

Exposition of Marriage, Joint-family System, Infidelity, Class and Caste Relations in *Roots and Shadows* by Shashi Deshpande

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is a leading woman novelist in Indian writing in English. She has written seven novels and four collections of short stories. In her novels she gives us a realistic portrait of middle class educated Indian women who are self -confident, self-reliant and financially self-dependent. Such women are the protagonists of her novels, they get trapped between tradition and modernity, they undergo great mental trauma, they face the problems of adjustments and conflicts and then they go in self- quest or a quest for their identity. When they start their journey for self-quest, they face sundry outer and inner conflicts, but they do not bother for the restrictions imposed by society, culture and nature and they get rid of their own fear and guilt.

Roots and Shadows is one of the important novels of Shashi Deshpande and it was awarded the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize for the best English novel published in India during 1982-83. This novel explores the inner conflicts of its female protagonist Indu who is an educated, modern young woman. She aspires to become independent and complete, she tries her best to create her own identity or to assert her own individuality, but finds so many hurdles coming in her way. She finds dominant Akka and her family to be a great hindrance to achieving her goal of attaining independence and completeness. So she leaves the house and gets married to Jayant who is her own choice. She leaves one house and enters another to be independent and complete, but ironically enough, soon she realizes the futility of her decisions. She feels that she has achieved completeness with Jayant, but she does not want this sort of completeness because she feels that she has lost her identity after marriage.

Keywords: Conflict, Tradition, Exploitation, Quest, Completeness, Identity.

The story revolves around the female protagonist Indu and uses the first person narrative. The story foregrounds the dynamics in an Indian, Brahmin, joint family and all its conflicts, compromises and peculiarities. Indu's mother dies at childbirth and his father Govind, a photographer, leaves her in the care of his old aunt, Akka and his brother, Kaka (for Indu, real name Anant) who live in their ancestral home. Akka is the matriarch and rules the house with a whip.

Apart from Anant and Govind, there is Atya (real name the Narmada, widowed sister), Sunanda (sister) and two more brothers (Madhav and Vinayak) with their wives and kids. She has to continue the frustrating job of writing for the magazine just to keep her husband happy

and satisfied. She faces intense conflicts in her mind and lays bare her soul as well as her body before Naren, her cousin. She indulges in sexual act with Naren with much wild abandon and cherishes it later without any guilt consciousness. She gains self-confidence after a series of conflicts or confrontations and it is with total understanding that she takes a decision to go back to Jayant. After a series of conflicts her quest for identity is complete and she hopes that she would do what she thinks right and not be dishonest to her inner self.

Indu grows up as a rebellious and pugnacious kid who wants to do things according to her fancy and understanding. She finally succeeds in her endeavour when she leaves the house at age of 18 and later marries a man of his own choice, Jayant. She works as a writer in a magazine but wishes to take up a different form of writing which would satiate the novelist inside of her. She is a doting wife and almost as dutiful and self-effacing as the domesticated housewives she always resented. She hides her dependence on Jayant and the hypocrisy of her emotions and actions builds a stream of angst and guilt inside of her. At the age of 29, she returns to her family house as Akka is on her deathbed. The fact the two had not spoken for 10 years and never really saw eye to eye, Indu is surprised when she learns that Akka wants to bequeath all her property and wealth to her. She hides the information from the rest of the family up until her final rites when the probate lawyer, Shayamarao reads Akka's will to the entire family. They all are shocked to see that Indu, a familial pariah, was given everything. Indu's cousin Padmini or Mini is supposed to get married and Akka promised to pay for it. So, Indu feels obligated to honour the said promise. As for the house, apart from Kaka and Atya, everyone wants it to be sold and receive their own share of the spoils.

All this while, Indu is distressed about her relationship with Jayant as he restricts her attachment with her to some placid and dispassionate letters. In her desperation, she even commits adultery with one of her cousins and close friend Naren who is the only grandson of the Old Uncle (cousin of Akka). Naren is a self-indulgent and carefree vagabond who was never accepted by the family. He was orphaned in childhood and only has his grandfather to call his own. In the end, Naren succumbs to his private devils and commits suicide.

The family is distraught over the tragedy especially the Old Uncle (his grandfather) and Indu. She even learns about the tragic life story of Akka as a 12-year-old bride, abusive marriage, her husband's concubine and widowhood. She realizes her lack of knowledge and will to understand Akka and her rules bred their asperity toward each other. Shaken by Naren's death but unaffected by her own foibles, Indu decides to discharge the responsibility Akka had loaded on her shoulders. She decides to fund Mini's marriage and to sell the house (and give everyone their share). She also decides to return to Jayant, her husband, and confess her infidelity. She hopes that their relationship can withstand the trial of such scorching honesty and even if it doesn't she would find peace in the confession of her sin. 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.

Roots and Shadows is the first novel of Shashi Deshpande and this novel depicts the tribulations and suffocation experienced by Indu, the female protagonist in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Indu faces confrontation or conflict with the family, with the male world and the society in general and amidst these adverse circumstances she goes in the quest of her identity and tries her best to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. The present paper aims at evaluating the intensity of conflict in Indu's mind and her intense quest for her identity.

Commenting on Roots and Shadows O.P. Bhatnagar remarks: "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 male-dominated society" (P 22).

Indu is a middle-class young girl brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family. She rejects the rituals that are vestiges of the past. She tries to explore the inner conflict of herself. She is a representative of modern educated women and she is very much in contact with the society and broods over the critical problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and individuality or identity. She reviews everything with reason. She makes an analysis of the ideals of detachment and freedom and strives to achieve them. She pays attention to the voice of her conscience and revolts. She breaks away from her family out of resentment and marries for love in order to assert her freedom. Like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu returns to her ancestral home after a gap of eleven years to attend her cousin Mini's marriage. She had left home at the age of eighteen to marry the man she loved. She returns on being invited by Akka, the domineering matriarch as she is on her deathbed. Akka has made her the sole heiress to her property and this has infuriated the other members of family and thus the atmosphere of the household becomes charged with resentment and dissatisfaction.

Shashi Deshpande gives a graphic description of a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household, and the various women characters, their greed, jealousy, hopes, fears, disappointments, and their agony. Indu's great grandfather had built the ancestral house years ago and four generations of the family lived there. It was an ancient family over which ruled like a tyrant "ruthless, dominating, bigot and inconsiderate Akka".

Akka is rich and childless, and decides to stay in her brother's house after her husband's death. She is an orthodox, a representative of the old order, an ardent believer in casteism and untouchability, and that is why she refuses to move into a hospital, as she says,

"God knows what caste the nurses are or the doctors. I could not drink a drop of water there". She reduced Kaka, even after he had become a grandfather himself, to a "red-faced stuttering school boy by her venomous tongue." And Kaka took it all with his lips sealed because in his generation elders were to be feared, respected and obeyed. Right from her childhood Indu realized that the women were occupying the secondary place in the family. She was taught how to behave and how to conduct herself in society (P 34).

Even a simple thing, like sending a cup of tea for her to the room, was supposed to be a breach of etiquette. As she tells, "sending up a cup of tea for a woman. Whoever heard of it?" Women, like children, were supposed to know their place. She writes, "As a child, they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be weak 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 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.” For a woman intelligence was always a burden. They liked their women not to think, not to make their own identity. And when old uncles had wanted Saroja to learn music, Akka opposed tooth and nail: “What learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like THOSE women? Are we that kind of family? Isn’t it enough for you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two aarti songs? What more does a girl from a decent family need to know?” (P 55)

Indu revolted against all this subjugation and suppression. They told her, “there had to be, if not the substance, at least the shadow of submission.” But she cared a fig for them. She had received English education and was well aware of the rights and duties of modern women, so she was unable to dance to the tune of the family. She had taken an oath that she would never pretend to be what she was not. And so it appeared as if she had been imbibing “I won’t” since her birth.

It is from Narmada Atya that Indu gets a peep into Akka’s life after her death. Akka got married at the age of twelve. She was small, dainty and beautiful, and she had a round face and her skin was fair, her nose straight and her hair curly, but her husband was thirty year old, he was tall and bulky and he had coarse features. Akka arrived at her husband’s house after six months.

At that time she was thirteen, being a teen-ager she was not familiar with the ways of the world, so she tried to run away from her husband’s house twice, but she was not successful. Her mother-in-law could not tolerate it, she locked her up in a room for three days, thrashed her and did not give anything to eat and drink. After three days she was sent to her husband’s room. She had a horrifying experience, she started crying and told her mother-in-law with tearful eyes,

“Lock me up again, lock me up.” But as Akka told Narmada that she had to submit before her husband and that there was no escape. She opens her heart before the consummation of her marriage and tells Narmada: “Now your punishment begins Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels” (77).

In My Story Kamala Das says, “Every middle-class bed is a cross on which the woman is crucified..... Men fall in lust, not love. Women crash in real self-destroying love.”(P3). For child brides in those days sex was a kind of punishment, a kind of brutality against which they could not raise their voice and continued to suffer in silence. This long silence prompted men successfully and brutally to establish their ascendancy over women in society. Thus the novelist castigates the weaknesses of women, their proclivity towards submission and their habit of silent suffering.

The novelist is not a militant feminist, so she does not hold only men responsible for all the problems and pains of women. We see a silver lining in Akka’s character when her husband is struck by total paralysis. She serves her husband, gives him medicine and meal at appropriate time and takes excellent care for two years, but she has not forgotten the tortures

of her husband, so she decides to take revenge on him. She does not allow his concubine, whom he loves passionately, to meet him and kicks her out of door. She is grieved to remember her sleepless and nightmarish nights, no night passed without tears. The novelist is of the view that arranged marriages are discriminatory towards women and that women do not get proper respect and place.

A husband is always in a position to enjoy the illicit company of other women for his physical and mental satisfaction, but the society does not permit a woman to fall in love with another person—her act is branded adultery. Neena Arora aptly remarks: “This condemnation is dictated by man’s interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration.” Indu wants to attain independence and completeness, but she finds dominant Akka and her family to be a great impediment. When she studies in the college, Akka does not allow her to meet the boys and cultivate friendship with them. She reprimands her for talking to a boy in the library. So later on she leaves the house and gets married to Jayant who is her own choice. We feel that she bids farewell to one house and steps in another house to be independent and complete, 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.”(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 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).

Indu laughs at the idea of not calling one’s husband by his name as it shortens the age of the husband. She fails to understand the connection between a man’s longevity and his wife calling him by name. For her it is as bad as praying to the tulsi to increase his life span. But she oscillates between tradition and modernity. She finds her roots in the age-old tradition or custom, she is not able to break herself free from the clutches of tradition. She painfully realizes that despite her education and exposure she was no different from the women who moved round the tulsi plant to increase their husband’s life span.

Even her husband who is educated and apparently a modern man is only a typical Indian husband. He likes a submissive and passive wife. His wife tries her best to keep him happy and satisfied. She does not like the frustrating job of writing for the magazine, Research Journal of English Language and Literature but she continues the job just to keep her husband happy. During her career she comes to know about a social worker who had received an award for social services. She wrote an article on her because she was very much influenced by the soft-spoken woman, her seemingly sincere and dedicated behaviour. But that social worker turns out to be diametrically opposite what Indu thinks her to be. She is ruthless and unscrupulous and always in the pursuit of fame, power and money.

Indu reads another article against the woman and shows it to her worldly wise editor, but he rejects the story written against the woman. She is shocked to see the woman’s hypocrisy and the editor’s attitude; she goes to her husband and tells him everything. Her husband is steeped in middle-class values and he says that he cannot change the whole system and asks her to continue her job for money. She starts writing what suits the magazine and not her own

conscience. She makes a compromise with the situation just to keep her husband in good humour and realizes that in a hypocrite society success is counted sweetest. You will have to get success by hook or crook even if you compromise against your conscience. Slowly but surely Indu realizes the absurdity of the existence.

Marriage has changed her. To her great shock and surprise she finds that Jayant had not only expected her to submit but had taken her submission for granted and she also, without being aware of it, submitted herself to him step by step in the name of love. She realizes that it is not love but an adjustment because she never wants conflict in her married life. She has done love marriage, so she does not want to give any chance to her parents to blame her for the step taken by her. She wants to prove her success.

We see her pathetic state: 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.....And so I went on lying, even to myself. (P115).

Here the novelist has very rightly and minutely put forth the situation in which young modern women, who are sandwiched between tradition and modernity, who leave behind the conventions and take the initiatives to join modernity, are entangled. Indu is of the view that one should pay attention to the dictates of one's conscience and be true to oneself in speech as well as in action.

There is some sort of natural relationship and easy compatibility between Indu and Naren. Indu lays bare her soul before Naren several times, but she lays bare her body before him twice in the novel. She indulges in sexual act with him and enjoys sensual pleasure with much wild abandon and cherishes it later without any guilt consciousness.

She thinks: I can go back and lie on my bed. I thought, and it will be like erasing the intervening period and what happened between Naren and me. But deliberately I went to my bed and began folding the covers. I don't need to erase anything I have done, I told myself in a fit of bravado.(168).

She decides that she will not tell Jayant anything regarding her incestuous relation with Naren. It has nothing to do with her husband. For her it is an exercise of autonomy within marriage. This assertion of herself has sparked off contradictory remarks from the reviewers. P. Bhatnagar views Indu's adultery as something shocking, while another critic P. Ramamoorthy does not view her adultery as something negative but as something stemming from the predicament of the compulsive circumstance women like Indu find themselves in.

This novel Shashi Deshpande explodes the myth of man's unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. *Roots and Shadows* ends with affirmation of the identity or individuality of Indu and also the principle of life that is endless. Through the image of the tree, the novelist 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. She gains self-confidence after a series of conflicts or confrontations and it is with total understanding that she takes a decision to go back to Jayant. After a series of conflicts her quest for identity

is complete and she hopes that she would do what she thinks right and not be dishonest to her inner self. She has confronted her real self and she knows her roots. Now she is a changed person who is well aware of the stirrings of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality, her place and her role in the family and society.

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