-assertion. She can control others with her authority and mastery like Akka did. For this reason, she makes her the sole inheritor of her property. Finally, she inherits all: Akka's indomitable courage, shrewd judgment and money. Money plays an important role in bridging the gender gap and to raise one's position. Money with power changes women's character. As they become financially independent, they move from the feminine to the masculine and begin to disregard conventions. Like Akka, Indu too settles all the matters of the family. She becomes the head of the family and is

... determined to buy the house, get Mini married to a better man and not to the man chosen by Akka and others, live in the house and do her writing, help the old and the deserving and to be discriminate and more and more judicious. Above all, ... for all this she has wealth, intelligence and freedom. In her new position, some people fear her, some hate her, and some others feel jealous of her, and do not accept her stepping into Akka's shoes... or chappals. (168)

Women cannot take over masculinized and militaristic system of power without becoming masculine themselves. Like men, they also like to exercise their authority and dominance over others. Indu too is thrilled when she comes to know that Akka has left the entire property to her name. Being the sole heiress of the family, she follows the methods and tactics of Akka. She confesses to Naren with whom she develops an extra-marital relationship—an expression of

her sexuality—her desire to dominate, her secret will to power. She says:

You know, Naren, I can almost understand now. I mean when they cringe and fawn and talk like they do I feel I could rub the noses in the dust. And it is a wonderful feeling, holding all the answers in my hand. Will Mini get married? Will Sharad become a doctor? Will Sumi go into business? Will Vasant Kaka get his partnership? Will Sumant get his flat? Will Vinayak Kaka buy that house? Will Kaka have his heart broken? Ask Indu. Only Indu has the answers to all these questions.(86)

Indu's role as the sole decision maker of the house gives her an opportunity to wield authority which gives her an immense sense of satisfaction and pride. The conversation between Indu and Jayant, her husband, also reveals her indomitable nature:

'You know, Indu, when I first saw you, I thought you a frail, little creature. Now I know you better. You are indomitable.' The word

fell into me with a heavy thud. 'Indomitable? But Jayant, that's what we called Akka!' 'Perhaps you are like her', he began lightly, but seeing my face, he went on more seriously. 'Aren't you? Isn't that why she chose you... only a great niece, really ... from among all the family.'(187)

This shows that the hidden human impulses of freedom and self-assertion makes a woman behave like a man. Indu too recognizes these impulses and governing attitude. She had declared an allout war against Akka's authoritarianism but ends up becoming a new and more authoritative Akka.

## References

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