

## Treatment of Girl-child and Her Psychology in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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### Abstract

*Shashi Deshpande is one of the living dynamic writers in Indian English literature. As a living writer in India, Deshpande reflects a realistic picture of the contemporary middle class family life. Her writings transcend gender boundaries. Human issues are relevant in her writings. In his novels, Deshpande points out that the girl child is subjected to rigorous training which creates compunctions in her psyche expressing itself later as submissiveness, silence and passiveness, though they may be well- educated. A suggestion that emerges is that a change in the upbringing of the girl child is required. Deshpande wants to transform the society and she realizes the necessity for women's education and economic independence which can eradicate poverty. Her women are feminists- Indians in all respects, routed to their conservative culture. This paper is a humble attempt to critically study the development of girl- child in her novel Roots and Shadows.*

**Keywords:** Indian Writing in English, Girl Child, Feminism, Women's Education.

Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle-class, who are brought up in a traditional environment and are struggling to liberate themselves and seek their self- identity and independence. She is also the one and only contemporary writer who has given graphic details about the girl- child and her psychology. Most of her women are able to transcend their identity crisis by analyzing their childhood and the process of their upbringing. *Roots and Shadows* projects the educated women who are unable to enfranchise the traditional background in which they are reared. The crux of all the prevailing problems of women is their subjugation which is always present in the form of silent servitude. Their social conditioning generates slavish attitude which in turn creates compunctions in their psyche, when they decide to remould or change it. Since her childhood, the psyche of a girl-child is moulded in a particular fashion to inculcate in her all types of feminine qualities. Simone De Beauvoir writes, "One is not born but rather becomes, a woman [...]; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [...] described as feminine (267). Shashi Deshpande gives minute details of the development of girl- child in her novels. In *Roots and Shadows*, she has displayed a series of girl- children, where each girl faces a different problem within the family circle. Here, we have three main female characters and their girlhood- Mini, Akka and Indu.

All the traditional feminine qualities have been inculcated in Mini since her childhood. Devoid of any aim in her life, she devotes herself to her family members. Mini's obedience, silence and submission never allows her to go beyond the rules and regulations set by the family for girls. Brought up under strict supervision, guidance and restrictions, she becomes acquainted within the real duties of a girl at a very early age. Indu, her cousin, recalls Mini as a child: "Mini had always been very much of a girl was expected to be,

helping the women with small odd chores from a very young age, waiting on her father and brothers and being generally docile. Our worlds really touched” (R & S, 122). Indu contemplates on the existence of inner strength in the women of her family who have spent their whole life slavishly without a word of appreciation for their services. While following their footsteps Mini too accepts that the life of a girl is devoid of ‘choices’. Indu could gauge the reason behind Mini’s submission before her parents’ decision of getting her married to a man who was neither properly educated nor mentally sound. Indu states: “A woman’s life, they had told me, contained no choices.... 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 had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength” (R & S, 6).

Mini’s father Anant faces a financial crisis. With no jobs in his hands, his family depends on the cultivation of the land they possess. His sons having inclination towards office jobs were reluctant to look after the lands. Anant was aware that with his weak financial position, he won’t be able to get his daughter married. Financially, he agrees to marry Mini to a distant relative of Akka as she promises to pay for Mini’s wedding. In India, a girl’s marriage is consummated only after satiating the demands of the groom and his parents. Vrinda Nabar writes about the dowry system of India in *Caste as Woman*: “The bride’s father gives according to his means, frequently out of proportion to them, borrowing of necessary, since he believes that his daughter’s prestige and happiness are at stake. Ironically, no one who is party to such a transaction appears to wonder what happiness measured in these terms implies, or whether it exists at all, or is worth acquiring at that price” (160). Anant too accepts the proposal as he had no other option left before him. Mini is unwilling but in order to save her father from further complexities of her marriage, she poses a semblance of agreement and decides not to show her disagreement.

Women like Mini who are always involved in the fetishes of tradition and household work, have no other option but to remain satisfied with the things provided. Women are also toned or conditioned to merge their aspirations and desires with those of their family. Mini too absorbs the trend established by the elder women of her family. She has been prepared for looking after the house and Akka’s desire to educate her was not because of giving her an independent stand but because she feels that educated girls get a good match. Mini accepts, “Of course I am marrying him because there is nothing else I can do. I’m no good at studies. I never was.... 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?” (R & S, 125). Vrinda Nabar comments, “Moreover, even if we concede, that the girl is an alien in her father’s home, it is man-made laws and social strictures that make her so. Right from birth, a girl is made to feel like a bird of passage in her father’s home” (56-57). Mini’s psyche too was fed with this idea. Her parents’ growing concern to settle her marriage fills her with guilt- guilt for being a girl, guilt for remaining unmarried, guilt for being a burden on her family. She too feels humiliated when people rejected her on the pretext of her physical appearance or the manner of her dressing. After being interviewed and rejected several times, she loses all her buoyance and her enthusiasm towards marriage and her only wish is to get married at the earliest in order to save her parents from the imbroglio of groom hunt. She states: “Any man, Indu? Yes, any man. Any man who says “yes”. You don’t know what it’s been like. Watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhaav Kaka running around after eligible men” (R&S, 126).

Mini describes to Indu the efforts made by her Kakas and Kakis as well as her parents to wheedle and lure the boy and his family. Every time they rejected her, she felt downcast and blamed herself for putting her parents in distress. Mini expresses the reason behind her resolute silence and her inability to refuse the match fixed by her parents: “And finally, if everything was fine, there was dowry. You know nothing of this, Indu. You’re lucky. You escaped all this. And now, when someone has agreed, can I refuse and make Kaka go through all of it all over again?” (R&S, 126). Mini perceives her husband’s house as her final abode and her husband as an oracle. The Indian women have been accepting their husbands with their flaws and trying to live upon their desires and demands by transforming and moulding themselves. Their predecessors act as archetypes for them. They absorb the trends set by them which dictate the feminine qualities to be performed by women. Although these feminine qualities are imposed on them yet they find it difficult to free themselves from its bondage.

*Roots and Shadows* also presents another facet of deprived womanhood through the character Akka who is the youngest sister of Indu’s grandfather. Indu always defined her as a callous woman lacking compassion and mercy. Akka returns to her parental home as a rich widow after the death of her husband and since then saddles the whole family by establishing herself as a dictator and treating her family members as puppets. Akka’s formidable authority never allows people to peep into her life and understand her. It was Narmada-Atya, daughter of Indu’s grandfather, who tells Indu about the traumatic and pathetic girlhood of Akka. She had become the victim of the evils of patriarchal practices. At the age of twelve, she got married to a man who was much older than her. Child marriage stifles her childhood which expounds to her the real trauma of being a girl. Her soul of child withers when she has to tolerate the scathing and bestial sexual advances of her husband. Narmada- Atya narrates about panic- stricken Akka trying to escape her husband’s brutality:

But I heard that twice she tried to run away [...] a girl of thirteen. Her mother- in- law I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days. Starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband’s room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother- in- law saying, “Lock me up again, lock me up.” But there was no escape from a husband then. I remember her telling me before my own marriage was consummated, “Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels” (R& S, 69-70).

Akka’s husband was a wealthy man and he kept mistresses. Akka as a married woman was expected to bear children but she faces many miscarriages due to “the kind of life she led” (R&S, 70). Her mother- in- law makes her life miserable for her inability to give birth to a living child. The chains of traditional marriage are heavy and the escape routes are not available to a wife, who often seeks consolation and refuge in obsessions, masochisms or mental slavery often leading to her physical decay and death. The social ethos which has been to the continuity of women suppression sees to it that unacknowledged martyrdom becomes a part of a housewife’s existence. She is expected to subordinate her own needs to those of her family. She is supposed to bear her exploitation and suffering with willing fortitude. Akka too has to endure and submit to insults, injuries and humiliations with a stoic patience and never complain.

A change in Akka’s personality appears when her husband faces a stroke. She looks after him with great care and keeps him ‘spotless’ but neither permitted the woman to see him

nor submitted before her husband's desire to meet her. The situation has brought a change in her position. Earlier Akka was feeble, fragile and timid and so he saddled her but now he was dependent on the mercy of Akka thus she was not ready to succumb before his demands. She declares, "It's my turn now. I've listened to you long enough. She came here. Twice she wanted to see you. She cried and begged to be allowed to see you just for a short while. I threw her out. You'll never see her again" (*R&S*, 71). Since then Akka learned the technique of domination. She became aware of the principle of survival of the fittest and grasped full control of the family in her own hands. She knew that the world was made up of two types of people- powerful and weak and the powerful always ruled over the weak. Deshpande's narratives bear the authenticity of woman's signature. She has rejected the masculine dialect and the masculine perception of virtue, relationships, content and laid before us the subversive role of tradition in perpetuating the secondary role of women and emphasized the need of discrediting its legacies if women have to emerge as liberated and emancipated beings. Akka, in order to establish her supreme power over her family, hides her weaknesses and emerges as domineering woman and becomes the epitome of obduracy.

Indu, the female protagonist of the novel, has an estranged relationship with Akka. Like Mini, Indu too was advised by the elderly woman to inculcate in her the cherished feminine qualities as it is the only way to survive in male dominated families. But, Indu has her own dreams, and promises herself not to become their replica. She recalls:

As a child, they had told me I must be obedient and unquestioning. As a girl, they had told me I must be meek 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 had said. It is the only way, they said, for the female to live and survive. And I [...] had watched them and found to be true. There had to be if not the substance, at least the shadow of submission. But still, I had laughed at them, and sworn I would never pretend to be what I was not (*R&S*, 158).

Indu's mother belonged to a different caste which was not appreciated by her father's family. As a result, her father Govind developed revulsion and resentment towards them. After the death of his wife, he left his motherless daughter at the disposal of his family. Indu is shocked to see the rigidity in her father's attitude which made him unconcerned about his fatherly duties. She gauges her father as a callous person, "How else could he have parted leaving me, a fifteen- day old motherless baby, with the family he hated and despised? He had not even come to see me until I was more than a year old. But that, perhaps, was because I was a girl. If I had been a son [...]" (163).

Indu 'resented' her womanhood as she was made conscious of her femininity by the elder women of her family. The onset of puberty perplexes her and makes her conscious of her own body. Almost all the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels endure the restrictions of puberty imposed upon them. She also focuses on the customs and rituals meant for women which expects them to perform 'fasts' and 'prayers' to earn eternal wifedom as well as peace and harmony for their family. Indu too perceives the women of her family involved in various rituals to ensure longevity of their husbands' lives. She is also expected to perform them to secure good fortune. Indu too accepts life as a curse without a husband but she does not believe in the superstitious rituals supposed to save oneself from the widowhood. She is always accused of questioning the established norms and of being cleverer and more educated than her predecessors. She points out: "It had always been

thrown at me like an accusation. As if it was a disgrace to be clever. I had sobbed out my heart to Old Uncle one day. And he said ‘For a woman, intelligence is always a burden, Indu. We like our women not to think’” (R&S, 33). Indu went ahead with her education and went for an inter- caste marriage with Jayant, who was of her choice.

Again, like her mother she was segregated from the family for transgressing the traditional mode of settling marriages. Shashi Deshpande has given us the glimpse of the rigid system of marriage in India which is decided not on the basis of compatibility, but on the basis of caste, religion, and dowry. Indu speaks against the traditional mode of settling marriages when she sees Mini being pushed into an incompatible marriage by the elders. She accuses, “You’re leaving out that great incalculable [...] human emotions” (R&S, 98-99). In her marital life, Indu could not free herself from “the shadow of submission” (158). In her march towards emancipation and selfhood, the contemporary Indian woman has to struggle against the insensitive fatality of options and the indoctrination of centuries which silently yet persistently endeavours to fashion her into the mould of womanhood as defined and defiled by the society. “The true woman”, Simone de Beauvoir remarks, “is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. He presumed ‘instincts’ for coquetry, docility, are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man” (131). Indu moulds herself for Jayant and prevents herself from retaliating as it will certify her marriage as a failure. Indu foresees it and decides to hide the frictions of her marital life from her family. She analyses herself:

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. Show whom. The world, the family of course. And so I went on lying even to myself along the way. Which meant that I who had despised Devdas for being a coward, was the same thing myself. I had killed myself as surely as he had done (R&S, 158-59).

Indu concludes that as a life partner they always expected from each other to overlook their vices and appreciate their virtues. Indu accepts that she throttles her desires not because of Jayant’s pressure but it was her own decision with which she had given up her identity and individuality. Soon she realizes, “And one day I had thought [...] isn’t there anything I want at all? Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? At that moment a savage truth that had stared me in the face [...] without wants there is no ‘I’” (49).

Indu experiences a void, a hollowness in her life, even though it was shielded by the deceptively beautiful screen of her social graces and obligations. Her stream of consciousness makes it clear that even in the educated upper middle classes the intrinsic value of even highly intelligent and capable women is invariably affected by her social or marital status, since the society treats her as an object and a possession, never as an individual. Indu submits before Jayant’s decision when he asks her to continue with the job she despised, as they have a “long way to go” (R&S, 17) and not to opt for a career as a writer. Indu helplessly and unwillingly acquiesces to his decision and continues with her job. She finds that her marriage has made her ‘dependent’ and defines love as a “big fraud, a hoax, a trap- a process of making one humble and dependent” (173). Finally, Akka summons her and she accepts it as a “welcome reprieve” (18). It is after returning to her paternal home that she relieves her past which helps her to understand her present. Akka dies leaving all her money and jewels in the name of Indu as she considered her shoulders as strong. Akka’s childhood trauma as deciphered by Narmada- Atya shocks Indu and fills her with guilt and compassion for her.



She understood the reason behind Akka's waspidish and governing attitude. Since childhood, Indu perceived in her family elderly people dictating and younger being impertinent towards them. She concludes that the existence of such kind of a family "has no meaning" (104). But, gradually she realizes that dissociation from family is not possible and decides that she cannot leave her family in lurch after enriching herself with Akka's money. Earlier Indu wished to purchase her parental home and maintain it instead of paying for Mini's wedding as she found that the match for her was not up to the mark. She wanted her elders to free themselves from the labyrinthine of rules and responsibilities with which they have enveloped themselves throughout their life. But then she realizes, "To fulfil one's obligations, to discharge one's responsibilities [...] can one not find freedom within this circle? It was perhaps my understanding of this that make it possible for me not only to pay for Mini's wedding but to attend it and enjoy it as well" (R&S, 15).

Finally, she considers the house as a 'trap' which has always linked her with her past she "had to move away from" (R&S, 186). She has been pursuing detachment throughout her life but she becomes aware that the detachment from the living is hard to achieve. The thought liberates her from the constraints of apprehension which engulfed her since her childhood. "Now I feel clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary, uneven edges off myself. And free" (186). With this idea, she also closes the chapter of her relationship with Naren who dies by drowning in pool. Her infidelity fills her with guilt and she accuses herself of cheating Jayant by hiding her true self and pretending to be what she is not. Indu decides to go back to Jayant as "to think otherwise would be to take the coward's way again" (186). Simultaneously, some firm decisions are made by her, "That I was resigning from my job. That I would at least do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing" (187). The novel ends with a positive note with the hope of a new dawn. The novel expounds the indelible mark carved on the psyche of women by the conventions and norms established by the society which restricts them from exhibiting their true self. The mode and style of their development inculcate in them submissiveness, silence and passiveness which has a stronghold on their psyche. Even modern educated women consciously drape themselves with these traits and find themselves in a fix. These traits which have become the roots of femininity, always cast their shadow on women's life. Shashi Deshpande seems to suggest through *Roots and Shadows* that a change in the upbringing of girl- child is required. Only then, she would be liberated from the mores reserved for women since ages.

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