



Defying Patriarchal Norms : A study of Roots and Shadows by Shashi Deshpande

Anjali, "Research scholar of OPJS University Churu" Rajasthan

Email id- anjaliahlawat007@gmail.com

Suresh Kumar," Assistant Professor of OPJS University Churu" Rajasthan

Abstract: This study focuses on Shashi Deshpande's book *Roots and Shadows*. Shashi Deshpande describes the struggles of women in the context of contemporary Indian society in this article. The protagonist struggles to understand and protect her identity not only as a woman but also as a human being in the setting of contemporary Indian society since she is unable to fully resist traditional, patriarchal standards of society.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, Indian society, relationships and responsibilities, freedom, self-confidence.

Roots and Shadows: The novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983) won the Thirumati Rangammal Prize for the best novel in 1984. Shashi Deshpande's primary focus of attention is the world of women- the struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society. Unable to fully defy traditional, patriarchal norms of society, the protagonist attempts to realize and preserve her identity not only as women but also as a human being struggle of women in the context of modern Indian society."

In her quest for selfhood and fulfillment, Indu had sought escape from her roots, family relationships and responsibilities. Here we are reminded of Kate, in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1971)' who also shrugs off her responsibilities (towards her husband and children) that have been burdensome and sets out in search of her true self. D.P.Chattopadhyaya, while interpreting the meaning of freedom, opines "freedom is also release from ties or bonds or duties."^ Indu's flight from family relationships had only landed her in another trap of shadow existence waiting for her in the person of Jayant (her husband), "I've got away. But to what? [...] to what have I got away? Is that any better than this?" Indu ascertains that these familial ties are the roots of one's being which keep on dogging one like shadow by which one cannot flee from. Freedom, thus, can only be "relative;" there is no extrication from relationships and "new bonds replace the old, that's all". Rightly opines O.P.Bhatnagar that the novel deals with "a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realizes her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with the family, with the male world and the society in general."" Shashi Deshpande emphatically insists on the



importance of women becoming aware of themselves as individuals and shaping their own destinies by assertiveness and self-confidence.

Shashi Deshpande gives expression to feminine discourse all through the novel. It is the female-pantheon, to whom an altar is erected in this novel. Akka, the surrogate mother of Indu, is a domineering woman in the novel. Compared to Akka's formidable power all males in the novel - Anant, Govind, Madhav, Vinayak and even old uncle- are languid. The novelist gives picture of Akka:

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 red-faced stuttering schoolboy by Akka's venomous tongue.

Akka, a grand old matriarch, is the presiding diety of the family, who with grim determination single-handedly managed the affairs of the family. All the family members looked to Akka for guidance till her death, and after her they bank upon Indu for support.

Shashi Deshpande has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of women in Indian set up. The first group consists of women who accept their "false conditioning" into subordination and dependence without demur. This set is represented by Narmada (Atya), Sumitra Kaki, Kamala Kaki, Sunanda Atya, Kaku and Mini. They are traditional-minded women. Akka, too, belongs to this class but without the selfishness, narrowness, powerlessness, languor and mawkishness of any one of them.

Against this obsolete set up of woman's life is placed educated, bold, uninhibited and unconventional Indu, who reviews everything with reason. She is projected against the women belonging to the older generation. Being a girl of progressive ideas, she could not share Akka's stale conventional notions, mumbo-jumbo religiosity, superstitious beliefs, and the family's class and caste consciousness. Atya's idea of not calling one's husband by his name as it shortens the longevity of the latter's life span, and of circumambulating Tulsi and praying for husband's life draws Indu's flak. Besides women like Kaki even ate from the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. Likewise, Anjana Appachana in the sixth section of her book. *Incantations and Other Stories* (1991)[^] presents Rukmini, a little-educated woman, who believes in the Hindu tradition of husband worship, and deviousness and silence are her only weapons. Even in her thoughts, Rukmini does not take her husband's name but uses "He" instead. Similarly, Anita Desai's *Voice in the city* (1982), provides an intimate peep into the habits and attitudes of traditional women. These women were "hidden behind the barred



windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from *The Bhagvad Gita* and *The Ramayana*, in the dim light of sooty lamps."^ Such activities do not allow women even minimum freedom for cultivation of their selves. The idea of freedom is simply inconceivable to them. These ideas do not appeal to Indu's rational mind and to her it is nothing more than putting a dead albatross around the neck of the people. As she puts, "That's just to frighten the women. To keep them in their places". As an awakened woman, Indu comes out with a crusade against injustice meted out to women for centuries for "All women are reformers at heart" and she is "all out to reform Indian womanhood".

In Indian society, a girl's mind is shaped by hammering in constantly that she is weak both physically and mentally and is subordinate to man. Indu states:

As a child, they 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 [...] I had watched them and found it to be true.

Indu resented all this suppression. Her education which has exposed her to modern times, has set her apart from the family. In a contemplative mood, Indu realizes the futility of such a hypocritical life. She "had laughed at them, and sworn I would never pretend to be what I was not".

To demarcate and divide the society on sexual lines is an ancient proclivity in Indian society. Indu was left by her father when she was hardly fifteen days old, and he did not return back to her for over one year although she lost her mother at birth. Deshpande exposes the male prejudice against female children. Indu's Madhav Kaka does not know in which classes his daughters are studying, all his energies are reserved for his deceitful son, Sunil. Akka, too, "kept all her softness for boys". When old uncle wanted his daughter Saroj to learn music, Akka had put her foot down. Thus, under the prevailing social, culture and family structure women are, in one way or another, the Cinderella whatever position they occupy in the society or family. One critic has rightly remarked that "as long as society remains patriarchal in its role allocation and division and division of labour, the culture of the second sex is bound to be eclipsed."^

Indu, endowed with fine intelligence and keen sense of discernment, has her own views about life. When she finds dominant Akka and even the family to be a formidable hindrance in



achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness, she rebels. The question which arises at this point is that: "is there really a complete break, an unbridgeable chasm between the world and the values of Akka and those of Indu?"

However, as a young girl, she liberated herself from the impinging influence of the family by running away from it to the girl's hostel. Later, Indu revolts against Akka, and decolonizes herself by marrying Jayant, a man of her own choice, who belongs to a different caste and speaks a different language. Indu seems to join hands with Veena Paintal's protagonist Charishma, in *An Autumn Leaf* (1976), who rejects the conventional procedure of marriage. According to her, in today's world arranged marriages have little chance of survival. As she puts, "I have my own personality and my dreams. I refuse to be tied down like a slave to some rich man I don't even know and be treated like a piece of furniture."^ Indu goes a step ahead of Charishma. It was Indu who proposed Jayant for marriage. Marrying Jayant, in defiance of the wishes of the family, is a symbolic act of self-assertion, a declaration of independence, and a bold affirmation of her identity as an individual.

Akka, however, remains unmoved by such spasmodic protests and refuses to bow down in front of demurs. When she falls critically ill and realizes that her end is near, she nominates Indu as the heiress of her entire property. Behind the veneer of anger at Indu's defiance and disobedience, Akka secretly admires her grand-daughter who is highly educated, emancipated and gifted with creativity. Akka, in the sanctum sanctorum of her heart knew that Indu would prove her mettle in the face of difficult situations and thus she would carry out her duties well.

Indu is duly informed of Akka's illness. When she receives Akka's summons, she heaves a sigh of relief for the summons "had been a welcome reprieve. A chance to get away. To avoid thinking about what was happening to me [...] to Jayant and me [...] and our life together". Before leaving for home, Indu is little hesitant whether she should go or not because it is more than ten years that she has left the family. Jayant, too, dissuades her from going back home for Akka, in his opinion, she is only a "distant relation". It sounded disloyal and treacherous to her. Shashi Deshpande knows that in Indian society, most of the decisions are made by men for women. Being a dynamic woman, capable of taking her own decision, Indu rejects Jayant's verdict and decides to leave. As P.S.Sathupati opines, Indu "searches for release from the constraints of the traditional and tradition-bound institution of marriage" in search of an autonomous self, only to realize like them, again that "this refuge is hard to achieve."



But why did Indu come? Did she come because she wanted to disprove of her husband's opinion or was it the result of a sneaking desire in her for the family reunion, some deep bond which tickled in her in spite of her anger and hatred for all that Akka stood for? Indu's "homecoming" is not only another step into autonomy, but also she starts introspecting deeply over her past life, her secret passions and sexual explorations. Her psychological journey into her memories conduces to self-analysis. Indu leaves no stone unturned to realize what her freedom is; what her moral responsibility is; her relationship in complex situations, and her different roles.

On the spur of the moment, Indu analyses the obscure but extremely excruciating cracks and chasms in her relationship with Jayant. Matrimonial relationship in the world of Shashi Deshpande is characterized by harmony and fulfillment in the initial stages, and later on, as a source of disillusionment and despair, disappointment and frustration. After marrying Jayant, Indu had thought she had found in him a spiritual and psychological level of closeness; as she tells us that "I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And in Jayant I had thought I had found the other part of my whole self. Not only that, but total understanding perfect communication". But did she really attain wholeness and integration of personality after marriage? Contrary to her romantic fantasies, marriage threatened to rob Indu of her "self." Willingly she yields to the demands of the marriage and moulds herself according to the demands of her husband.

Whatever she did, even the way she dressed and spoke, fell into a pattern. As 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 him. Always what he wants. What he would like.
What would please him. And I can't blame him. It's not he who has
pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be.**

Similarly, Mangal and Medha, in Deshpande's *Moving On*, have shaped themselves to their husband's needs. Mangal, even as a young woman, made herself into a mother figure, a facade that her husband used for his own purpose, the way he used his own mother, converting the senile old woman into a saintly figure after her death, putting up her enlarged picture on the wall of his room, garlanding it with fragrant flowers every day. And Medha, too, a small-town girl, quickly learnt the rules of the game and adapted herself to her husband's needs. Rosemarie Tong criticizes the roles donned by women at various stages of life, "Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they



have to in order to survive economically/ psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing."

Marriage with Jayant has compelled Indu to lead a dual life. She confesses that she has found in her "an immense capacity of deception. [...] I hid my responses and emotions as if they were bids of garbage". Jayant, on the contrary, is impervious and indifferent to her emotional urges. Emotionally crippled, Indu compares herself with fluid, which has neither tangible shape, nor any form of its own. She perceives that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant's masculinity - by becoming his wife. The paradox is that she feels estranged from Jayant but at the same time she cannot live without him. Ann Foreman opines, "Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for a woman there is no relief for these intimate relations are the very ones that are the essential structures of her oppression."

Marriage has failed to satisfy Indu's thirst for total independence. For this institution demands total submission from a woman and in that situation she cannot demand freedom for herself. But Indu has freedom to think and to talk about her own caged "self". She gave vent to her frustrations and disappointments in the company of her friend, Naren - the only person in whom she can confide. She confesses to him that she fails to establish emotional rapport with Jayant for "it shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. [...] And so, I pretend. I'm passive. And unresponsive. I'm still and dead". Rightly opines Naresh K. Jain, Shashi Deshpande's women are "aware of their own sexuality" and it affects "their relationship with their men." Consequently, Indu's love-marriage degenerates into a mere psychological affair that makes her feel as if there is something disgraceful in total commitment, as if she has abused her body's sanctity.

Passion in a woman has not been accepted for long. Anita Desai, too, deals with sexual repression of her characters. Maya, of all her women characters, is the one who is most aware of her body and its appeal. She is irritated to find Gautama (her husband) overbuys with his papers, giving no thought to her "soft, willing body". She tries to enter Gautama's "securely male" world but is rejected.

Man concentrates on his own purposes and aims in life; woman's needs are peripheral to him. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir opines that for "loyalty and friendship" to exist between man and woman, the essential condition is that they should be "free in relation to each other and be equal on concrete matters." Certainly, for ensuring harmony in the marital relations, an acceptance and adjustment of the wishes, attitudes and sentiments of both the partners is necessary. Most of Shashi Deshpande's women suffer in marriage because their



men like to remain locked up in their solitary cells and do not try to reach out to their wives. Jayant is a male chauvinist for whom the wife is like a robot or some sophisticated mechanical device for the fulfilment of his needs. By refusing to accept Indu's real self, Jayant forces in her a state of armed neutrality for life that mars the felicity of their relationship.

Instead of love, self-gratification becomes the basis of marriage for a male and he usually deprives woman of togetherness and warmth. Jayant, too, fails to recognize the fact that love is necessary for happiness and "the closer together people get, the more independent and self-contained their relation becomes." Resultantly, Indu scoffs at the romanticized concept of love. To her, "it's a big fraud, a hoax", and if somebody believes in it, he or she is trapped and becomes humble and dependent. She acknowledges this truth, "the sexual instinct [...] that's true. The maternal instinct [...] that's true too. Self-interest, self-love [...] they're the basic truths". Therefore, Devdas, Sarat Chandra's love-lorn tragic hero is for her repulsive, "A grown man moaning and crying for love! God! How disgusting!" she opines.

Indu is only rightful in her distaste for love that is non-real and absurd, that lacks the humanizing influence in the context of marriage in a phallogocentric civilization, a civilization that perpetuates myths created by male-oriented societies and makes marriage for the female partner, both physically and spiritually dissatisfying. Indu confesses the moral risks of a woman caught in the trap of a love-marriage with an orthodox man of restrictive social code, an "automation" therefore, "plugged" into a social system that he does not question, "Jayant [...] 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". In addition, it emphatically evinces the modern educated woman like Indu's love of success. As it was a love-marriage, she did not want to give any chance to her parents to blame her for the bold step taken by her. She wanted to prove her success.

Nevertheless, Indu is financially liberated woman. Being a writer, she is always interested in creative writing - a means to articulate her feminine voice, to forge moments in art that are arresting and original. Indu seems to join hands with Betty Friedan when she remarks, "the fundamental human drive is not the urge for pleasure or the satisfaction of biological needs but the need to grow and to realize one's full potential." Like Jaya, in previous novel *That Long Silence*, Indu is alive to her writing potential but before long she has to curtail her freedom and knuckle under the dictates of the editor. She wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service but Jayant does not approve of this idea. He is a "barrier" to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that a person like Indu can do nothing against the



whole system by wielding her pen, "That's life! What can one person do against the whole system! No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile gesture. We need the money, don't forget, we have a long way to go".

Through the character of Indu, Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself, to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potential for creative writing. Indu slips into the set pattern and started writing the kind of things that are acceptable, popular and easily sold no matter how many lies she had to tell in the bargain. When Naren asked her whether she is happy working there, she replied, "Why not? It's a job. Gets me so much money a month. What's wrong with that?" Naren is really concerned about her writing career. He even suggested her, "it would have been better to write your own stuff. But how long it was that she has really written something she wanted to?

Standing at yet another threshold, Shashi Deshpande's protagonists once again ask themselves the question - "Is this my life forever?" At this juncture, the woman wonders whether her life is her own or belongs to others; and whether she has lived a life as she had wished to or has been made to change shape according to the wishes of others. It seems to her that she has become a stranger to herself. Indu, too, perceives herself as a "shadow" of the female self Miller observes, "when one is an object, not a subject, all of one's own physical and sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently." Being an educated woman, it is impossible for Indu to live without her independence and identity. She even toyed with the idea of leaving Jayant and living by herself That, to her, seemed the only way of becoming her own "self" Indu's struggle for selfhood, her struggle towards liberation of mind, her struggle for an emotional and intellectual definition of herself as a self-actualizing person, is in a sense a fight against womanhood. The day she grew up, the knowledge of her womanhood had been brutally and gracelessly thrust on her with cruel words:

'You're a woman now,' Kaki had told me. 'You can have babies yourself I, a woman? My mind had flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. [...] "And don't forget," she had ended, "for four days now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything."

Such had been her introduction to the beautiful world of womanhood. It has given her a rude shock and she started resenting the fact that she is a woman. Indu tells Naren, "I felt hedged in, limited by my sex. [...] because it closed so many doors to me". The fact of being a woman has never been a source of pleasure or pride for Shashi Deshpande's protagonists. In order to assert her right to an independent life, she longs to escape from the burden and responsibilities of womanhood.



How to reconcile woman's human demand for freedom with her need for love, nurturance and how to strike a balance between her wifehood, motherhood and career and spiritual fulfillment, are some of the issues raised by Shashi Deshpande in this novel. Indu, in an act of unreflecting defiance against patriarchy, refuses to be mother of a child that is "not wholly welcome". It threatens her positive struggle for independence, for selfhood, and her effort at intellectual liberation. Juliet Mitchell observes that it is within the "role as mother and housekeeper that woman finds the oppression that is hers alone." Unlike the occidental concept of maternity, in Indian society, "maternity" is regarded as the most sacred of earthly manifestations for it makes the sacrament of marriage holy, indispensable and continuous. A child is considered to be a woman's happiness and her justification, through which she is supposed to find self-fulfilment and self-realization. Examples of childless women and their suffering abound in literature. In Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) Maya suffers from bouts of loneliness and desperately longs for a child. It is also one of the causes of her neurosis. In *Voices in the City* (1982) Monisha cannot conceive because of her blocked tubes. She suffers immensely and ultimately commits suicide. Though Indu acknowledges the truth of maternal instinct, still she willing delayed motherhood. She opines, "Having children [...] it isn't something you should think and plan about. You should just have them. And yes [...] end up like Sunanda-itya. Pure, female animal". Indu seems to affirm Neera Desai's belief when she opines:

Women are gradually realizing that they have personalities of their own as human beings and their mission in life does not end with becoming good wives and wise mothers but also in realizing that they are all members of the civic community and of the body politics.

Indu's education sets her apart from average Indian woman. She strongly believes that an identity of one's own is important, which is inextricably linked with a name of one's own. Indu deeply resents the fact that in traditional joint Hindu families, women, time and again, live without any identity, voice and name. Looking at the cook who was called Kaku by everyone she wonders:

Kaku [...] what was her real name? Perhaps, she had no name at all. These women [...] they are called Kaku and Kaki, Atya and Vahini, Ajji and Mami. As if they have to be recognized by a relationship, because they have no



independent identity of their own at all. And in the process, their own names are forgotten.

They are reminiscent of the persona in Anne Sexton's poem, "Self in 1958" who says, "What is reality? I am a plaster doll [...] Am I approximately an I." Similarly, Satyavati, the protagonist in Ashapurna's *Pratham Pratishruti* (1977), wonders that women do not possess their own identity and are known through their relationships with men. As she states, "No one knows her name nor attempted to find out. 'Wife of Jata'-that is her only introduction or she might be mother of someone." Indu even sympathises with those "silly martyrs and idiotic heroines" (as stated by Saru in *DHNT*) who are proud of having their names changed by their husbands during their wedding ceremonies. Being an intense thinking woman, Indu wonders how one could surrender one's name so lightly.

Acting as a foil to Indu, is her cousin Padmini (Mini). Mini has altogether different viewpoint about marriage. She opines that a woman feels safe in society, when she is married and it does not make any difference to her if the groom is not the man of her choice either. Akka had, before her death, fixed the marriage of Mini without consulting the girl. Indu tries to persuade Mini to marry Naren instead of the person chosen by Akka. Mini refuses to romanticize her marriage which for her is an arrangement arrived at for her own good by the elders whose wisdom must be revered. Indu tries to argue with Mini but is deeply perplexed by her response, "What choices have I?" Shashi Deshpande is at her best, when she dwells upon this subject. Being a rebellious woman, Indu opines:

Millions of girls have asked this question millions of times in this country. [...] What choice do I have? Surely it is this, this fact that I can choose, that differentiate me from the animals. But years of blindfolding can obscure your vision so that you no more see the choices. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so that you can no more move out of your cage of no-choices.

Conclusion: In the preceding article, an attempt has been made to critically examine and analyze "the liberation of woman in the works of Shashi Deshpande." In this concluding chapter, an effort has been made to coalesce and combine the different findings into a single unit. We have tried to explore the various forces, which drive Deshpande's protagonists to struggle and strive for asserting their liberation.

The term "liberation" has been construed in various ways: firstly, "as absence of constraint, inner or outer or both;" secondly, "as release from ties or bonds or duties;" thirdly, "as



personal rights and social and political liberties;" fourthly, "as freedom of action." Whatever meaning we attach to the term "liberation," its "one indispensable characteristic is that it should be open or available to all irrespective of their difference in respect of class, sex, education, etc."

References:

- 'Doris Lessing, *The Summer Before the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).
- D.P.Chattopadhyaya, *Individuals and Worlds: Essay in Anthropologica Rationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976) 8-12.
- O.P.Bhatnagar, "Indian Womanhood: Fight for Freedom in *Roots and Shadows*," *Indian Woman Novelists*, ed. R.K.Dhawan, V (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991) 118
- "Anjana Appachana, *Incantation and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1991)
- Anita Desai, *Voice in the City* (New Delhi: Orient, 1982) 124.
- M.Mani Meitei, "Subverting Phallogocentrism: Feminine Discourse in *Roots and Shadows*," *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, ed. R.S.Pathak (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998)82.
- Veena Paintal, *An Autumn Leaf* DeM: Hind Pocket Books, 1976) 20-21
- P.S.Sathupati, "Conflict and Identity in Shashi Deshpande's Novels," *Indian Women Novelists*, ed. R.K.Dhawan, 4, III (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995) 17.
- Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought* (London: Routledge, 1993) 208.
- Ann Foreman, *Femininity as Alienation: Women and the Family in Marxism and Psychoanalysis* (London, 1977) 102.
- "Naresh K.Jain, "Tradition, Modernity and Change," *Women in Indo-Anglian Fiction: Tradition and Modernity* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1998)21.
- Anita Desai, *Cry the Peacock* (New Delhi: Orient, 1980) 103. ^Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans, and ed. H.M.Parshely (1953; Harmaondworth: Penguin Books, 1983) 488.