

Thematic Study of Woman-Struggle for Her Identity in Shashi Deshpande's Novel

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Abstract— The present novel “Roots and Shadows” is Shashi Deshpande’s award winning novel. She is pretty famous novelist for the enlightenment of woman related issues. In this novel also, She explains very beautifully how a girl or a woman struggles for her individual identity. The story is based on the themes of tradition, family life, marriage, patriarchy, domestic abuse, self-delusion and adultery. The author has tried to display the complex web of interpersonal conflicts and interpersonal contradictions affect all our lives. Indu considers her education and wit as her medals of superiority but fails to show her strength in her individual battles. All her life she pretends to be a rebel but her life ends up being a summation of responses to others, be it retaliation against Jayant and Akka or persuasion of Naren and self-indulgence.

Keywords— struggle, individual identity, patriarchy, self delusion, adultery

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is one of the best novelists who threw a light on the issues that a girl or a woman faces in her daily life. She wrote a number of novels. Among them the present novel “Roots and Shadows” is her very favourite novel. It is an award winning novel. Shashi Deshpande’s *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is apparently the story of triumph and tragedy of a house wife. It tells the story not of an individual but of an institution which is threatened by the forces of change and faces dissolution. Akka, a grand old matriarch, is the presiding deity of this institution. She confesses peace and security on her willing subjects but deals ruthlessly with the rebellions and the recalcitrant. Caught in this vortex is Indu, the protagonist of the novel. She is sensitive, educated and liberated ‘new women’ of modern India, who questions and challenges Akka’s authority. She walks out from the house to seek fulfilment in her own personal way. Akka, however, remains unmoved by such spasmodic protests and refuses to slacken her grip as long as she lives. When she falls critically ill and realizes that her end is approaching, she chooses Indu as the heiress wills her entire property including the house in her name. Indu is duly informed of Akka’s illness and comes back to the family only to find that Akka is dying. She meets Akka and notices that even in the face of death there is a quiet dignity about her. ‘There was’, Indu recalls after her death, a triumphant gleam in them (Akka’s eyes) I could almost see her thought... I made, you come home, didn’t I?.

II. STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Essentially *Roots and Shadows*¹ explores the inner self of Indu who represents a set of modern ‘new women’ who are educated and are very much in contact with society dealing with the critical problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and above all individual identity.” She has the freedom to talk about anything she likes and is also free to think of her own caged self besides politics, corruption and what not. Married to Jayant, Indu freely talks and walks with Naren and uses such words as ‘kiss’, ‘rape’, ‘deflowered’, ‘organs’ and so on. O. P. Bhatnagar observes, “The novel deals with a woman’s attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with the male world and society in general.”

Indu comes back to her ancestral place from where she, against the wishes of Akka and the other members of the family, had escaped 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. At first they all looked to Akka for guidance till her death, and after that to Indu. Indu usurps the place of Akka till about the end — like Lily Briscoe in place of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. The home and hearth collapse when Akka is dead, and nobody can escape from her invisible presence in the form of memory that still reigns — a kind of Jungian archetypal mother. All other characters now become shadowy and children of the lost generation. Even Indu, who wants to “put a fight to save the house, the

family and to bring order, fails to assert herself and becomes adulterous and tainted.” Despite this the woman in her remains still oppressed in more than one way, although castration complex and penis envy make her overt sexually. Now she is not the motivated but the motivator who sees man as an object of her desire. Her sexual attraction to Naren is an example of this. As a woman she thinks motherhood not compulsory but optional. By rejecting womanhood she rejects the essentialist marking of certain social standards of femininity on woman. What is traditionally believed as natural to a woman is reversed.

Indu has been a determined girl, who always wanted to be free and independent. But, now, a number of questions come before her, which left her, puzzled and baffled. She is uncertain about the fact whether she has broken the strangle hold of family and tradition only to be dominated by love for her husband. She realizes a realistic understanding of love and marriage. She experiences a severe disillusionment of her desire of love and marriage and suffers a silent sexual humiliation. She herself holds,

“...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.”

Is Indu her own self ever when she is working or is it her tragedy never to be free or complete? She goes back to her parents’ home to find out 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, her own marriage based on love and so on. Now it is Indu’s turn to become a strong character. It is as if Akka knew the inner strength of Indu as ‘one of the strong ones’ that she ‘put the burden on me... to carry the burden’² with all her money left in Indu’s hand, money plays all important role to bridge the gender gap and raise, one’s position. Indu is determined to buy the house, get Mini married to a better man and not to the man chosen by Akka and others, lie in the house and do he writing help the old and the deserving and to be discriminated and more and more judicious. Above all she has to educate the woman. For all this she has wealth, intelligence and freedom. In her new position some people fear her, some hate her, and some other feel jealousy of her, and don’t accept her stepping “into Akka’s shoes ... or chappals”.³ Now she speaks from the pulpit with dissent note. She is able to negate all feminine limitations for transformation into creativity, the power to change others. And 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, ‘the refuge’ which ‘is hard to achieve.’

Besides being an educated modern woman, Indu is very sensitive to the situations. She aspires to become independent and complete in herself but finds so many hurdles coming in her way. She finds dominant Akka and to be a great hindrance to achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness. When she studies in the college, Akka doesn’t allow her to meet the boys and cultivate friendship with them. So, later on, Indu leaves the house as a rebellion and gets married to Jayant, a person of her own choice. We find that she leaves one house and enters another to be complete and independent, but ironically enough, soon she realizes the futility of her decisions: ‘Jayant and I ... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize.’⁴ She speaks about her own incompleteness thus:

This real sorrows that I can never be 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.⁵

Indu’s fondly cherished a dream, an ideal, and yearning to attain ‘detachment’ and ‘completeness’ comes to collapse and she faces disillusionment. Perhaps marriages have taught her things like deception artificial show.” Her desire to assert herself has 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 responses as if they were bits of garbage.’⁶ 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 can’t 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 Indu, she declares: ‘I essentially monogamous, for me, its one man and one man alone.’⁷ But later, she offers herself twice to Naren. And then 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”.⁸ 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 has done.

Indu tries to reason out each and every action. Her mind starts musing over the reasons for giving her body to Naren.

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self, an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it. *Roots and Shadows*, her first novel but published after *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *If I Die Today*, mark the beginning of the quest of woman for herself. The theme is continued in her later novel *That long Silence*. Deshpande's core concern is woman and her internal and external quest. In an interesting interview, Deshpande reveals that all her characters are concerned with their 'selves' and they learn to be 'honest' to them. Being true to one's self, not as being true in the sense that nature or culture demands of them, is the wisdom that Deshpande's protagonists learn.

Indu asserts that one should listen to the dictates of one's conscience and be true to one in speech as well as in action. As O. P. Bhatnagar says:

In the end, comes the realization that freedom lies in having courage to do what one believes is right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere to it. That alone can bring harmony in life.⁹

But, unfortunately she herself has failed to do so either for fear of failure or because of timidity. The very fact "makes her see herself as a sinner and deceiver and becomes a cause of her suffering".¹⁰ She conceals the real self without being conscious of it and feels herself cheated and lost in the mesh of tradition.

Another ambition or ideal dream for Indu is to attain the state of 'detachment' and 'loneliness' and be perfect in herself. To achieve this she had met Naren her reference group. She always wanted to be like Naren — completely detached and non-involved. However, she wonders if she would ever reach the stage of no passions and ambitions and being satisfied. To her surprise, she finds herself involved and attached in many ways. She expects other to show concern for her, e.g., she wishes that her parents invite them (Indu and Jayant) formally to their place though her father does not find it necessary to give a formal invitation. In the same way, she expects too much from Jayant, which result in frustration:

I'm grading expectation down. Each month, each day, I expect less and less and less from ... why can't I compromise for what he can give ... deep affection; yes; total, absolute commitment.¹¹

On one occasion, her father talks of having met Jayant, she asks him how he was. And the answer is : 'wonderful, wonderful, wonderful'.¹² At this Indu just burns in anger as what she expected to hear was that Jayant was pining for

love. Similarly, when Naren says that he is going back to his work, the word, 'going' disturbs her and she feels like a 'deserted, abandoned child'.¹³ She feels fairly, attached to Naren as she thinks that it is only Naren who has achieved the state of detachment.

Indu earnestly dreams to be detached and independent, but to no avail. Her dreams always derive her to her disillusionment. She feels ashamed of herself when she does not see the things in a practical form. She tells Naren:

I'm still and dead. And now when you tried to kiss me, I thought... this is Jayant. So that's all I'm, Naren. Not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife.¹⁴

On the one hand, she is ashamed of not being a pure woman, but on the other hand, she hates her womanhood. She stops working for woman magazine:

"Woman, woman, woman... I got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. And as if we had locked ourselves in a cage and thrown away the keys." (85-86).

In fact, she started hating and fighting against the womanhood since the day she was made aware of being a woman by the elder women in the family. The thrusting upon attitude by the society in general and the family members in particular has made her more rebellious and aggressive. She looks at each situation from the same angle. She starts doubling:

"I had some time loved Jayant. But between the idea and reality there is an immeasurable distance."¹⁵

A woman relating to others, needs tendency to detract her form, her own sense of identity. Indu feels herself as if she has become so fluid that she has no tangible shape, no form of her own. It is Indu who minuses the 'I' which renders her an ideal woman — 'a woman who sheds her 'I', who loses her identity in her husband's'.¹⁶ She is a woman who bears everything without a drop of tear. Marriage reduced her to a "total surrender"¹⁷ through Indu, the novelist voices her own views on marriage:

"It's a trap... that's what marriage is a trap, a cage? ... a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other."¹⁸

A woman's experience is primarily through interpersonal, usually domestic and filial relationships. Her identity exist "largely as being-for-others (needing to please; narcissist vanity; and deriving security from her intimacy with other) rather than being for itself."¹⁶ Indu experiences herself as a woman given to physical narcissism in her self-reflexive concern with the body; often 'looking in the mirror',¹⁹ she tries to trim herself up to please Jayant and to please her

narcissist self. She loves being ‘looked at’.²⁰ In this context it would be pertinent to present what John Berger bears.

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself... She has to survey everything she is and everything she does... Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another... Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at ... The surveyor woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”²¹

Indu fails to establish emotional rapport with Jayant for “it shocks him to find passion in woman. It puts him off”.²² Indu’s is the paradoxical situation in which Indian women are enmeshed. Indu leads an ambivalent life. She cherishes within her heart profound dreams to dwell freely in the domain of man-dominated society and culture, but her dreams are crushed carelessly and she has to face disillusionment. Yet her questioning mind questions as to why she is in a confused state of 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 thing will change. Her mind unrolls thus:

To 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. Nevertheless I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me.”²³

Indu ultimately realises 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 permanent place in her memory.”²⁴ Hence, she decided to go back to Jayant. It is she, she feels, who is to blame for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of heaven. She, being narcissist, “had locked herself in a cage and thrown away keys.”²⁵ She herself that marriage had stunted and hampered her individuality because she has regarded it as a ‘trap’ and not as a bond.

So we see that with all her so-called modern ways and rationality that Indu had been so proud of, she cannot avoid the trap of culture and convention. She discovers to her consternation and dismay that she herself, in spite of all her fiery self-importance and zeal for guarding her identity, is an anachronism. Even love through which she had sought liberation had gradually fallen into place, leading to

invisible but extremely excruciating cracks and chasm in her relationship with Jayant. Contrary to her romantic fantasies Jayant turned out to be a man like any other. She acknowledges the final, and probably inevitable, falsity of her dreams and fantasies, which forces her to face the fair disillusionment. And she is bound to bear the bare reality but with a sense of boldness and brevity.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, in *Roots and Shadows* we hear a woman speak — speak through her body, through her conscious and sub-consciousness, and through her pen. Thus Deshpande has very 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 Indian women who are rooted and shaped by Indian culture and customs but influenced by the scientific knowledge of the West. There was a time when the Indian woman was hailed as ‘a Parvati’, ‘a Sati’. But now she is a changed person who is aware of the stirring of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality, her place and role in the family and society.

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