

Sculpting the Self: Familial Relationship in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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Abstract

The emergence of the new Indian woman in nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties as inclined to question the traditional and image of women in terms of female identities and patriarchal values, led to an essential change in familial and marital relationships, and redefines attitudes towards sex and social roles. This notion provokes Indian woman writers to explore feminine perspectives. Shashi Deshpande as a contemporary Indian novelist presents the dilemma of Indian women fluctuating between traditional and modern roles. This paper discloses that the protagonists consider marriage as an anchorage but soon discover that it is merely the transference of the power from a domineering mother to a repressive husband. It sketches the disillusionment of young women who embrace the married state in the hope that it would provide them respect, security and status in the society. Unfortunately, they are disappointed because marriage only suppresses their growth and curtails their individuality. They come to the mature understanding that identity and individuality would attain meaning and significance only if they remain part of the family. Moreover, it articulates the possibility of liberation within the framework of marriage. It further describes the 'new woman' who is in search for the means to overcome oppression and to develop her powers and abilities for personal fulfilment and self-actualisation to find a 'new self'.

Keywords: Indian English Fiction, Shashi Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, Familial relationships, mature understanding, sculpting the new self

Sculpting the Self: Familial Relationship in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

Indian writers have created a firm platform for Indian English fiction. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayam, Salman Rushdie, Amit Chaudhuri, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantra Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Githa Hariharan and Jai Nimbkar, Uma Vasudev, Anjana Appachana have dealt with the theme of familial relationship and have given a new direction to Indian English literature. In modern India, woman is entwined into the unavoidable cage of "being woman-wife-mother." Clara Nubile, in *The Danger of Gender* (2003), writes about 'what does it mean to be woman in modern India':

A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood, otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to traditional

Indian views... Indian woman do not appear to have their independent role in society... Only if a woman is a wife and a mother – both examples of male appendixes – she gains a status in the outer world. (12)

Deshpande unravels that woman has to go away from the social structure so as to find her place in society. Shashi Deshpande in her novel portrays the predicament and oppressions faced by the protagonist who is searching for freedom for her autonomous life from her autocratic husband. The silent suffering of the housewives is socio-psychic in nature. They are agog to find meaning and value for their life. They want to be self-styled without any hindrance of the male centred society. Deshpande herself says:

Women have been quite suppressed, quite Oppressed ... a large section of Indian Women are suffering even today ... And women who have no choice even to decide about having children. We have many people who still advocate “Sati” who consider dowry a necessity, who count it a loss when a girl is born and profit when a boy is born. It is this abysmal difference that I want to do away with, as a feminist. (230)

Marital relationship is the central theme of Deshpande’s novels. Marriages are of three types – they are love marriage, arranged marriage and love-cum-arranged marriage. Out of these three one can catch the first type of marriage in Shashi Deshpande’s novel *Roots and Shadows*. The protagonist in this novel unchains herself, leaving her parental house but is again chained after having been lured into the house of her husband. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* realize that love has no place in her marriage and this leads her to see only deceit and betrayal around. This novel brings to light the image of the middle-class woman sandwiched between tradition and modernity and Deshpande excels in portraying the crisis of the middle-class Indian woman. The platform of Shashi Deshpande’s protagonist is “My life is my own.” She further conveys that women should accept that they are responsible for their own victimization.

Roots and Shadows is the story of Indu, a middle class young girl, brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka, the mother surrogate in the novel. The family is ruled by Akka, a widow who handles everything in the family with an iron rod. She is the head of the family and the unquestioned ruler of the roost. The novel begins with the heroine’s return to her ancestral house. The parental home initiates her into an understanding of the meaning of human life. It is here that she discovers her roots – as an independent woman and a writer; and shadows – as a daughter, a mother and commercial writer and her oppression in the male-dominated society.

Akka never allows Indu to meet boys. Indu rebels against the overpowering influence of Akka and the domineering ambience of the family where women must submit and accept. Indu is advised by Akka to inculcate the perfect feminine qualities in her so as 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 a female to live and survive. And I ... I had watched them and found it 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. (RS 158)

Indu's radical approach towards the conventions and dictatorship of Akka is evident in her matters of education, love and marriage. She reacts: "There was only one thing she wanted and that was to dominate, and for her it is 'a declaration of Independence'" (RS 68). Like her mother, she is isolated from the family for transgressing the traditional mode of settling marriages. "I want to be loved, I want to be happy" (RS 13). This dispossession leads Indu to find solace in the company of Jayant. But, ironically she realizes the futility of her decision:

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 now seem to me to be an exercise in futility. (RS 23)

Indu forgets her individuality after the deception and disillusionment and behaves like the traditional Indian wife:

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 pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be. And one day I had thought ... isn't there anything I want at all? (RS 53)

She loves being looked at. It is quite relevant to quote Berger here:

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 of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (46-7)

Reddy says: "Her hard-won independence seems only one ephemera when she honestly questions herself if she is indeed independent. Under the guise of independence, the rebel in her had conditioned herself to become as submissive as any other Indian wife" (5). Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman. It leads her to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (De Beauvoir 500).

Women pay for their happiness at the cost of their freedom. De Beauvoir emphasizes that such a sacrifice on the part of a woman is too high for anyone since the kind of self-contentment and security that marriage offers woman drains her soul of its capacity for greatness: "She shuts behind her the doors of her new home. When she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland; the forests were hers. Now she is confined to a restricted space" (502). Indu works as a journalist but is not satisfied with her job. She prefers creative

writing but Jayant discourages her. Deshpande emphasizes the febleness of the strong marriage and reveals the commonality of this middle-class husband and wife. Jayant's nature compels Indu to hide her true 'self' from him:

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. (RS 38)

In such a situation, Indu feels alienated from Jayant. To Ann Foreman, women experience themselves as the fulfilment of other people's needs: "Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are the essential structures of her oppression (102).

Regarding a woman's role-playing, Rosemarie Tong observes: "Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and/or psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing (208). She is a lucky woman who bears everything without shedding a tear. Through Indu, Deshpande voices her view on marriage:

It is a trap. That's what marriage is. A trap? Or a cage? Maybe the comic strip version of marriage... a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other... isn't so wrong after all. And it's not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage itself? (RS 63)

Women's experience is chiefly defined through interpersonal, usual familial and filial relationships. Her identity exists "largely as being – for – others rather than being – for – itself" (Waugh 43). Deshpande sketches the process of transformation in Indu from a bold, sincere and outspoken woman to a person avoiding pain, conflicts and confrontations. The tragedy is that having played her role to perfection, Indu finds her life empty, meaningless and unfulfilled.

The novel explores the pain of the protagonist Indu in the male-dominated society. She tries to escape from this and discover her real 'self'. The novelist highlights that Indu protests against the restrictions imposed upon her. She looks upon marriage as a system which makes one very dependent. It depicts her confrontation with the family, with the male world and society. She manages to escape from the suffocation in the male-dominated society and finds her real 'self'. Her long journey ends with the realization that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots behind. The story concludes with her assumption that by fitting herself in a new role of a wife she could attain her freedom. The novel ends on a positive note with the hope of a new dawn. Indu has learnt to see not only her life as full of possibilities for growth and grace but the very meaning of existence.

In this novel, protagonist is caught in the conflict between individuality and conventionality. She does not want to be considered as object of satisfaction. She confronts and attain a new balanced power. But the idea of freedom is not obtained from the west. She strongly believes in conformity and compromise for the sake of the retention of domestic harmony. Deshpande advocates neither victory nor defeat in her novel but the harmony and understanding between two conflicting ideals, which is the symbol of basic Indian attitude. Deshpande celebrates the major exploration of her heroines by outshining the boundaries of the female gender. Bhatnagar's quote is applicable to the ending of the novel:

Thus, Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory nor of defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposing idea and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude. (63)

Deshpande presents the protagonists wedged in the web of marital discord. In the words of Bernard Shaw:

Man and wife do not, as a rule, live together; they only breakfast together, dine together, and sleep in the same room. In most cases the woman knows nothing of the man's working life and he knows nothing of her working life (he calls it her home life). (Preface 11)

There are diverse grounds like deprived childhood, socialization, tradition, culture and incompatibility that lead to the failure of the women as wives. Though she criticises society, Deshpande is optimistic and creates fighting women who use their education and employment to fight and win in the end. Whether they fight or not, win or lose these women travel in the gloomy passage of their lives in their bleak existence, as wives in a male-dominated society.

In this novel, Shashi Deshpande not only speaks of liberation within the framework of marriage but also attempts to trace the process by which women are 'womanised'. Deshpande's women do not opt out of imperfect relationships, but try and redress the power and gender imbalances through self-knowledge. Kamini Dinesh contends:

[The woman's] emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife, in the end, is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife – one who has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. She is a wife reconceptualised as a woman and an individual – a marked contrast to the older generation of women around her with their uncomplaining, unresisting, fatalistic attitude. (204-205)

Thus, *Roots and Shadows* revolves around the family relationships and the necessity for women to live within a relationship because without women's contribution, the family can collapse. Shashi Deshpande presents a woman's view, what she is in a family and what the family means to her. The protagonists Indu is in search for self and in her searching she loses her oppression to find a new self. A 'new woman' is a feminist who is in search for the means to overcome oppression and to develop her powers and abilities for personal fulfilment and self-actualisation.

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