

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND SHADOWS

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Abstract

Roots and Shadows was the first novel written by Deshpande in 1978 but published only in 1983 after The Dark Holds No Terrors and won the Thirumathi Rangamal prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. Deshpande had initially started writing Roots and Shadows as a detective novel but later Indu, the protagonist became her focus and this led her to change the form. *Roots and Shadows* is an inquiry of Indu's desire for the attainment of her inner self, the claim of her existence and freedom with reference to her relationship with her husband, Jayant and the members of her family. Like every girl child, she was trained to be quite, amenable, tractable, submissive and unquestioning in her childhood. Oppressed by Indian patriarchy, Indu, the protagonist of the novel, revolts against Akka, the head of a matriarchal family, who represents age-old and orthodox beliefs and conventions, and decides to go for love marriage with Jayant, a man of different caste with the optimism to get freedom from her imprisoned being in her conservative and orthodox ancestral family with its rigid customs. In her quest of freedom and happiness, she leaves her parental home with a very simple dream that her marriage would help her to realize her need to belong, to be wanted, to be needed, and to be loved. She takes marriage as a substitute to the restraint imposed on her in the name of gender-discrimination in her ancestral family. After her marriage, she surrenders totally to her husband for the sake of love. After getting married to Jayant, she enters into her dream world. This paper is an attempt to discuss Indu's struggle against patriarchy.

Keywords: woman, patriarchy, freedom, marriage

Shashi Deshpande occupies an eminent place among the women novelists. Her novels help us feel the intricacies of the life of woman

as mother, wife. Daughter, lover a victim of circumstances. Her primary focus of attention is the world of woman the struggle of woman in modern society.

Deshpande's protagonists are women struggling to find their own voice and are continuously in search to define them. But they *become fluid, with no shape, no form of their own*" (15). (Roots and Shadows)

Shashi Deshpande's focus deals with woman of the middle class and her unfulfilled desires, urges and sacrifices. She asks questions pertaining to the status of woman and her unfulfilled quest for freedom in a world which is bent upon ensnaring her. The novelist's focus falls to find the avenues available to her in her search for freedom from the male members of the society. It is quite interesting to note that she makes a very close and stinging study of the oppression and reactions of women belonging to upper middle class in a sexist society. Deshpande mirrors the society the way she observes it. Her contribution to the world of literature is the presentation of the reality of the middle-class woman:

"I realize that I write what I write because I have to. Because it is within me. It's one point of view, a world from within the woman, and that I think is my contribution to Indian writing".(Shashi)

It would be relevant to point out here that the publication of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 took the American society by storm. The critic here shuns the popular notion that a woman's only place is her home and that she should find fulfilment in motherhood. Betty Friedan avers that the root cause of women's pathetic condition is not sex but the freedom which has always been denied to them. She argues and tries to convince that a woman's fulfilment is in a creative work of her own. Shashi Deshpande also espouses this quest for freedom. Her novels *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence* are deeply concerned with the protagonists' quest for freedom. (Friedan)

Commenting upon the difficulties which she encountered while composing *Roots and Shadow* Shashi Deshpande told Lakshmi Holmstrom in an interview:

Maybe it was difficult at first I remember the first story that I wrote the one in which I consider my writing really began to develop. "the

Intrusion". Until then, as I told you, all the stories were in a sense trying out. It's a story that was really difficult to write where a man forces himself on a woman something that I knew happens, that I wanted to write about. May be then I broke through the language barrier. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02690059308574305>)

But of course for an Indian woman writing there are all sort of inhibitions which you have to learn to get past, simply to acknowledge women's sexuality, leave alone foregrounding it. I don't wish to restrain myself from what should come for reasons which have nothing to do with the novel and what belongs there. Social reasons for example, worrying about what people will say. Those don't count for me when I am writing though I am told some women have to take these things into account. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/02690059308574305>)

Though Deshpande incessantly writes for women, raises women's issues, lets the world know the suffering, yet she is not identified as feminist writer. She "makes it clear that hers is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the cause of all troubles." (Shashi)

This clearly throws light on the dilemma of a woman novelist writing in contemporary India. The protagonist of the novel Indu is a sensitive, educated and ambitious young woman who fearlessly questions fulfilment in her own way. Her search for freedom decides the course of her actions, her morality and her deep trust in her ambition of attaining freedom and gratification. Since her childhood, Indu had realized that she was holding the secondary place in her family. Due to the patriarchal set up of the society, the condition of every woman is bound to be pathetic. In *Roots and Shadows*, the dominant culture and the marginalized culture are expressed in the shape of suppression of the latter by the former. A woman is frequently reminded to follow the commands of the males. Indu's condition is clear from the following words:

As a child, they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek and submissive. Why? I had asked. Because you are a female. You must accept everything, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to

live and survive. And I had watched them and found it to be true. There had to be, if not the substance, at least the shadow of submission. But still, I had laughed at them, and sworn I would never pretend to be what I was not (158). (Pathak)

Indu always faces her comparison with her cousin Padmini (Mini) who comes very close to the obedient girl. Akka approves of Mini as she is ready to marry the boy of her choice. Indu really feels frustrated to see the women of the family in such a horrible situation as none of them are allowed to lead a life of their own. Indu feels sorry about it that woman is nothing but merely a puppet in the hands of men. . Old fashioned families have no space for women. She is stunned to know that subdued girls like Mini consider husbands as "a definite article "permanent", and "forever" (126-127).

But, Indu refuses to accept all dictatorship of patriarchy and goes for choice marriage. The moment she saw Jayant for the first time, she knew he was the man for her. And she had only proposed to him and married. The moment Indu got married, she was very optimistic. She thought that she would enjoy a free life with Jayant, free from all conservative things of the society. However, she repented her decision later. Her quest for freedom suffers a great set back:

Then I had met Jayant. And I had found out that he too expected me to submit. No, not expected. He took it for granted that I would. And I did it, because, I told myself, I loved him. As if that justified everything. As if the word took away the taint from the deed and remembering how I had surrendered to him, step by step. I realise now, that it was not for love, as I had been telling myself, but because I did not want conflict. The hideous ghost of my own cowardice confronted me as I thought of this that I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure. I had to show them that my marriage, that I was a success. Show whom? The world. The family, of course. And so I went on lying, even to myself, compromising, shedding bits of myself along the way (158-159).

Indu feels that marriage is a tragic situation in which all Indian

women are entangled:

It's a trap... that's what marriage is ... A trap? Or a cage? Maybe the comic strip version of marriage.... A cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... isn't so wrong after all. And it's not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself? (61).

The fact remains that Indu's individuality gets crippled due to her attachment with Jayant. In this choice marriage she faced only and only sexual humiliation and a sense of imprisonment and deep within she is inclined to have freedom and detachment. Moreover, the novelist shows how the sense of guilt eats into her vitals Indu vis-à-vis her affinity with Naren. She considers herself a sinner, a deception which becomes a source of agony for her. The idea of leaving Jayant seems to be a better option now: "Sometimes I wonder if I will leave him. The only way in which I can be, myself, my whole self again". (97)

It is true that she hardly left with any choice. The tragedy of her life lies in the fact that she feels totally aloof. Her isolation reminds of what Meursault says in *The Outsider*:

'Mother died today or may be yesterday. I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours Sincerely'. That doesn't mean anything (9). (Camus)

It is clear that Indu's life is full of unfavorable circumstances now. She starts leading her life with silence and a silent sense of hatred:

The house was silent, as if tired of its pretense of liveliness. A few women who had been left behind, and who has been carrying on an interminable argument in the kitchen, their voices rising and falling monotonously, were now hustled out by an authoritative male voice.(6)

Definitely anyone can lose the mental peace in such kind of disturbing life scenario. It is apt that this kind of situation is very common in society and frequent attempts are made to silence the voice of weaker sex by it. Helen Cixous narrates Indu's personality:

I write this as a woman, toward women. When I say 'woman', I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first

it must be said that inspite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the 'dark' - that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. (334).

Indu realizes that one should follow the voice of one's own conscience and be true to one-self. Ultimately, she experiences that true freedom is in having the strength to do what one wants to do and the firmness to adhere to it. Her interpretation about herself of a sinner and deceiver, became the very reason of her agony. She all of a sudden discovered that she had given in to Jayant, not because she adored him, but simply because she didn't want to confront any conflict, so that her family would feel that her marriage was a happier one. So she kept on lying and adjusted even with the worst situations. She thought that Jayant wouldn't be able to bear rejection him he did not want detachment and non-involvement. This made Indu feel that there was nothing wrong in her need of Jayant for it did not make her any less of a human being. The only option left to bring harmony in her married life was to stop pretending and to reveal her whole self, her weakness and her strength, her virtues and her vices.

Amar Nath Prasad glorifies Deshpande for her portrayal of fine feminine sensibility in the following words:

Her marathon struggle against the negative forces often engendered by the ruthless and sapless patriarchy; her emerging new ideas and views against the age-old norms of society, her unfettered growth and maternity of personality ever* amidst the dominance of conservatism and her self-introspection for a life of reconciliation to make the life perfect and beautiful will always be remembered in the portrayal of characters of the fictions of Indian novelists in English.” (10-11) (Prasad)

All Deshpande's women go back to their husbands. This going back is predominant in her novels; but this going back is not by compromise but by a kind of understanding as Indu thinks:

To go back to Jayant what kind of 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 (205). (Deshpande)

Her own life becomes perturbed because of the patriarchy which she has to face even after marriage. She feels that her husband Jayant is

not at all concerned with Indu's desires. She wants to unburden herself from the marital clutches she has got caught in. She starts talking the way Jayant wants her to. She feels completely useless and compares her emotions as garbage. In order to seek some emotional support and relief she surrenders before Naren:

“As a woman I felt hedged in by my sex. I resented my womanhood as it closed so many doors to me” (87).

As for as Indu's professional life is concerned, she is compelled there too to submit to the tortures of the editor. Though she is supporting her family financially even the no appreciation is being given to her by Jayant. He is least bothered about her being and talent. He never praises her skills. The quest for freedom and self, keep on haunting her. She has become a split personality. Her one side is asking her to surrender and the other to rebel. Indu crosses all limits as Elain Showalter says:

“the female phase which is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from the dependence of opposition, a search for identity” (13). (Showalter)

It shows that once Indian woman is hailed as 'pativratas', and so on but now she is a changed person. She is aware of the strivings of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality, her place and role in family and society. She has a new image, an image of a quester. The novel ends with an optimistic note: Indu plans to go back to her husband and feels everything about herself. It seems that to Deshpande's women protagonists going back is indispensable. *Shadows* ends with an affirmation of the individuality of Indu. Through the image of the tree, Deshpande suggests that Indu has learnt to see not only her life full of possibilities for growth and grace but the very meaning of life itself. It is with this total understanding that Indu decides to go back to Jayant. Indu has confronted her real self and she knows her roots;

she need not be ashamed of her body and sexual needs; she has to decide what her job will be; she is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but for others too, and life does not come to an end with individuals, be it Indu or Jayant” (*My Life is My own* (47).

The contemporary Indian structure of society, mainly the new concepts of western education and financial independence have uprooted the roots of old Indian culture and social values to some extent for modern woman. Educated Indu, with her went for an inter-caste marriage with Jayant. Indu still feels disturbed and expresses

her loneliness in these words:

This is my real sorrow that I can never complete in myself until I had met Jayant, I had not known it...that was somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone. (34)

Like her mother she gets separated from the family to challenge and shun the traditional exercise of running marriages. Indu is a writer, this talent of creativity makes her vocal against social capture, but Jayant does not appreciate her skill. He dashes her hopes to the ground of peace and happiness. She wants to establish such a picture of modern woman who is no longer a slave to patriarchy. She dreams to achieve the state of detachment but to her surprise, she discovers herself connected and attached in many ways. Her mind breaks up between two extreme, on the one hand she is so attached to her house which becomes the part and parcel of her life and on the other she is like caged person.

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