

## **BEYOND THE SHADOWS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ROOTS AND SHADOWS BY SHASHI DESHPANDE**

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of writing this article is to highlight how modern Indian educated woman is assigned the roles of a daughter, sister, wife and a mother, never paring a chance for her to look within and discover their self-identity, self-respect and, individual likes and dislikes. Her attempt to assert herself and her individuality is mercilessly strangulated at every step. Even in the twenty first century, the patriarchy commands them to be docile, submissive and timid. In Indian tradition and culture, individualism, quest for identity, protest and the idea of rebelliousness have often remained alien to women. They were not allowed to voice their concerns and protest against the injustice done to them by the male-dominated society. Shashi Deshpande in her novel *Roots and Shadows* delineates the ordeals that a woman-Jaya- is subjected to undergo and how she overcomes the hardships to discover her self-identity and individuality.

**Key words:** self-identity, individuality, patriarchy, protest, submissive, tradition, asserts.

Throughout the twentieth century there has been a study of a ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman's existence. Man has subjugated woman to his will, by using her as a means of self-gratification. But he has never desired to elevate her to the rank she is created to fill. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal graphically with problems that confront middle-class educated women in the patriarchal Indian Society. In *Roots and Shadows* she focuses on female experience and female world. But she is not against the male and has stressed a harmonious relationship between man and woman. The novel *Roots and Shadows* presents a revolutionary woman who is seen to be acting against dominance of any kind right from her childhood.

Indu, the heroine of the novel refuses to be cowed down by Akka, the rich family tyrant who dominated the family. Again as an act of revolt she boldly breaks the tradition by marrying Jayant who belongs to some other caste. In order to achieve her freedom, a woman accepts marriage as an alternative to the bondage created by the parental family. From the role of a daughter she looks forward to the role of a wife through marriage

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hoping that this new role would give her the freedom she longs for which she unfortunately does not realize.

In the novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983) Indu searches for the release from the constraints of the traditional and tradition-bound institutions hoping for an autonomous self. Conformity to society, family, etc. destroys one's self-hood. The only self that can be achieved is the self, born in an inter-personal relationship. Indu longs for this kind of inter-personal relationship. She inwardly cries, "This is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself, there was somewhere outside me a part of one without which I remained incomplete, then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone" (RS, 34). This novel gains its feministic touch in Indu's exploration into herself. Besides this, it moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human existence. In his analysis of this novel, R.K.Dhawan rightly observes, "Indu moves on the road of self realisation and the destination seem to be the point of comprehension of the mystery of human life" (1995:17). Indu has learnt to see not only her life full of possibilities for development and status, but the very meaning of life itself. At the end of the novel, there is a change in Indu's realization of Akka. In the beginning, Indu takes Akka to be a sadist. But this realization undergoes a change in her mind because she has confronted her real self and knows her roots.

*Roots and Shadows* begins with Indu's return to her ancestral home. She is a middle-class young girl brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family. The parental home initiates her into the meaning of life. She discovers what her roots are and what her shadows are. She rebels against Akka and her conventional world. Defying the rigid values of Akka, Indu marries Jayant. In order to attain freedom she chooses marriage as an alternative. But marriage, the promised end in a traditional society, does not bring her the desired result. She experiences not only disillusionment in sex but also suffers a silent sexual humiliation. She does not suffer from the guilt in her extra-marital relationship with Naren and decides not to tell her husband about it. This is clear when she openly says, "that had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together" (RS, 205). This novel gets its strength from the fact that Indu is assertive and her autonomy and awareness of her individuality is something not only unusual but also striking in a woman. Indu does not have any guilty conscience. She takes firm decisions. She says authoritatively and convincingly "I felt as if I was watching life itself . . . endless, limitless, formless and full of grace" (RS, 202).

Indu contemplates on the existence of inner strength in the women of her family. In fact the women of her family have spent their whole lives slavishly without a word of appreciation for their services. When Mini accepts the life of a submissive girl, Indu, her cousin gauges the reason behind Mini's submission to her parents' decision. Mini's parents

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have decided to get her married to a man who is neither properly educated nor mentally sound. Indu says:

A woman's life, they had told me, contained no choices. And all my life, especially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The women had no choices but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered . . . have they been born without wills, or have their will atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini, who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength (RS, 6).

Women are also toned or conditioned to merge their aspirations and desires with those of their family. Mini also follows the trend established by the elder women of her family. She is aware of the fact that educated girls get a good match. She admits:

Of course I'm marrying him because there's nothing else I can do. I'm no good at studies. I never was. I went to school because . . . I had to. And then to college because Akka said I must go. Boys prefer graduates these days, she said so. I went. But I failed and it was a relief to give it up. There's only one thing. I'm really good at . . . looking after a house. And to get a home, I have to get married. This is not my home, is it?(RS, 125).

Shashi Deshpande gives her readers a glimpse of the rigid system of marriage in India which is decided on caste, religion and dowry, not on the basis of compatibility. Indu speaks against the traditional method of settled marriages. As a woman she wants her life-partner to overlook the vices and appreciate the virtues. She resents her womanhood as she is made aware of her femininity by the elder women of her family. She accepts life as a curse without husband but she does not believe in the superstitious rituals which are supposed to save one from widowhood. She is always accused of questioning the established norms and of being cleverer and more educated than her predecessors. She experiences hollowness in her life. Her stream of consciousness makes it clear that even in the educated upper middle class; highly educated women are invariably affected by social or marital status. Whether a woman is educated or not, society treats her as an object and a possession, never as an individual.

Indu submits to her husband Jayant's decision to continue with the job which she hated. She finds that her marriage has made her dependent. She defines love as "a big fraud, a hoax, a trap, a process of making one humble and dependent" (RS, 173). It is only after returning to her parental home that Indu relives her past which helps her understand her present. She gradually realizes that the house has become a trap which has always linked her with her past. She has been pursuing detachment throughout her life. The thought of detachment liberates her from her doubt and uncertainty. She had to make some firm decisions on her own. She says: "That I was resigning from my job. That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing" (RS, 87).

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Like Shashi Deshpande's other protagonists, Indu in *The Roots and Shadows* is a career woman. Indu is a woman writer who is caught between individual aspirations and social stigmas. They finally somehow manage to overcome social stigmas and at the same time assert their individuality. Shashi Deshpande's career women, "are not satisfied with the rhetoric of equalities between men and women but want to see that the right to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities are realized in their own lives" (Bala, 2001: 32). Indu, a journalist is not satisfied with her job. She finds her job routine and unpleasant. Even in her profession she is not allowed to reveal her individuality because the editor wants her to write what is acceptable to the public. She is not happy to paint false journalism. Jayant, her husband takes it easy and advises her to compromise. But Indu in her heart of hearts dislikes compromising with her honesty and makes up her mind to resign. Jayant strongly disapproves of any such move which forces Indu to helplessly continue in the same job. Though Indu is compelled to continue her job as a journalist, she ultimately overcomes her husband's influence. After resigning her job, she devotes herself to the kind of writing she has always dreamt of. Indu, thus finally asserts herself as a writer. She at last discovers her roots towards real freedom as a writer while her shadows as a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer are challenged vehemently at every juncture.

Indu is an indomitable new woman who brushes aside society's narrow conventions. She has the freedom to talk about her likes and dislikes. Though she is married to Jayant, she freely moves with Naren and uses words like, "kiss", "rape", "deflowered" and "orgasm". Through her Shashi Deshpande has portrayed the inner struggle of an artist to express herself. She actually wants to become a true woman in preference to an ideal woman. As a woman she is hardly left with any choices, her life is painfully circumscribed. She says, "A woman's life, they had told me, contains no choices. And all my life, especially in this house, I had seen the truth of this" (RS, 142). It is through these odds that Indu fought her way to realize her identity and worth as an individual.

As a determined girl Indu always wants to be free and independent. She is projected against the women belonging to the older generation. She believes that one should listen to the dictates of one's own conscience and be true to oneself in speech as well as action. She struggles hard to understand life in reality, the actual cause that is distressing her married life. She feels that her sense of certainty, confidence and cheerfulness is being destroyed in the presence of her husband. Jayant, her husband, never bothers to understand and appreciate her feelings. In fact, there is no real communication between them. The problem with her is that she is a woman with a questioning mind. She is willing to wound yet afraid to strike. As a result of this state of mind she returns to her husband with the fond hope that things would change for the better. Her mind rolls thus:

. . . 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 he could . . . stand the scorching touch of honesty. Never-the-less I know I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me (RS, 205).

In all her novels Shashi Deshpande focuses on the modern woman's ambition of becoming economically free and leading a happy married life. Marriage generally does not give hundred per cent freedom to a woman in her job. Very often married women have to tackle their own family problems and manage their professional problems. When a married woman faces problems in her family, her professional work may be disturbed. Even though the monetary aspect is very important for a woman, her familial happiness cannot be ignored. This is the problem with Indu. In the beginning she looked upon Akka only as an inconsiderate and interfering old woman. But now she comes to know that Akka has been a pillar of great strength which has enabled her to act according to her beliefs. She realizes that she should not allow anything to come in her way and she must rise to the expectations of Akka. Akka has chosen Indu, her great grandniece, as her heir because she believes that Indu is capable of showing the same indomitable courage and strength and will become a pillar like herself. Akka expects that as an educated woman Indu would be free to act according to her conscience.

Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self has frantically made her long for self-expression. She is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but also for others. Life does not come to an end with individuals like Indu or Jayant. Indu has discovered the meaning of life through the realization of her own potential though men may think that it is too much for a woman like Indu who tries to by-pass the established standards of tradition and convention. Indu, thus, achieves a phase of self-discovery which Elaine Showalter calls the Female Phase, "A turning inward freed from the dependents of opposition, a search for identity" (Showalter, 1977:13). The age-old patriarchal belief that women are to be in the shadow of men and they are to follow their command is dealt a massive blow and is put to ground by Jaya in this novel by her self-discovery and finding her root as a writer. She tears apart the chauvinistic web wherein she is assigned the roles of a daughter, sister, wife and a mother only, never recognising the individual worth of the female self. Indu is convinced of her real roots and this knowledge enables her to fly beyond the silver lining of the male shadows. She realises that women are not to be in the shadow of men but at par with men in every aspect of life if not more; they should complement each other rather than complicate life for each other; they should live in harmony, not in conflict with self-respect and respect for each other.

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