

A new Millennium Indian Women Society in *ROOTS and SHADOWS*- A Study

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande has achieved reputation as a serious writer with remarkable potential. Though she is not an affirmed feminist, she occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who are concerned with the problems of women and their quest for identity. She sensitively portrays that a lot of women and their mute nature to bear suppression can be seen in her novels. For the courageous and sensitive treatment of large and significant themes, her works are regarded as outstanding contributions to Indian literature in English. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class, who are brought up in a traditional environment and are struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self-identity and independence. She is also the one and only contemporary writer who have given graphic details about the girl child and her psychology. Most of her women characters are able to transcend their identity crisis by analyzing their childhood and the process of their upbringing. Basically Deshpande writes about the conditioning of women and their failures in the fast changing socio-economic surroundings of India conveying the essence of the Indian socio-cultural ethos in a foreign language has not inhibited her from using English as the medium of her fiction.

Key Words: Quest for Identity, Suppression, Courageous and Struggling to Liberate

INTRODUCTION

The novels of Deshpande are abound in women characters in search for identity and a self of their own. Indian woman has been a silent sufferer for years. While she has played different roles as a wife, mother, sister, daughter, daughter-in-law etc. she has never been able to state her own individuality. Their pursuit becomes an arduous effort as the Indian society is essentially patriarchal. The Indian society that is highly de-systematic, especially on the issue of gender. It is disinclined to talk about the freedom of the Indian women.

Shashi Deshpande's first full-length novel *Roots and Shadows* features an educated, middle-class woman protagonist, Indu, who, like her counter parts in Deshpande's other novels finds herself prostrate under the suppression of our tradition-bound society. The novel deals with Indu's attempt to defend herself as an individual. Being suffocated with the restrictions impelled upon them her by Akka. She longs to seek refuge there, where she can be free from all those hurdles which deprive her 'self'. At the age of eighteen she leaves home to 'preserve' herself, "with the help of her husband. She believes that she has chosen the best person in life, but contradictorily she finds that also is an 'edge' for her 'self'.

At the end, she realizes that her husband is her refuge though she is not able to perceive it at the early stage of her life. The happenings in the novel clearly spell out the kind of refuge that the protagonist is aiming at. The novel begins with the marriage of Mini, Indu's cousin, which is performed in a traditional way in their ancestral home. It makes Indu think retrospectively about the events which led to her returning home after a gap of eleven years. The eighteen-year-old rebel, who leaves home to live life in her own way, returns on being summoned by the old matriarch, Akka, who is on her death bed. Indu is drawn once more into the voters of the family as Akka makes her the sole beneficiary of all her property from here the spotlight slots to all the myriad characters in the novel. The author bring alive a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household with her characteristic eye for detail. She successfully portrays the baser human emotions like speed and jealousy in the novel.

Indu comes back to her ancestral place to attend the funeral of Akka, the old rich family tyrant. Indu has been a determined guy and wanted to be free and independent but she is not uncertain about the fact whether she has broken the stranglehold of family and tradition only to be dominated by love of her husband, which again she feels is not a true love. She realizes that she has accepted Jayant not for love as she used to think but because she wanted to show her

family that she was successful. She goes back to her parents home to find out the root but she finds the shadow instead. "This is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself".

Indu laughs at the idea of not calling one's husband by name as it shortens the age of her husband. But later she realizes that she is also going in the same path. She herself notices:

When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I dress I think of Jayant, when I undress I think of Jayant. Always what he want, what he would like, what would please him, and I can't blame him. It is not he who pressurized me into this. It is the way I wanted it to be... Have I become fluid, with no shape no form of my own (Shashi Deshpande -3).

The paradox of the situation is that she is not happy with Jayant but at the same time, she cannot live without him. She achieved completeness with Jayant but she does not want this sort of completeness. Indu doesn't believe in love. To her there is no such thing as love in real life though it exists in books and stories. According to her "it is a big fraud." It is not the only thing in life. And if somebody believes in it, he or she is trapped and become humble and dependent. The concept of love is totally false for Indu, so Naren asks her, what the truth is, and she answers,

The sexual instinct... That is true. The material instinct... That is true too. Self-interest, self-love they are the basis truth you remember Devadas. I saw it with some friends. They sobbed when he did for love. A grown man moaning and crying for love. God how disgusting? (Shashi Deshpande -173)

Indu is a motherless child and she is brought up by her aunts, uncles and others in a joint family. Akka, the sister of her grandfather is the head of the family. Indu's father is not bothered much about his daughter. Akka is very much interested in the family and at the same time she imposes restrictions on everyone including the elders. She detests Akka and disowns her ancestral home and marries Jayant so that she can be free and become complete by herself. She lives with him but she does not want to have a child. She denies feminine traits declaring that she is a modern woman who is least bothered about rituals and ceremonies. She is a professional writer. After ten years she reaches her parental home on a call from Akka, who is in deathbed. Akka leaves her whole property choosing Indu as her heiress. All people at home depend upon her for their fortunes.

She seeks fulfilment in Naren, her cousin outside her martial bond. Her union with Naren offers her an opportunity to vent her subtractions and review her life objectively. She relates to Naren her life with Jayant in detail.

We belong to the smart young set. Do you know what that means' Fresh flowers in the house every day. You believe it, Naren. I've gone and done a course in flower arrangement'. The best places, whether you go out to eat or to cut your hair. Freshly laundered clothes truce a day (Shashi Deshpande - 28).

The emotional outburst from Indu proves that she had been exercising control over herself in order to protect her marriage. It is difficult for her to accept her compromise in this matter as she had all along fooled herself that she was different from her kakis and Atyas. As P. Bhatnagar comments.

If baffled her to realize that she who had considered herself to be so independent. So intelligent, so clever, she who had been so proud of her logical and rational thinking, she who had been all set to reform Indian womanhood had fallen into the trap waiting for her. She thought that the woman of old believed that the greatest good look for them was to die before their husbands did-to die "Suhagans". She also wanted Jayant to be always by her side. So what was the difference between them and her? Was she not basically the same? (P. Bhatnagar -121).

Throughout the novel, there are several examples which prove that Indu is very conscious of the unfairness prevailing in the society with regard to women. Seeking refuge takes place twice in life at two different stages. There are differences between these two occasions. The motif of seeking refuge can be discussed with reference to the character of Indu. She represents the modern age where as other women in her family like Akka, Narmada, Sumitra-Kaki, Kamakaki Sunanda-itya and Padmini stand for the traditional life. According to above said characters a woman has to get married to beat children, to have sons and then grand children they were stall for them the only success woman could have (Shashi Deshpande -116). In spite of the fact that Indu lives with them in a joint family.

Indu represents the modern generation is rebellions since her childhood. For instance her own words can be quoted to reveal her nature as given below,

Since childhood the right method of serving food had been drilled into me. Salt here, chutney and pickles

below it, vegetables on the right, dal in the Centre, ghee only after serving the dal, the pattern was rigid and there could be no deviation from it. Once, in a contrary mood, I had purposely changed it. The result had been catastrophic (Shashi Deshpande -14).

Apart from being revolutionary, she rejects traditional beliefs and values as she has been influenced by western education and thought. She is a woman who rejects rituals that are relics of the past. She is a modern woman who views everything with intelligence and reason. As a representative of the contemporary educated and thinking woman, she stands in sharp contrast to Akka, the head of the family as well as the mother surrogate in the novel. To the women of the older generation, a woman's life is nothing. Indu is against all the conventional beliefs which consider women as a mere tool for gratifying man's lust. That is why she rejects the concept of the traditional bound institution of marriage and goes in search of an autonomous self even if it was hard to achieve conformity, according to Indu to the greatest destroyer of freedom and self-hood.

The custom of worshipping the plant, ocyum sanctum (tulsi) is criticized adversely by her when it is said that the woman should worship it to keep her husband safe. The rituals which carry a lot of meanings for others are meaningless as far as Indu is concerned. Her faithfulness in age-old customs and habit is given in the following manner: Sarabjit Sandhu observes that

Besides being an educated woman, Indu is very sensitive to the situations. She aspires to become independent and complete in herself but finds so many hurdles coming in her way. She finds dominant Akka and her family to be a great hindrance to achieving her goal of attaining her independence and completeness when she studies in college, Akka doesn't allow her to meet the boys and cultivate friendship with them. So, later on, Indu leaves the house and gets married to Jayant, who is her own choice (Shashi Deshpande -103).

Very often she keeps herself away from others. There is a tendency in her to rebel against the practice and beliefs since her childhood and it is obvious when she chooses her husband on her own very much against the will of Akka. As a child, she was told to be obedient and unquestioning, meek and submissive simply because she was a female. Then she had laughed at them and sworn she would never pretend to do what she was not. But after marriage, to her great shock and surprise, she found that Jayant

had not only expected her to submit but taken her submission for granted. And she surrendered to him step by step in the name of love. But then she realizes that it was not for love but because she didn't want conflict. And her pathetic state being revealed thus: "The hideous ghost of my own cowardice and conflated me as I thought of this... This I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure (Shashi Deshpande -175).

According to Indu one should listen to the dictates of one's own conscience and be true to oneself in speech as well as in action. Unfortunately she herself has failed to do so either for the fear of failure or timidity. This fact makes her see herself as a sinner and causes deep suffering. Another fondly cherished dream of Indu is to attain the state of "detachment". Her mind keeps harping on this theme of detachment and loneliness. However, she wonders whether she would ever reach the stage of "no passions, no emotions, and an unruffled placidity" (Shashi Deshpande -118). She introspects and finds herself involved in many incidents. She expects others to pour love for her.

On one occasion her father talks of having met Jayant, naturally she asks him how is Jayant. And he says "oh wonderful, wonderful, wonderful" (Shashi Deshpande -100) at this she wishes she would have murdered her father of his air of "cheerful candor". What she expected to hear was that Jayant was "pining for her". Similarly, when Naren says that he is going back to his work, the word "going" rings like a bell and makes her feel like "a deserted abandoned child" (Shashi Deshpande -161). She feels very much attached to Naren for the fact that in her mind he had achieved "detachment". She again, feels ashamed of herself. When she does not see the things in a practical form, she expresses her confused state of mind before Naren, "So that's all I'm Naren not a pure woman not a too faithful wife. But on anachronism "A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it" (Shashi Deshpande -192). On the one hand she is ashamed of her not being a pure woman, but on the other hand, she hates her womanhood.

Marnath Prasas observes that,

Indu longs to escape from the burden and responsibilities of womanhood in order to assert of an independent existence. Indu struggles hard to understand the reality of life, the actual cause which is destroying her married life, she feels that her sense of certainty confidence and assurance is being

destroyed in the presence of Jayant, but to Jayant, her feelings are non sense, this becomes the cure of the problem (Marnath Prasas -174).

She is always in a confused state of mind. She is willing to wound but afraid to strike. She strongly declares, "Now I wound go back, and see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty" (Shashi Deshpande 205). The woman who is ready to start a new life based on honesty, next moment changes her mind to share the secret with Jayant. Indu's mind is torn between two extremes. On the one hand, she is so attached to her parental home that the house and the voice, the sounds, the smells and the members of the house have become a part and parcel of her life" and on the other hand, the house turns to be a "caged place" a trap and the family "a large amorphous group of people with conflicting interests" (Shashi Deshpande -205).

Indu like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* experiences disillusionment in sex and falls a victim of "sexual paralysis". This silent sexual humiliation leads Indu to have extra marital relationship with Naren. This is the second step to express herself-autonomy. Indu and Saru seek freedom not only intellectually but secularly too. They suffer from no guilt but begin to evolve a new code of sexual ethics. The heroines undergo a new experience and give a new intergradation of "love". Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reveals: "Love... there was no such thing between man and woman only a need which both fought against futilely (Shashi Deshpande -65). Equally, Indu laughs at the idea of "love", "I love a book, a word, or a sari, a curry, a dog, a child, a man" (Shashi Deshpande -97) when Naren asks her what the truth is she answers: "The sexual Instinct that is true. The material Instinct... that is true. The material instinct... that is true too". (Shashi Deshpande -173)

Indu believed that marriage would bring her freedom, but to her great shock and surprise, she found that Jayant had expected her to submit to him, for granted and she surrendered herself to him step by step in name of love. She found it was not love but an adjustment as she never wanted unhappiness in her married life. Another ambition or ideal dream for Indu is to attain the state of "detachment" and "loneliness" and be perfect in herself. To achieve this she had made Naren her reference group. She always wanted to be like Naren-completely detached and non-involved. However, she wonders if she would ever reach the stage of no passions and ambitious and being satisfied. To her surprise, she finds herself involved and attached in so many ways.

She always accepted others to show love and affection for her. She wishes that her parents invite them (Indu and Jayant) formally to their place though her father does not find it necessary to give a formal invitation. In the same way, she expects too much from Jayant which results in frustration. She feels very much attached to Naren as she thinks that it is only Naren who has achieved the state of detachment.

Indu longs to be detached and independent but to no avail. She feels ashamed of herself when she does not see the things in a practical form. She tells Naren,

I am still and dead. And now when you tried to kiss me, I thought... that this is Jayant. So that'd all I'm, Naren. Not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife. But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately and is ashamed of it (Shashi Deshpande -192).

On the one hand, she is ashamed of her not being a pure woman, but on the other hand, she hates her womanhood. She stops working for the woman magazine: "women, women, women.... I got sick of it. There was nothing else. If was a kind of narcissism. And as if we had locked ourselves in a case and thrown away the keys." (Shashi Deshpande -85-86)

In fact, she started hating and fighting against the womanhood since the day she was made aware of her being a woman by the elder women in the family. The thrusting-upon attitude by the society in general and the family members in particular has made her more rebellions and aggressive. She looks at each occasion from the same angle. Even at the idea of love which she herself initiates, she starts doubting, I had for some time loved Jayant. But between the idea and the reality there is an immeasurable distance (Shashi Deshpande -91).

After experiencing some of her married life, she looks down at marriage is a trap, A trap? Or a cage? A cage with two trapped animals glorying hatred with each other (Shashi Deshpande -67).

Indu is assertive and courageous as challenging as Akka. The indomitable Akka keeps everyone under her thumb. She entered the house as a childless widow during the early phase of her life. Since her arrival she is very much interested in the family and it continues even her death. She is very strict and authoritative. All people at home except Indu accept her loyalty. Her character can be drawn positively. In the words of Atya "she wanted everyone in the family to be happy" (Shashi Deshpande -68).

Such a responsible, old lady is rejected by the young, modern Indu. Akka does not allow her to mingle with the boys and talk to them. She is permitted to pursue her studies but she keeps an eye on her which she despises greatly. It is said that for the crime of revealing the designs of the gods Sisyphus was meted out the following punishment. In the underworld Sisyphus King of Ephyra was compelled to roll a big stone up a steep hill, the stone always rolled down and Sisyphus has to begin all over again. The stone is also symbolical of the vain struggle of man in the pursuit of knowledge.

Indu, the central character in *Roots and shadows*, shares the fate of Sisyphus. Her crime is the revelation of long hidden inner world of women in general and Indian women in particular. She is suffering in her world and her suffering is deeper than Sisyphus's as he was to roll up only one stone, while she is rolling up many, viz, the ideal of independence, and completeness, the concepts of self, sin, love, the ideal of detachment and freedom and so on. The writer has artistically juxtaposed two sets of women in the Indian society. One set is represented by Akka, Narmada, Atya, Sumitra Kaki, Kamala Kaki, Sunanda Atya and Padmini. To this set a woman's life is nothing but "to get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grand children" (Shashi Deshpande -128). To them a female could "neither assert, demand nor proclaim" (Shashi Deshpande -146) and an ideal woman is one who, sheds her 'I' who loses her identity in her husband's (Shashi Deshpande -54).

Indu is not only an educated young woman but also she is highly sensitive too. She starts rushing to become independent. But then she finds dominant Akka and even the family is great. Akka doesn't allow her to meet the boy in the lone corner of the library speaks ill of her mother. Indu leaves the house and later marries Jayant, a man of her own choice. Thus she leaves one house and enters another to have independence and joy. There she realizes the futility of her search. In her own words "Jayant and I... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize" (Shashi Deshpande -14). As for achieving completeness in herself. She speaks thus,

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 (Shashi Deshpande -34).

Indu ridicules Atya's idea of not saying one's husband's name as it shortens his life and of worshipping tulsi and praying for husband's life. But then she understands that she is not different from Atya-like women as she also wishes, that Jayant should be with her always all the time, forever (Shashi Deshpande - 36) only her reasons for thinking so different. She had also aspired to assert her "I". But after her marriage it occurs to her that whatever she was doing viz., looking in the mirror, dressing, undressing all she was doing for Jayant.

Indu like almost each modern Indian woman, moves like a pendulum between tradition and modernity acceptance and rejection, flexibility and liquidity, fantasy and reality and above all, revoke and compromise. She lives with dualities. She tries to find her real 'self', but is deceived in many ways. Her journey for finding her 'self' begins from her ancestral house which she leaves to become free and independent for finding her roots, she gives up her house which bears her roots. After a long time, she returns to her house where she finds her real 'self'.

Indu's marriage with Jayant has compelled in her a duality of life. As a girl-child, she is always taught to be obedient, submissive and unquestioning. Her idea of marriage changes every day. To her great surprise, and shock, she finds that Jayant has not only expected her to submit but has taken her submission for granted and she also, without being aware of it, submits herself to him step by step in the name of love. Then she realizes that it is not love but suppression hides behind every woman's married life.

Indu, the female protagonist of the novel has a peculiar relationship with Akka. Like Mini, Indu too was advised by the elderly women as a child to inculcate in her the cherished feminine qualities so that these could help her to survive in male dominated world. But Indu has her own dreams and promises herself not to become their replica. Indu's mother belonged to a different case which was not appreciated by her father's family. As a result, her father, Govind developed revulsion and resentment towards them. After the death of his wife, he left his motherless daughter at the disposal of his family. Indu was shocked to see the rigidity in her father's attitude which made him unconcerned about his fatherly duties she considered her father as a callous person.

Right from childhood, Indu also observed the secondary position occupied by women in the family. It was unthinkable for a woman to have a cup of tea

sent to her room. Indu light heartedly mocked the women's reaction. She laughingly asked her Kaka, "Can you imagine them sending up a cup of tea for me? Women and children should know their places" (53). They showed the life led by a widow, a domestic help reminded Indu of the plight of all widows who shared their heads to avoid censure who didn't and were treated like out-castes. Looking at the widow's shaven head, Indu says,

The bare skull, with its short hairs, looked somehow not only indecent, but observe 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 (Shashi Deshpande -130).

There are several instances in the novel which subtly prove that Indu has always been playing the role of a perfect wife in order to keep her husband happy and satisfied. The most glaring example of Jayant's insistence was that she should continue working for her magazine even when he knew how frustrating it was for her. Indu narrated the story of how she once interviewed a social worker who received an award for her services. Indu was the woman who was "soft-spoken, articulate, seemingly sincere and dedicated" (Shashi Deshpande -18). After writing up the article, Indu was given another article written about the same one by an old man. Indu was shocked to read it. She thought that it was the story of shameless exploitation of ignorance, poverty and need. She went to her editor with both the copies and worldly-wise as he was, he refused to accept the copy written by the old man. Indu was taken aback by the hypocrisy of the woman and the attitude of the editor. She narrated the incident to Jayant and expected that he would stand by what was right. But he said that what one person could do against the whole system.

Here, the novelist exposes the hypocrisy and double standards prevalent in society. The easily available Naren is not considered a suitable match for their daughter instead they pay a handsome dowry for someone who has nothing but his family's social status. Shashi Deshpande does not make any sweeping anti-dowry statements but raises the issue subtly to be pondered over by the readers. Indu's experiences teach her that one should listen to the voice of one's conscience and be faithful to it. Freedom within marriage is possible if one dares to do what one believes is right and strongly follow it. This alone can bring harmony and fulfilment in life.

Thus Indu witnesses the inner struggle and suffering of educated Indian woman who raised many basic questions regarding modern woman who are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the west. Previously woman is regarded as the weak and emotional fool but now she is totally changed person and is aware of what is happening around her, her quest for identity, her individuality, her place and role in society and in family. Indu represents this new woman. Now this is up to the society to together to criticize her or to appreciate her in her exercise to establish a new image of a new woman.

Thus in *Roots and Shadows* there is a woman speak-speak through her body, through her consciousness, and through her pen. This kind of exercise might be called "wish fulfilment". That power castrates the child's image of him and expels him from the chauvinistic identification of himself with the master narrator. This subversion of the political system of authority gives way to marginalized female culture. Essentially, it germinates feminine accent, a feminine discourse i.e. seeking to communicate by disrupting the earlier authoritarian position as may be required in a new historical context, the emphasis having been placed on what has been marginalized.

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