MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE’S NOVELS:

ROOTS AND SHADOWS AND A MATTER OF TIME

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande’s two novels Roots and Shadows (1983) and A Matter of Time (1996) present the changing scenario of marital relationships. Three phases – nineteenth century, early twentieth century and later twentieth century – have been represented by the characters in these two novels. The nineteenth century is represented by Akka and her husband in Roots and Shadows and Vithalrao and Manorama in A Matter of Time. The early twentieth century and later twentieth century are represented by a number of couples from these novels. Arranged marriages were the norm in the first phase. The changes are noticed in the next two phases with a growing space for the individual woman.

Key terms: arranged marriage, love marriage, inter-caste marriage, marriage of convenience, desertion.

One of the major concerns of Shashi Deshpande as a novelist is the depiction of the marital relationships among the characters she has portrayed. She depicts what happens to men and women in and after marriage, what they have been, what they have become and what is in store for them. In her two novels Roots and Shadows and A Matter of Time Shashi Deshpande presents characters belonging to four generations corresponding to the time frame of about one hundred and fifty years that span the major portions of the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. The changes in status of men and women and the changing nature of marital relationships are presented in these two novels. Indeed, India is incredible – in her landscape, in the tourist attractions, in her cultural heritage and the simultaneous co-existence of the family patterns from the extended and joint families to the nuclear, four-cornered or triangular-shaped families. The oldest text Rig-Veda, welcomes the daughter-in-law in the husband’s family like an empress “samrajni-iva” as a river enters the sea: “Come, O desired of the gods, beautiful with tender heart, with the charmed look, good towards your husband, kind towards animals, destined to bring forth heroes. May you bring happiness to both quadrupeds and bipeds” (Rig-Veda, X, 85.27). The equality of partnership between the husband and the wife is advocated in the Vedic ideal of marital relationships. The rituals, the vows and counsel in the marriage ceremony enjoin the same equality and prestigious status to the woman. There is of course a gap between the cup and the lip, the precept and the practice, the professed ideal and the actual practice. These two novels by Shashi Deshpande like her remaining nine novels reveal this gap between the desired and the real. The saga of four generations in these two novels illustrates this changing trend in marital relationships between the husband and the wife.

The first generation marital relationships are reported. In Roots and Shadows, the marital relationships of Akka, the grandfather’s younger sister are reported by Atya (Narmada) to Indu the protagonist to bring out the hardships that Akka suffered in her marriage. It was an arranged marriage between Akka and her husband and the family position was the determining factor. Akka’s husband was a man of thirty years in age, of bulky coarse features. Akka then was just twelve years, a small, dainty and pretty girl. It was an early, almost a child marriage of two unequal partners. Akka never told anybody what she suffered but every day, and in particular, every night for her, was that of untold suffering, brutal tormenting and physical abuse. She wept every night but nobody ever enquired the cause of her sorrows. Her mother-in-law whipped her, starved her for days, locked her up but never stopped to send the young wife to her husband’s room. In those days there was no escape from a husband. Akka could not give birth to a living child. Her husband had the weakness for women and always had mistresses. After his marriage he took up for one woman whom he wanted to give Akka’s ornaments. Their married life for fifteen years had already passed and Akka kept those ornaments safely in her father’s custody. Then Akka’s husband had a stroke. For the next two years Akka nursed him and kept him spotlessly clean. Even in such a condition, the man, unable to speak, produced some horrible sounds which Akka understood as his desire to meet his mistress. Then Akka, cool and calm, said, “Listen to me. It is my turn now. I’ve 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 while. I threw her out. You’ll never see her again” (Deshpande, 1983 : 72). After his death, Akka came to her father’s house and established her authority over the destiny of her brother’s children and grandchildren with an iron hand and indomitable will.
Indu’s grandfather’s and his sister Akka’s cousin Old Uncle is another first generation character in *Roots and Shadows*. After the tragic death of his grandson Naren, Old Uncle himself remembered his wife, who had died fifty years ago. “I wish, Indu, you could have known her,” he (Old Uncle) said. “She was only thirteen and an ignorant village girl when I married her. And I, a bookish solemn young man, thinking it my duty to educate her. She taught me so much more herself. She knew how to reach across to any person, so easily getting over the barriers of age, class, caste or sex. Mothers-in-law ... what they were supposed to be. But I think my mother would have attacked me if I had said a harsh word to my wife” (Deshpande, 1983 : 162).

The marriage of Vithalrao and Manorama in *A Matter of Time* was reported often by Kalyani and Goda as a miracle. Vithalrao was the educated, intelligent son of the Rao family from the city. Manorama was the daughter of a poor village Brahmin. Her mother sent her to Yamunabai’s school. The sulky, over-worked girl was transformed by Yamunabai, the social reformer and the founder of the school for girls, into a girl of confidence, self-assurance and intelligence. Vithalrao’s father noticed these qualities in the young girl and made an offer to the girl’s father for his son Vithalrao. Vithalrao did not hesitate to think about the social resistance and the grand wedding took place. After marriage, Manorama helped her family but she broke off ties with them completely. Only the youngest brother was allowed to come as after one year after Manorama’s marriage, her mother died after the boy’s birth. Vithalrao noticed his talents and educated him. He became a lawyer and started working in Bombay.

His sister was worried as she did not have any male issue and so she asked the youngest brother Shripati to marry her only daughter Kalyani. Vithalrao and Manorama’s active social work and happy married life became clouded after Kalyani’s return to the parental house after the loss of her mentally retarded son – Madhav.

These pairs belong to the nineteenth century. The average age of the girls at marriage then was about twelve to thirteen years. The marriages were invariably arranged marriages. Akka’s marriage was male-dominated. Old Uncle’s married life was happy but brief. The miracle of Manorama-Vithalrao’s marriage remained so till Kalyani’s return to her parental house – The Big House built by Vithalrao. Then Vithalrao became shaky and Manorama temperamental. During their last illness, both of them were very carefully nursed by Kalyani.

In *Roots and Shadows*, apart from her parents, her uncles and her aunts are the second generation characters. Her eldest aunt, Atiya (Narmada) herself says about her husband, “But my husband was, thank God, a decent man” (Deshpande, 1983 : 71). After her husband’s death, her in-laws harassed her. She was brought home by her father. From morning to night, she is busy in that cell-like room, working hard continuously and pleasing all. After Mini’s marriage, she has come to Indu’s house. She cannot understand the rules of the new world. She gets on well with Indu’s husband because of her undemanding affection – “something he never got from anyone else” (Deshpande, 1983 : 23).
Atya’s married life was happy but very short. Similar were the cases of the married lives of Govind (Indu’s father) and her mother. Theirs was a love marriage and an inter-caste marriage. After fifteen days after Indu’s birth, Govind lost his wife. Old Uncle’s daughter Saroja loved music but Akka did not allow her to “learn music from a strange man!” (Deshpande, 1983 : 54). Saroja never complained about this refusal. She got married and was very happy. Her husband – Naren’s father – was fond of music. He wanted her to start learning music after Naren’s birth. Then both of them died. It is noticed that whether arranged or love marriage, their married life was cut short by death.

The marriages of her three uncles and the youngest aunt were arranged marriages. The determining factor of all these marriages was convenience. Kaka lives in the world of the prestige of the house of old times. He finds the income dwindling and expenses increasing making the maintaining of the house difficult. His four children add to his worries. His wife Kaki is in control of reality. She prefers the man of property, though advanced in age and of coarse features to be Mini’s husband to Naren who is not steady in his jobs. She would like a small house with a kitchen, a gas and shining pots and pans. She regrets, “Who knows anything about me, child? Has anyone ever asked me what I want?” (Deshpande, 1983 : 113). Kaki is in conflict with the other “kakis”. “I can’t escape work anyway. That’s all I’ve done ever since I entered this house” (Deshpande, 1983 : 69).

Madhavakkaka is an officer and behaves like that in office and also at home. His wife Sumitrakaki is an officer’s daughter and now an officer’s wife. Being convent educated, Sumitrakaki often spoke in English and Madhavkaka called her ‘darling’ even in public. Her children the son Sunil and two daughters Lata and Geeta appeared trendy, mod and sophisticated. Sumitrakaki demanded help in the likely payment of the dowry from Akka and Akka exploded, “What’s 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 … if you have spent less on saris and paints for your face and lips and nails … you wouldn’t have had to ask others now” (Deshpande, 1983 : 66). Their son Sunil – a third class B.Sc. – was doing some diploma in Business Management. He wanted to take up an agency. Madhavkaka and Sumitrakaki feared that Sunil might demand a loan from Indu. They wanted Indu not to give him a loan otherwise after becoming financially independent he was likely to marry a Christian girl of his choice.

Vinayakkaka is a doctor in a small town. Vinayakkaka and his wife Kamalakaki and their three daughters affected being in high spirits. He boasts of his bouncing healthy daughters as good advertisements of his being a doctor. Then Kamalakaki had soothed loudly, “Boasting about their size now when you should be worrying about it? Don’t forget you have to start looking for husbands for them in a few years” (Deshpande, 1983 : 64).

Sunandaatya, her youngest aunt, was critical of all others, of Kaki and her handling of her mother’s silverware. Her husband Vasantkaka has never had a steady job. The person for
whom he was currently working offered him a partnership. Sunandaatya told Indu that Akka had almost promised her to give the capital he needed but that was not true. “What!” Akka had exploded. “Give that money to that waster of a husband of yours! I’d rather throw it down the drain” (Deshpande, 1983 : 125). Sunandaatya believed that her son failed S.S.C. because of his caste. She couldn’t bear to think of pulling down the house. “For her too, this house was a refuge. It was her security against a life with an irresponsible husband who had long periods of joblessness” (Deshpande, 1983 : 125).

In A Matter of Time, the second generation married life of Shripati and Kalyani was characterised by the hopelessness that lay within their relationship that doomed it from the start. The history of the relationship between Shripati and Kalyani dated back to the very reason for the marriage, to Shripati’s reluctance and Kalyani’s helplessness in accepting a feared uncle as a husband, and Manorama’s appeal to Shripati’s sense of gratitude. Manorama desired to keep the property within the family, her family as she was aware of her not having a son but only a daughter – Kalyani. Kalyani always remembered that she was no more than a mere daughter in her childhood. At school, she was a clever girl, was good at Maths. She started receiving some anonymous letters of love and her mother had stopped her schooling. Then Manorama married off Kalyani to her own brother Shripati, pressurizing him into the marriage as the return of his upbringing and his career in law supported by her husband Vithalrao. Vithalrao did not interfere with Manorama’s decisions. Shripati and Kalyani had three children and when Sumi was five, Madhav four and Premi, the baby on the lap, they were coming for the holidays to the Big House. On the platform, Kalyani with three children and the luggage around could not trace Madhav’s disappearance. He was never found though Shripati searched for him everywhere for the next two months. With Sumi and Premi, Kalyani was brought back by her father. In her last illness, Manorama asked Shripati to be back and he came to occupy the room upstairs specially built for him. For more than thirty years Shripati lived upstairs and Kalyani downstairs in the same house under one roof but did not exchange a single word since the day Madhav was lost. “Baba obviously thought she did. If not, why did he …” she searches for the exact word, “cut himself so completely away from her? Thirty years? No, more than that. Imagine not speaking to your own wife for over thirty years” (Deshpande, 1996 : 142). It was a muddle, a muddle from the very start of this marriage, a forced one, a muddle more complicated after the son was lost and remained a muddle to the time when it ended in the tragic accidental deaths of the elder daughter Sumi and her father Shripati. The youngest granddaughter Seema clinging to her and the eldest granddaughter Aru, assuring her, it is noticed that Kalyani survived all the ruins of time. “The real miracle is Kalyani herself, Kalyani who has survived intact, in spite of what Shripati did to her, Kalyani who has survived Manorama’s myriad acts of cruelty” (Deshpande, 1996 : 151).

Sudha married P.K. almost immediately after Gopal’s father’s death. This quick decision transformed the house of mourning into a normal house. Gopal and Sudha were a brother and a sister, who had the same mother but their fathers were different. Sudha’s
mother married her father who was the elder brother but he died of typhoid. Then their mother married her husband’s younger brother, who was Gopal’s father. Gopal was just eight when his father died. Sudha was more like a mother to him than a sister. Her considerate, well-meaning, kind husband P.K. too accepted Gopal as his own. Sudha and P.K. were linked with the continuity of Gopal’s life. Then around the college-going stage Gopal realised that Sudha’s father and his father were different though both shared a mother. Sudha, the confident, vigorous and healthy girl, with marriage and motherhood, blossomed into an attractive woman. She could not bear and understand Gopal’s move to go to Shivpur. P.K. persuaded Sudha to let do Gopal whatever he desired to do. It was P.K., who understood the nature of relationship between his son Ramesh and his wife’s brother Gopal as Ramesh’s ‘Guru’. Sudha and P.K. make a rare couple that in a responsible manner discharged everything efficiently. Sudha’s last illness and her death have affected Gopal by emphasizing the “nothingness of life”.

The second generation pairs in *Roots and Shadows* and *A Matter of Time* are nine couples. This generation knows love and inter-caste marriage being introduced but most of the marriages were still arranged marriages. Convenience is the deciding factor in match-making. Self-interest remains the key to relationships. A rare sacrifice is that of Sudha and P.K. Shripati-Kalyani relation poses a puzzle. The traditional pattern is simultaneously co-existent with unconventional type of Govind’s relationship with Indu’s mother which is an intensely happy but tragically brief marital relationship. The second generation characters present the early twentieth century that stands as the transitional phase between tradition and modernity.

Govind’s daughter Indu was brought to the house as a fifteen-day infant. Kaka, Kaki, Atya and Old Uncle brought her up showering love and care. Her father insisted on her English-medium schooling and she lived in the house for the first eighteen years of her life. Then one remark against her mother “trapping” her father by Akka made her leave the house. She completed her education and became financially independent by working as a journalist. She chose Jayant and proposed to him. Jayant belonged to another caste and spoke a different language. She is required to make many compromises in her professional writings and in her married life also she has made certain adjustments in order to avoid the conflict – “If only Jayant were here. ... This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant I had not known it, ... that there was, somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant. And lost the ability to be alone” (Deshpande, 1983 : 38). Rather, Indu states the complementarities of each other in the marital relationships and which is the key of successful relationships, though Indu herself was at present in conflict with herself for her surrendering and compromises. Finally, Indu went to the home she lived in with Jayant, her husband. On the day of Mini’s wedding, Indu realises, “Behind the facade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so
that the generations might continue” (Deshpande, 1983 : 14-15). This, in a nutshell, is the practical reality about the marital relationships.

Indu’s cousins – Kaka’s two elder sons Hemant as well as Sumant have been failures in their careers. Hemant was working as a clerk and was already a father of two sons – Vishwas and Sanju. His wife Mangala is a housewife. Sumant’s wife Nalini is just mentioned and they have one son – Abhay. Mini is getting married and accepts her lot by asking, “What choice do I have, Indu?” (Deshpande, 1983 : 116). Her question echoes the over-all impression carried by most of the maidens in the country in this phase of the later twentieth century.

In A Matter of Time, Gopal was the tenant in the outhouse of the Big House. He watched the Big House, the man who lived upstairs, the landlady, tense, but cordial, the younger girl Premi and the enchanting elder girl Sumi. “But, no, it’s not only Shakuntala and Dushyanta, or Romeo and Juliet; flesh-and-blood people have, through the years, pledged it, consummated it, died for the thing they call love” (Deshpande, 1996 : 168). Sumi continues to remember the history of their love-making, her advances and Gopal’s acceptance and assurance. “For a brief while Gopal and I were part of this eternal story too. We fell in love” (Deshpande, 1996 : 168). Then the pleasures of the body pall, they have three daughters, he resigns from his job of a University teacher and then just walks out of her life. Kalyani cries out, “no, my God, not again,” (Deshpande, 1996 : 12). Gopal’s desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and a disgrace. Sumi confidently, calmly handles the situation. All preparations for Aru and Charu to launch their careers have been made. Then she dies in the tragic accident.

Premi, Sumi’s younger sister, has pursued the medical career and has married Anil, a lawyer. Devaki, Goda’s daughter, has married Vasu, an architect and Hrishi is their son. Ramesh, a responsible, practical doctor has married Chitra, an athlete but she is now a devoted wife and mother. There is Shankar, the printer, with whom Gopal lives after his renunciation. His wife Manju gets irritated by her mother-in-law’s telling Sumi, “a woman should not be without her husband”. When Shankar repeats the same, Sumi replies, “I can’t do anything for Gopal. He’s going his way and I have to go mine” (Deshpande, 1996 : 161). Advocate Surekha and her husband have a good rapport between them when they go out for a party. Yet on the same day Aru had seen the face of grief in the woman advocate’s room.

Both Indu in Roots and Shadows and Sumi in A Matter of Time have married their husbands because they loved them. Indu overcomes her psychological dissatisfaction but there is a clear break between Gopal and Sumi. Saru, Indu and Jaya are worried about marital relationships they find themselves in but finally resolve their dilemmas by adjusting their wifely roles. Sumi is different from them as she stands and faces reality with open eyes, with steadfastness and independence of spirit. The modern times are reflected in these relationships. The other pairs conveniently carry on the routine of such relationships.
The fourth generation characters such as Aru and Charu are not married yet but their prospects indicate relationships that will have more freedom, more openness and more clarity with the zest of life and youthful exuberance.

Of all these relationships the role of Vithalrao shows how generous approach, liberal attitude and understanding nature promote Manorama into social life. Even her dominating nature and her cruelty towards Kalyani is borne out patiently by Vithalrao. He shows how tolerance and mutual intimacy makes marriage a long but happy association. The other relationship is of Goda and Satya. Goda lost her mother soon after her birth and her father relinquished her to the care of his wife’s brother, that is, Vithalrao. Surprisingly, Goda received affection from both Vithalrao and Manorama. Manorama’s treatment of Kalyani being the only female issue was different but she brought Goda up with love and care. Both Kalyani and Goda grew in the same house and Goda was treated in such a manner that many people thought her to be the daughter of the house. In marriage too Goda has been lucky. Her husband, Satyanarayan was, and still is, an easy-tempered man and a good provider. He was a cheerful companion, laying his jokes at Goda’s feet like a homage. Even today, after forty years of marriage, he is devoted to his wife. Each week Goda complains to Kalyani of Satya’s cheating on his diabetic diet, his insistence on driving his old Fiat named ‘More Hit Than Miss’ by their grandson Hrishi and his extravagance of buying all the magazines on the stands, both English and Kannada. This shows, whether it is an arranged marriage or a love marriage, what matters is mutual trust, binding faith, pure affection and caring love that cement the marital relationships between the husband and the wife. Love conquers all and faith cements all.

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