

# IDENTITY MOTIFS IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND SHADOWS

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Shashi Deshpande, a novelist and a short story writer, occupies a predominant position among Indian English novelists. She has sensitively treated typical Indian themes and has portrayed contemporary middle-class women with rare competence. In a wider scene, her subject matter is nothing less than human predicament. Deshpande's novels show the alienated and depressed condition of the middle-class educated career woman, and their search for identity within married life is a freedom and recurring theme in the novels.

Shashi Deshpande deals with the Indian middle class women's turmoil, compulsions and frustrations in a changing world. She exhibits her instinctive ability to articulate the feelings of the contemporary, urban, educated upper middle-class woman. Who is caught in the transitional period between tradition and modernity?

Shashi Deshpande's focus in her fiction is essentially on the Indian woman and her role in the modern society. The Indian woman in the past was denied opportunities available to women in other countries. Early marriage and purdah system confined her to her home her identity was embedded in the matrix of her family. But the advent of English education and the reforms advocated by social activists brought a gradual change in the attitude of the public.

The new woman is constantly trying to live as an independent individual. Shashi Deshpande tries to project women who endeavor to give equal importance to their professional as well as personal lives. Her protagonists- Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*), Jaya (*That Long Silence*) and Urmila (*The Binding Vine*) are career women who belong to the middle-class working class. Her career women attempt to redefine human relationship by taking newly acquired professional status into consideration. In her novels, Shashi Deshpande has depicted different aspects of the middle class women's life. Without fighting against the patriarchal society and male domination, she has taken a balanced view of life from a woman's point of view.

Shashi Deshpande, in her prize winning novel, *Roots and Shadows* (1983), deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and her freedom. Deshpande's theme is identity crisis faced by Indu, the intelligent and sensitive married protagonist. Like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Indu too 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 "this refuge is hard to achieve" (The Dhammapada, 6).

In her quest for personhood and fulfillment, Indu had sought escape from family relationships, but had discovered how relationships are roots of one's being and follow one like so many shadows that make life no more substantial than a shadow—a life without identity. The realization of the need to conform for survival and the awareness that conformity is the great destroyer of selfhood, and the only self that can be achieved is the self- born in interpersonal relationship makes Indu cry out in agony. She speaks about her own incompleteness thus: "This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself" (34).

Indu comes back to her ancestral place from where she, against the wishes of her father and the other members of the family, had accepted so many years ago to get married to a person of her own choice. She comes back to attend the funeral ceremony of Akka, the old rich family tyrant. The large family is on the threshold of change though everybody is unaware of it. And the key to their future lies in the hands of Indu.

Indu has been a determined girl, who always wanted to be free and independent. But now, a number of questions come before her, which leaves her puzzled and baffled. She is uncertain about the fact whether she has broken the stranglehold of family and tradition only to be dominated by love for 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 a success. She goes back to her parent's home to find out of the roots, but she finds the shadows instead. It becomes a time of reckoning for her. She thinks about her own life, her career, her love, the traditional concept of marriage based on love, etc. After illuminating interactions with the varied personalities in her family, she works out their futures and also her own future. She decides to go back to find out her own home.

Truly speaking, *Roots and Shadows* is symbolic representation of the dialectal nature of man and woman set against each other in material terms for power struggle, "Roots" stand for tradition and "Shadows" signify the marginal culture. The dying tradition is soon to become shadows against a backdrop of apocalyptic change. Also, it suggests that once the root is removed, life is deprived of the binding force giving way to new possibilities. Here Shashi Deshpande seeks to show her identity through the deconstruction "difference" as a feminist writer.

As a feminist novel, *Roots and Shadows* give expression to feminine discourse all through. The central characters are women. Compared to Akka's formidable power, all males in the novel- Anant, Govind, Madhav, Vinayak, and even old uncle- are languid. The novelist gives a picture of Akka:

Since the day Akka 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. (22)

At first they all looked to Akka for guidance till her death, and after that, to Indu, who usurps the place of Akka till about the end

Indu is projected against the women belonging to the older generation. Thus, the writer has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of women in the novel. Akka, Narmada, Sumitra Kaki, Kamala Kaki, Atya, and Sunanda Atya represent one set; and Indu represents the other set. To the older generation, a woman's life is nothing "but to get married, to bear children, to have sons and the grand children" (128). And the ideal woman

is the one who doesn't have her own independent identity: A woman who sheds her 'I' who loses her identity in her husband's (54). The new generation (here represented by Indu) reviews everything with reason. Indu analyses the ideal of detachment and freedom and tries to achieve these. She tries to listen to the voice of her conscience and revolts. But, unfortunately, in all her efforts, she fails miserably either due to the impact of the culture and tradition or all these combined together.

The novel explores the inner self of Indu, who symbolizes the new woman who is educated and who lives in close association with society brushing aside all its narrow conventions. She has the freedom besides politics, corruption, and so on. Married to Jayant, Indu freely moves with Naren and uses such words as "Kiss" "rape," "deflowered," "Orgasm" (78), and so on in her conversation with him. Indu says :

We're gay and whimsical about our own people, our own country. We are rational, unprejudiced, broadminded. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption, family planning. We scorn the corrupt, we despise the ignorant. We hate the wicked. And our hearts bleed, Naren, for Vietnam, for the blacks, for the Harijans ..... But frankly, we care a damn about anything but our own precious selves, our own precious walled-in lives. (25)

Through the character of Indu, 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 wants to bid adieu to her monstrous service, but her husband, 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 anything the whole system by her pen.

The temperament of the husband and the wife are diametrically opposite to each other. One is sympathetic to the ills of the society in the "system", whereas the other is nonchalant. One is in quest of an artistic selfhood, while the other is a philistine in pursuit of materialistic happiness. Despite these temperamental differences, Indu is quite submissive. She did not ask him, "To go where?" Instead she silently went back to her work, through hating it and hating herself for it. Her self-alienation increases, as she becomes aware to the conflicting demands made on her by her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of demands passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer. Thus, Indu perceives herself as a shadow of the female self.

A woman's role is not only confined to the centripetal needs of the family in which she lives but also to its centrifugal needs. It is here that a woman has to be more than a submissive housewife. Indu does not take pride in her suffering. She cannot bear with the suffering she has to face in the family, and therefore breaks away from it and marries Jayant. In the family, she was an incomplete being without a sense of the wholeness of personality. But with Jayant she feels a sense of completion and wholeness: "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" (15). But did she really attain wholeness and the integration of personality? No. She often haunted by a "usual feeling of total disorientation" (38). An outsider, she remains untouched by the milieu: "For some reason I was an outsider. The waves of sorrow, sympathy and comradeship rippled all around me, but left me untouched" (30).

Besides being an educated young woman, Indu is very sensitive to the situation. She aspires to become independent and complete in herself but finds so many hurdles coming in

her way. She finds dominate Akka and her family to be a great hindrance for achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness. When she studies in the college, Akka does not 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. We find that she leaves one house and enters another to be independent and complete, but ironically enough, she soon realizes the futility of her decisions: “ Jayant and I.....I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize” ( 14). She speaks about her own incompleteness thus: “This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not 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” (34).

Indu laughs at the idea of not calling one’s husband by his name as it shortens the age of the husband. Later, she realizes that she too is not different from other woman, as she always want Jayant to be with her. The only difference is her reason for thinking so. After she gets married, she does all the activities, which her husband would like. 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 is not he who has pressurized me into this. It is the way want it to be ... Have I become fluid with no shape. no form of my own. (54) Perhaps, marriage has taught her things like deception and artificial show: “ How desire to assert herself had driven her from affection to hypocrisy “. Indu herself realizes: “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” (41). All these bitter facts of losing her identity into her husband’s frighten and scare her. The paradox of the situation is that she is not happy with Jayant, but at the same time, she cannot live without him. She has achieved completeness with Jayant, but she does not want this sort of completeness.

At one point in the novel when Naren tries to make love with her, she declares: “ I’m essentially monogamous, for me. its one man and one man alone “ (89). But, later she offers herself twice to Naren. And the the question haunts her how she will view the act of adultery. Immediately after the act, she goes to her own bed, but deliberately avoids sleeping, as it would erase. “ the intervening period and what happened between Naren and her “ (167). On the one hand, she does not take –love making as a sin or crime, but on the other hand, the very next day, she starts thinking of the enormity of what she had done : “ Adultery ..... What nuances of wrong doing ... no, it needs the other stronger word .... What nuances of sin the word carries. I will now brood on my sin, be crushed under a weight of guilt and misery” (170).

Indu tries to reason out each and every action. Her mind starts musing over the reasons for giving her body to Naren. And, future, her mind on the matters of sin, crime, right and wrong can be seen as:

Apart from wronging Jayant? Wronging Jayant ? I winced at the thought. But I had not wronged Jayant even before this ? By pretending, by giving him spurious coin instead of the genuine kind? I had cheated him of my true – self. That I thought dishonorable, dishonest, much more than this. What I with Naren. ( 188)

Indu does not believe in love. To her there is no such thing as “ love “ in real life, though it exists in book and movies. 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 becomes humble and

dependent. The concept of love is false for Indu. When Naren asked her what the truth is, her answer is:

The sexual instinct ..... That is true. The maternal instinct...That is true too. Self- interest, Self- love ...They are basic truths, you remember Devadas? I saw it with some friends. They sobbed when he died for love. But I could have bucked. A grown man moaning and crying for love! God! How disgusting! (173)

As a child, she was always told to be obedient, submissive, and unquestioning. She used to laugh and always thought that she would never try to show what she was not. But marriages changes everybody. To her great shock and surprise, she found that Jayant had not only expected her to submit being aware of it. submitted herself to him step by step in the name of love. When the realization came to her. she found it was not love but an adjustment, as she never wanted conflict in her married life. As it was love- marriage. she did not want to give any change to her parents to blame her for the step by her. She wanted to prove her success.

According to Indu, one should listen to the dictates of one's own conscience and be true to oneself in speech as well as action. As O.P. Bhatnagar says: "In the end, comes the realization that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere it. That alone can bring harmony in life"(8). But, unfortunately she herself has failed to do so either for fear or failure or because of timidity. The very fact makes her to see herself as a sinner and deceiver and becomes a cause of her suffering. Indu gradually realizes that she doesn't exist for her but for Jayant, the archetypal male. She feels in her a sense of existential insecurity. As a tragic woman, she rails at her family and the patriarchal world where a girl is "never claimed" and "set apart from the others" (81).

Indu ultimately realizes that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant. Naren, with whom she develops an adulterous relationship, is nothing more than a mere shadow to her. He has no permanent place in her memory. Hence she decides to go back to Jayant.

Indu struggles hard to understand the life in reality, 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. And when she talks of such feelings to him, he would call it only "nonsense" and nothing else. This becomes the crux of the problem. Jayant never bothers to understand what she really wanted, what her feelings are. To be precise, we can say that there is no real communication between them. She toys with the idea of leaving Jayant when she sees that there no real understanding between them. But then again her questioning mind questions as to why she is in a confused state mind. This is the main trouble with Indu. She is willing to wound but afraid to strike. As a result of this, instead of leaving Jayant, she goes back to him with the vain hope that things will change.

Indu's self-discovery is the frightening vision of the feminine self's struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval, and decides to lead a meaningful life with her husband. The home she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace, an consolation. It is Akka's house, which offers her ample opportunities to know herself. it is here she is able to discover her roots as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother, and a commercial writer. She brings to see life in a new light: " Yes, the house had

been a trap too, binding me to a past I had to move away from. Now, I felt clear, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary uneven edges of me” (204).

Indu now feels a sense of hope for existence. Negating the idea of non-existence, she says: “No, there is no such thing. To accept it will be to deny the miracle of life itself, if not this stump, there is another, if not this tree there will be others. Other trees will grow, other airs... I felt as if I was watching life itself. . . Endless, limitless, formless and full of grace”(202).

One can see her failure as her new efforts are also rooted in dishonesty. Indu’s mind is torn between two extremes. On the one hand, she is so attached to her parental house 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 out to be a “caged place” “a trap, and the family a “large amorphous group of people with conflicting interests.” She is always in a confused state of mind and is struggling with the situation to reach a final solution.

The novel ends with a note of affirmation. Indu asserts her individuality as a woman and also as a partaker in the endless cycle of life. Through the character of Indu, Deshpande has registered her awareness of the arrest of feminine development brought about by an economic, produce in women dependency, insecurity, lack of autonomy. and an incomplete sense of their identity. Indu lives to see life with the possibilities of growth; she has discovered the meaning of the life in her journey to individuation.

Thus Deshpande has very minutely and exquisitely pinpointed the inner struggle and sufferings of the new class of Indian women through the character of Indu. who has raised many basic questions regarding modern women who are rooted and shaped by the Indian customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the West. There was a time when the Indian woman was hailed as a “Pativrata”, “a Sati,” and something, which has to be protected by man, but now she is a changed person who is aware of the stirrings of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality. and her place and role in the family and society is whether to reject and condemn her or to encourage and cooperate with her in her efforts to establish a new image.

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