

DISCOVERING THE ROOT OF EXISTENCE
IN SHASHI DESPANDE'S *ROOTS AND SHADOWS*

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Abstract

Women's struggles in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories. This is truly applicable to her novels as well. Our society considers women as ideally sympathetic, gentle, warm, passive and dependant. Domestic life and the work patterns evince the concept that women should be subordinate to and dependent on men. Through the character of Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande has very exquisitely portrayed the inner struggles and sufferings of the new class of Indian women, who have raised many questions regarding modern women who are tooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the Western world.

Key words: Identity, Existence, Root, Realization

The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But it was only after independence, that they could make solid contribution to Indian English fiction. The post-independence period, has brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility. The woman has been the focus of many literary works in this period and the major writers who have achieved recognition in the last decade of the 20th century are Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita

Desai, Shashi Deshpande and the life through the eyes of women writers, one gets a glimpse of a different world till now not represented in literature. Women, who were treated as second class citizens were assigned their due place in these writings.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. Deshpande's novels deal with the image of women in general. The writer with most sustained achievement in feministic fiction, has to her credit eight novels, six collections of short stories, and four children's books. Her writing is clearly a part of Indian literature, and emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society. G.S. Amur aptly remarks: "Women's struggles in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories"(SD,Tlo,10)This is truly applicable to her novels as well. Our society considers women as ideally sympathetic, gentle, warm, passive and depended. Domestic life and the work patterns evince the concept that women should be subordinate to and dependent on men.

The protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* is a young woman who has rebelled against her authoritarian and traditional joint family. This work comes out with its feministic approach in Indu's, the protagonist's, exploration into herself. Indu left home as a teenager to study in a big city, and is now a journalist, she has married the man of her choice. But she realizes that her freedom is illusory; she has exchanged the orthodoxy of the village home for the comforts of the smart youngest of the city, where material well-being has to be assured by sacrificing principles, if necessary. She returns to the family home after an absence of twelve years when her great aunt, a childless widow dies, leaving her wealth to Indu. As the heroine takes charge of her legacy, she comes to realize the resilience of the village woman she had dismissed as weak.

Indu traverses the road of self-realization and her destination is the point of comprehension of the mystery of human life. The struggle of such women gives shape and meaning to their individual existence in a sexist society. According to Deshpande, no amount of theorizing will solve women's problems- especially in the Indian context. Through Indu, in *Roots and Shadows*, a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and freedom is depicted. This work can also be called as a novel which explores the inner struggle of Indu, who represents a set of modern women who are educated and are very much in contact with the society, dealing with the critical problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and individuality.

The story of this novel revolves around Indu. She broke away from her family out of resentment and married for love in order to assert her freedom. The four generations of the family lived together in the ancestral house built years ago by Indu's great-grandfather. It was an ancient family over which Akka ruled like an inconsiderate tyrant, ruthless and dominating. She was so dominating that she could reduce Kaka to a "red-faced stuttering school boy by her venomous tongue", even after he had become a grand-father. Living in the family was so close and so entangled with one another that if anyone moved, the other was bound to get hurt. Therefore, an undercurrent of tension was always present even during times of great rejoicing. There were intrigues, jealousies, rivalries and malicious words. Thus there were many diverse conflicts

The conflict between individual freedom and social obligation is evident mainly in the character and destiny of Indu. Her life functions simultaneously as the story of an individual as well as an institution. The institution to which she is actively related is the joint family system. The institution of marriage also figures significantly in the novel. Indu is engaged in a quest for freedom and self-identity. Her quest is at first frustrated by her joint family and later by her marriage with Jayant. Right from her childhood, Indu had seen that women

occupied a secondary place in the family. As a child she had been told to be obedient and unquestioning, as a girl she had been told to be weak and submissive. When she had gathered the courage to ask why, she had got the answer that this was the only way a female could live and survive. She is forced to accept everything, even defeat, gracefully and her intelligence was only a burden for her and she is not supposed to think. Indu, finds dominant Akka and her family, a great hindrance to achieve her goal. When at college, Akka did not let her meet boys and cultivate friendship with them.

Women like Mini, Indu's cousin, are always involved in the fetishes of traditions and home hold work. They have no other option but to remain satisfied with the things provided. Even Akka herself represents another facet of deprived womanhood. She is the youngest sister of Indu's grandfather. Akka returns to her parental home as a rich widow after the death of her husband. At the age of twelve she got married and became a victim of the evils of patriarchal practices. Her soul of child withers away when she has had to tolerate the scathing and bestial sexual advances of her husband. Indu gathers all these from Narmada – Atya. Akka's personality gets changed when her husband faces a stroke .Now Akka learned the technique of domination. She knew that the world was made up of two types of people, the powerful and the weak and the powerful always ruled the weak.

Women are toned or conditioned to merge their aspirations and desires with those of their family. The instance of Mini before her, makes Indu understand that the very objective of educating a girl child was not to give her an independent stand but to get a good match. Later she leaves home and marries Jayant, a man of her choice .She leaves her parental house and enters the house of her husband to achieve freedom and completeness but soon realize the futility of her doings and decisions, “Jayant and I....I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize” (Deshpande 14). She continues, “This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I met Jayant I had not kown it....that was

somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost ability to be alone” (Deshpande 34). It appears that marriage has taught her the lesson of deception, “Her desire to assert herself had driven her from affection to hypocrisy” (Deshpande 33). Indu herself feels “I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see... I hid my response as if they were bits of garbage” (Deshpande 41). All these touching facts of losing her identity into her husband’s, frightens her. Gradually Indu found that Jayant had not only expected her to submit but had also taken her submission for granted. She, unaware of it, submitted herself to him step by step on the altar of love. When she met the reality, she found that it was not love but an adjustment, as she never wanted strife in her married life. She bears everything only to show her victory over her parents. Indu resented all this suppression. She had sworn that she would never be a hypocrite and so she had been rebellious since birth. She had thought that womanhood was a beautiful world, but it was thrust upon her so brutally and harshly that she had received a rude shock and started resenting the fact that she was a woman.

The novelist presents a veritable state of women in which modern women are bound to live between tradition and modernity is revealed through Indu. She mocks the very word ‘love’, “I love a book, a word, or a sari, a curry, a child, a man” (Deshpande 97). The experience that love has no place in her life and drives her to the extreme stance of seeing only stratagem and betrayal, all around. She feels how sex becomes an emblem of power and authority. Marriage proves to be another trap and woman feels like a caged animal. Thus she willingly surrendered herself to Jayant even before he pressurized her to do so. She who had considered herself to be so independent, intelligent, clever and so proud is not seen anywhere. She who had set out to reform Indian womanhood has fallen into the trap waiting for her. She even wanted to get off leaving Jayant and living alone for that seemed to be the only way of becoming herself.

Indu felt uneasy not only about her marriage but also about work too. What her editor said and what was acceptable to the public did not matter her. But she had no voice there too. When she voiced her doubts, Jayant answered that one person cannot change the whole system, therefore, there was no point in making herself an object of ridicule. It also worried Indu to realise that she had deserted her family only to become a part of success oriented patriarchal society. Of course she now belonged to the smart young set but was often depressed. She regrets that she had left her family for this hypocritical life. Her mother had died giving birth to her, but the family had never let her feel a motherless child. She felt that her wish to assert herself had stemmed from hypocrisy and assurance.

Akka is the eldest and the guardian of the family. She does not approve of Indu's marriage with Jayant. Nor do the family members dare approve and invite them. Akka believes that love marriage does not work. Love marriage could involve different castes and perhaps different languages. Kaka is also afraid of Akka and does not invite Indu. She marries Jayant who belongs to a joint family but prefers and moves to a nucleus family. Later on Indu moves back to the joint family as she has been made an heir to Akka's family. Financial power is very crucial in a joint family. When Indu feels unhappy with her conjugal life she is made heiress to the whole property. Thus she gets an opportunity to be away from Jayant. It was after ten years since she left her family. Jayant discouraged her decision. However, it was only when she reached her parental home that she realised how much it meant to her. She felt so comfortable and so much at home that she realised where she belonged to. As she is alone in Akka's house, she develops an intimate relationship with Naren. But soon she wished that she had listened to Jayant's advice and not come back. This was a very huge and unwanted responsibility for Indu as she had always wanted to be completely detached and not involved with the family.

Indu found herself in an unenviable position for there were so many people and all of them wanted her to do different things. Some of them are Narendra Atya, who had been widowed in her childhood, Sunanda Atya who had an irresponsible and jobless husband and the like. Finding herself in a state of dilemma Indu was tempted to follow Jayant's advice, who had written her that there was no need to be involved in other people's problem. As all the possibilities were going through her mind, she had the opportunity to reconsider her relationship with her husband. At the same time she was greatly attracted to Naren. He was also attracted to her and she gave herself to him twice, but the very next day her mind was in turmoil of matters of sin, crime, right and wrong. But she does not take love making as a sin or crime. Later she feels ashamed of herself and tells Naren, "...When you tried me, I thought... this is Jayant. So that's all I'm Naren. Not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife. But as an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much, too passionately and is ashamed of it" (Deshpande 192).

She is also ashamed of herself for not being a virgin woman. Therefore, she hates her womanhood. After realizing her failure in married life, she looks down upon marriage as a trap, "A trap? Or a cage? ... a cage with two trapped animals glorifying hatred at each other" (Deshpande 67). This sheds a light on Indu's awareness of her autonomy and realization that she is a being, and not a dependent on her husband. Jayant never tried to understand her feelings. Thus there is no real communication between them, "Love, that's a word I don't really understand. It seems to me an overworked word... sometime I wonder if I will leave him.... the only way in which I can be, myself, my whole self again" (Deshpande 97). Because of this thought, instead of leaving Jayant, she goes back to him with the vain hope that things will change the situation "... go back to Jayant. What kind of a life can you build on a foundation of dishonesty.... Now I would go back and see that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty? Nevertheless, I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and

me” (Deshpande 205). According to Jasbir Jain, Indu’s “... adulterous relationship does not lead to a sense of guilt, instead it liberates the psyche from false restrictions” (Deshpande 15-16). But this is not fair. We cannot agree with Jain’s theory of “liberating the psyche from false restriction” because how can anyone bring in the physical relationship with someone other than the husband as a liberation of psyche from false restriction. Then if men also start thinking like this there will not be any respect to the institution of marriage.

Indu’s profession, namely writing, after marriage too was one that she undertakes to support her family expenditure as she got married without parents’ permission. She expresses her on writing thus, “I no longer have any desire to mould people, to change them, to reform society. There is only one thing I know I can do... I can write...” (Deshpande 15). By this she asserts that she has no desire in reforming the society through her writings. While in the process of writing too she feels tired and wants to abandon it. Indu’s failure in all these fields shows that she is dishonest in her endeavours. She is always in a chaotic state of psyche and combating with circumstances to reach final solution. According to Indu, one should listen to the dictates of one’s own conscience and be true to oneself in speech and action. But unfortunately, she herself had failed to do so either for fear of failure or some other reason. She wanted to show her family that her marriage was a success and she had lied and compromised all along losing her identity. Indu who had proudly thought that she would never pretend had actually pretended before Jayant by not revealing her whole self to him, thereby wronged to Jayant, Naren and herself too. Indu had believed firmly that she should be detached and will not be involving in any unnecessary matters. But her relation with Naren revealed her concept to be wrong. She realized that Jayant would be shattered if she were to reject him, unlike Naren. Naren remains unaffected by Indu’s rejection because he was a totally detached person, he was no body’s husband or lover and he loved music to such an extent that he could completely lose himself in it. This made Indu realise that love was not a

restricting but a uniting bond and life meant depending, on each other. The only way in which she could bring harmony in her married life was to stop pretending and to reveal her whole self, her weakness and strength, her virtues and vices.

The author employs the technique of withdrawal as a tool for self-realisation for her protagonist. Indu withdraws away from her suffocating life situations. Unable to adjust to the social demands on her she attempts a temporary psychological as well as sociological withdrawal. This renders her freedom and ensures a place for her in both family and the society. All of a sudden Indu's vision becomes clear and she knows what she has to do. Now she realizes that Akka had been a pillar of strength, rather than an interfering old woman as she perceived. She has chosen Indu as her heiress because she believed that Indu was capable of showing the same indomitable courage and strength. Whatever freedom she wanted, Indu had to find within the bounds of her obligations and responsibilities and within them one is free to do what one wants.

Through the character of Indu, Shashi Deshpande has very exquisitely portrayed the inner struggles and sufferings of the new class of Indian women, who has raised many questions regarding modern women who are tooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the Western world. In ancient times, Indian woman was hailed as 'Pativrutha' or 'Sati' and now she is a changed person. Now she is aware of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her place and role in the family and society. Indu represents such a woman. The society can either reject and condemn her or encourage and co-operate with her in efforts to establish a new image. Shashi Deshpande generally as the female protagonist and employs a kind of stream-of-consciousness techniques. Almost all her novels deal with crisis in the heroine's life. Through the protagonists' consciousness-raising voice, struggling to assert her femininity, the author gets to the root of existence and gives vent to a kind of female subjectivity which refuses to reconcile and identify herself with the patriarchal and male-

dominated society. *Roots and Shadows* reflects the turmoil of modern existence with its divergent demands and pressures by delineating the crisis of human personality and human relationships. This is confined within the parameters for home and family.

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