

The Role of Men in Indu's Discovery of Her True Self in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract

The Indian woman novelist Shashi Deshpande is very much concerned about the issues of a middle-class woman. She earnestly depicts her struggle for the search of her true identity. In her novel *Roots and Shadows*, the protagonist Indu finds herself alienated when she refuses to follow the rigid norms imposed by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings nothing but disappointment. She realizes that her educated and apparently progressive minded husband is not different from the average Indian male. She feels extremely bad when she finds that she has been unconsciously aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. She persistently tries to find her true self.

Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self that frantically longed for self-expression, finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realization and discovery of her authentic female self.

The men in her life play a significant role in her journey of self-discovery. Jayant, her husband, and Naren, her friend unknowingly help her find her true identity. Her father and the Old Uncle also play a vital role in shaping her character.

Paper

Shashi Deshpande, though not an avowed feminist, occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle. Her novels usually have an unconventional marriage leading to the issues of alienation, accommodation and adjustment on the part of the female protagonists. These women, however, disown a

ritualistic and tradition-bound life in order to explore their true self. “Concerned with quest for an authentic selfhood and an understanding of the existential problems of life, Deshpande's heroines are all agog to retain their individuality in the teeth of disintegrating and divisive forces that threaten their identity.” (Swain 1998: 86)

In the novel *Roots and Shadows*, the protagonist Indu finds herself alienated when she refuses to conform to the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings only disillusionment when she comes to know that her educated and apparently progressive minded husband is not different from the average Indian male. She is even contemptuous of herself when she realizes that she has all along been unconsciously aping the model of the ideal Indian wife. The novel gains its feminist stance from Indu's persistent exploration of herself as an individual.

Indu is the daughter of Govind, Akka's defiant nephew. Akka did not approve of his marriage as Indu's mother did not belong to their caste. Soon after the birth of Indu, her mother died. Her father left her with the family and forgot to take due care of her. Indu thinks that her father did not take care of her as she was a girl. But the fact is her father sets her apart by sending her to an English medium school. This education shapes her identity differently.

Indu, a merely fifteen-days-old child, was warmly welcome by the family. Anantkaka, Narmadaatya and Kaki never allowed her to feel the absence of her parents. As a child and an adolescent, Indu was a horror, a monster with her devastating honesty and insatiable desire to know. Her uncle Vinayakkaka says that she was shy, awkward, rude and disobedient.

Old Uncle is a friend, a confidant, an ally to Indu. He has always been a refuge for her. He and Naren constantly remind her (Indu) that she has no right to judge anyone. He has always been a father confessor for her.

Indu hates and challenges Akka's domination and too much authority. She revolts against Akka and decolonizes herself by marrying Jayant who is of a different caste and speaks a different language. She rebels against Akka's tyranny and withdraws herself from the family and gets detached from the family matters. But the marriage smothers all her wishes to be happy, complete and independent. She starts feeling suffocated.

After eleven years of her escape, she is summoned to the ancestral house by Akka as she was on her deathbed. Indu takes the opportunity to go away from her crushing married life. Her search for her true 'self' started from the ancestral house ends at the ancestral house itself. She reconsiders her relationships with her family members and with her husband Jayant too. The incidents and people there make her see the things in their right shape.

Akka gives all her property and the responsibility of the ancestral house to Indu through her will. After the death of Akka, her will creates commotion in the family. Akka has deliberately put Indu in such a situation that she cannot escape the family any more. Indu is treated differently after the declaration of Akka's will. On one hand, Indu curses Akka for doing this to her. She says, "Akka has played a dirty trick on all of us." (90) But on the other hand, she is thrilled with her new role. "And it's a wonderful feeling, holding all the answers in my hand." (84) Jayant thinks that Indu is indomitable. "Perhaps you (Indu) are like her (Akka)." (16) The idea aghasts Indu. She remembers Akka: "... I can play your game as well. Domination." (87) Indu, thus, finds her new self ready to take decisions for the family and for herself.

Kaka's sons feel jealousy for Indu. Sharad, the youngest, gives way. He says that Indu's reputation in the family is formidable. "You're the standard set up for us luckless youngsters. We're always measured against your stature... And let me tell you frankly, we fail miserably." (45) Indu appropriates every opportunity to flaunt her newly-acquired power. When she discovers that she has become the standard against which everyone in the family is measuring himself/ herself, she becomes ecstatic.

After marriage, to her great shock and surprise, Indu found that Jayant has not only expected her to submit but has taken her submission for granted. She also, without being aware of it, submitted herself to him step by step in the name of love. "To belong, to be wanted, needed, loved, desired, admired... how many traps there are! And I fall into all of them." (34) When the realization came to her, she found it was not love but an adjustment as she never wanted conflict in her married life. Perhaps, marriage has taught her the things like deception and artificial show: "She was bewildered to find that her desire to assert herself had driven her from affection to hypocrisy." (Bhatnagar 2001: 43)

She expresses her disillusionment in marriage: "Jayant and I... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasize. I think of the cries that had filled me

earlier... I want to be loved, I want to be happy. The cries are now stilled. Not because I am satisfied, or yet hopeless, but because such demands are now seem to me to be an exercise in futility.” (23) As she is a woman, Indu is asked to be obedient and unquestioning; meek and submissive. She is asked to accept everything with grace. It is the only way for a female to live and survive. And, she finds it to be true. “There had to be, if not the substance, at least the shadow of submission.” (144-145)

Indu has always thought that she would never pretend to be what she is not. “But my marriage had taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see. To say to him nothing but what he wanted to hear. I hid my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage.” (43-44)

Indu talks about their physical relationship: “Jayant, so passionate, so ready, sitting up suddenly and saying, ‘No, not now’, when I had taken the initiative.” (81) It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. Therefore, when Indu tries to initiate, Jayant turns away from her. Indu has learnt a lesson now. So, she pretends. She becomes passive and unresponsive; still and dead. She tells Naren that she is not a pure woman nor a faithful wife. “But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it.” (82)

What she (Indu) wants is freedom from the past, from responsibility and from obligation. 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. Indu cannot show any weakness.

Indu constantly fights against her womanhood. While talking to Naren, she gives the reason. The knowledge of womanhood was gracelessly and brutally thrust on Indu the day she “grew up”. Indu, being highly unconscious about her own body, felt immense hatred for it. And then, the idea of uncleanness came. She was prohibited to touch anything or anyone for four days. “And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being woman. I was unclean.... I felt hedged in, limited by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me.” (78)

On one hand, she hates her womanhood. But on the other hand, she is ashamed of her not being a pure woman. She struggles hard to understand the life in reality, the actual cause which is destroying her married life. Jayant is completely indifferent to her sentiments, feelings and wishes. There is no real communication between them. This is the crux of the problem. As Sandhu puts it: “She is willing to wound but afraid to strike.” (Sandhu 1991: 34)

“This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself... that there was, somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant. And lost the ability to be alone.” (38) At the initial stage of their relationship, Jayant was an ideal man for Indu. She found her dream-man in him. “The day I had met him, a burden, the weight of uncertainty, had fallen off me. There had been an absoluteness, a certainty instead.” (50) “I had thought I had found my alter ego in Jayant. I had felt that in marrying him, I had become complete... And in Jayant, I had thought, I had found the other part of my whole self. Not only that, but total understanding. Perfect communication. And then, I had realized this was an illusion. I had felt cheated.” (108)

Jayant betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. Nor is he ‘a sheltering tree’ to her. Instead, she finds that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant’s masculinity – by becoming his wife. Willingly she yields to the demands of marriage and moulds herself up to the dictates of her husband. “We’re on different planes. He chooses his level. And I... I try to choose the one he would like me to be on. It humiliates me. And Naren, it was I who proposed to him.” (81)

Indu surrenders just because she does not want conflict. The hideous ghost of her own cowardice confronts her. She has clung tenaciously to Jayant, to her marriage, not for love alone, but because she is afraid of failure. She wants to prove that she is not wrong in finding a life partner. “And so I went on lying, even to myself, compromising, shedding bits of myself along the way.” (145) The bitter facts of losing her identity into her husband’s frighten her. “Marriage threatened to rob Indu of herself.” (131) The paradox of the situation is that she is not happy with Jayant but at the same time, she cannot live without him. She wants Jayant and at the same time, hates herself for wanting him so much.

“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 pressurised me into this. It's the way I want it to be... Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own?... Am I on my way to becoming an ideal woman? A woman who sheds her 'I', who loses her identity in her husband's?" (53-54)

To her, love is a big fraud, a hoax. One believes in it and falls into the trap and becomes dependent. According to her, the truth is "The sexual instinct... The maternal instinct ... Self-interest, self-love they're the basic truths." (144) She says about love: "It seems to me an overworked word, overburdened by the weight we put upon it." (86)

Indu experiences disillusionment in marriage and sex. She suffers a silent sexual humiliation. Therefore, she feels no guilt for her act of adultery. She experiences a sense of sexual autonomy. She arrives at a realistic perception of love as physical instinct. She tries to evolve a new code of sexual ethics.

Indu involves with Naren physically twice. Both the time, she wants to have it. Before and after that, when Naren tries for that, she denies firmly twice. She says: "I am essentially monogamous." (80) "For me, it is one man and one man only." (18)

During the act of love-making with Naren, Indu feels that she does not have to hold herself back. This feeling gives her a great relief. She experiences the true ecstasy. After the act, she feels an intense fever for activity. She says to Naren that she needs a bath. She does not go to bed once again as she does not want to erase anything from her memory. She is in a fit of bravado. "I liked to imagine myself a daredevil." (115)

After making love to Naren, Indu comments about her sari: "Thank God for synthetic material. Uncrushable. You can lie on the ground with a man and get up uncreased. Nothing shows." (79) This is evident of the striking fact that the physical relationship of Indu and Naren does not create any new bond between them. It has not been so for her with Jayant. With his touch, she has felt as if she has lost not only part of herself but the whole. But Naren's detachment makes her feel untouched. There are no lingering feelings to make them uncomfortable. There is no difference in the way they behave with each other – the same ease, the same acrimonious bickering, the same moments of sudden understanding and laughter.

Indu has duality in her nature. On one hand, she thinks that she has done nothing wrong. She does not want to forget anything from the act of adultery. But on the other hand, she wants to have a bath to make herself clean. She thinks that we should not associate carnal desires with guilt or shame. She visits the place of adultery next morning.

In the morning after Indu's act of adultery, Atya comments, "You've made yourself dirty." (140) The comment has double meaning for Indu which makes her think about the act. Suddenly she thinks about the enormity of her act. "Adultery... what nuances of wrongdoing....no, it needs the other, stronger word ... what nuances of *sin* the word carries." (142) She says that she will now brood on her sin, be crushed under a weight of guilt and misery. But her mind beings, coldly and analytically to think of what she has done. She thinks with a kind or remorseless logic, a detached objectivity as if she is thinking of some other person. Indu thinks that bodily desire is one of her private devils. It traps her. But by having committed adultery, she has driven out that devil.

Indu shares a different kind of relationship with Naren. He addresses her as an "opportunistic, mercenary young woman." (83) He asks her if she has poisoned Akka to get her property. Indu viciously says, "I wish I had poisoned her." (84) He is surprised to know that in spite of sharing mutual hatred for each other, Akka has made Indu her heir. After knowing Akka's will, Naren calls her "the golden goose".

Naren brings Indu out of her pretenses. He makes her lose control over herself. She feels something different for Naren. She is afraid to face it, to reveal it. Naren makes her realize that she lacks the quality of courage. She needs steadfastness. He gives her the simplicity of will.

Naren is a challenge to her. She accepts it and lets herself go. And with it a sudden relief comes over her. Suddenly she comes to know what is wrong with her marriage. She realizes that she has surrendered to Jayant not for love but just to avoid conflict. She wants to show the family that her marriage has been a success. She is afraid of failure. Therefore, she has continued to lie and compromise shedding bits of herself along the way. She has sworn proudly that she would never pretend. But she has started pretending before Jayant by not revealing to him her whole self but revealing only that which he wants to see. In doing so, she has wronged both – her own self as well as Jayant.

It is Naren, who by his touch of love discovers Indu to herself gives her the experience of release from shadow existence and be her “real” self. “With Naren, I would never have to pretend. He would not be affected by my rejection...I wanted involvement, not detachment...When Naren touched me, I had felt as if I had found out one more piece of the jigsaw puzzle.” (86-87)

Her relationship with Naren brings many realizations to her. She realizes that there is nothing shameful in her need for Jayant and she needs not be ashamed of her body and sexual desires. It does not make her less of a human being. She comes to know that her love is not a restricting bond but a uniting bond. It will enable her to create harmony in life. For that, she must stop pretending. She must reveal to him her whole self with all her weaknesses, strengths, virtues and vices. All of a sudden, her vision becomes clear and she comes to know what she must do.

To Indu the concept of a successful marriage is a hoax and she insists that nothing should be judged. A perfect understanding is based on “Don’t judge me. Don’t criticize me. Just appreciate me. See only my virtues, not my weaknesses.” (115) Indu charges Jayant that he knows nothing about her. He replies, “I know as much of you as you allow me to know.” (23) But after some time, Indu reveals the fact: “How could he understand me? Most of the times I can’t even understand myself.” (108)

Finally, Jayant comes to recognize her strength as well as weaknesses which she has hidden from him so far. There is a better understanding between them and an ease in their relationship that was not there before.

Indu firmly declares: “Now I would go back and see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty.” And in the next breath confesses: “Nevertheless, I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me for that was not important.” (205) The woman who resolves to start a new life based on honesty next moment revokes the vow by her unwillingness to share the secret with her husband.

The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her job, thus defying the male authority, hierarchy and the irony of a woman’s masked existence. She comes out of her emotional upheaval and decides to lead a meaningful life with her husband. She now wants “To live

without fear... fear of being unloved, misjudged, misunderstood, displeasing. Without the fear of failure.” (158) “I no longer fight my need of him. I am not ashamed of it.” (24)

Indu’s uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self that frantically longed for self-expression, finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realization and discovery of her authentic female self. “Even a compromise is one of the respectable choices that is developed as a survival strategy by Shashi Deshpande in her novels.” (Shitole 2009: 864)

She ultimately realizes that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant... It is she, she feels, who is to blame for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of a heaven. “But what of my love for Jayant, that had been a restricting bond, tormenting me, which I had so futilely struggled against? Restricting bond? Was it not I who had made it so? Torment? Had I not created my own torment?” (168)

“Here, in this house, in this family, was a role waiting for me. A role that I could, perhaps, act out more successfully than the one I had tried until now.” (132) She has often felt herself just a mouthing, grimacing puppet, dully saying the lines she has to say actually feeling nothing. She has felt herself flat, one-dimensional, just a blurred figure merging into the background. “Whereas here, I would stand out, sharp and clear. I would be most emphatically myself. Indu.” (132)

Till now she has looked upon Akka only as an inconsiderate and interfering old woman. But now she knows her better. She knows Akka has been a pillar of strength which has enabled her to act according to her beliefs. She has allowed nothing to come to her way. She knows she has to rise up to Akka’s expectations. She has chosen Indu as her heir because she believed Indu is capable of showing the same indomitable courage and strength and become a pillar like herself. Indu must show the courage and fulfill her obligations and responsibilities. She now understands and appreciates the truth told by Old Uncle that rules add grace and dignity to life. Within them, one is free to do what one likes.

Thus, Indu finds her true self...ready to accept her role and responsibility. Her father gave her education; her husband brings disillusionment regarding conjugal relationship and also

encourages her to publish on her own thereby asserting her real spirit; Naren indirectly helps her demonstrate courage to violate set norms and exercise freedom.

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