

Cultural Confluence: The Symbiosis of Antiquity and Modernity in Roots and Shadows

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to discuss Indu's struggle against patriarchy. *Roots and Shadows* was the first novel written by Deshpande in 1978 but published only in 1983 after *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and won the Thirumathi Rangamal prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. Deshpande had started writing *Roots and Shadows* initially as a detective novel but later the protagonist, Indu, became her focus and this led her to change the form. *Roots and Shadows* is an inquiry of Indu's desire attainment of her inner self, the claim of her existence and freedom with reference to her relationship with her husband, Jayant, and the members of her family. Like every girl child, she was trained in childhood to be quite, amenable, tractable, submissive, and unquestioning. Oppressed by Indian patriarchy, the protagonist of the novel, Indu, revolts against Akka, the head of a matriarchal family embodying age-old and orthodox beliefs and conventions, and decides to go in for love marriage with Jayant, a man of different caste, with the optimism to gain freedom from her imprisoned being in her conservative and orthodox ancestral family with its rigid customs. She leaves her paternal house with a very simple dream in her pursuit of freedom and happiness: that her marriage would help her realize her need to belong, to be wanted, to be needed, and to be loved. She takes marriage as a substitute to the restraint imposed on her in the name of gender-discrimination in her ancestral family. She completely surrenders to her husband for the sake of love after marriage. She gets into her dream world after marrying Jayant.

Keywords: Tradition vs. Modernity, Feminism in Indian Literature, Cultural Conflict, Identity Formation, Patriarchy and Resistance, Intergenerational Tension, Indian Womanhood

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande occupies a foremost place among the women novelists. Her novels help us feel the intricacies of the life of the woman as mother, wife, daughter, lover, a victim of circumstances. Her primary focus of attention is the world of woman, the struggle of woman in modern society. Shashi Deshpande's focus deals with the woman of the middle class and her unfulfilled desires, urges, and sacrifices. She puts questions regarding the status of woman and her unfulfilled quest for freedom in a world which is bent upon ensnaring her. Seeking the

avenues available to her in her search for freedom from the male members of the society, the novelist falls upon. Quite interestingly, she has made a very close and stinging study of the oppression and reactions of the women belonging to upper middle class in a sexist society. Deshpande mirrors the society the way she observes it.

Betty Friedan avers that the root cause of women's pathetic condition is not sex but the freedom which has always been denied to them. She argues and tries to convince that a woman's fulfilment is in a creative work of her own. Shashi Deshpande also espouses this quest for freedom. Her novels *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence* are deeply concerned with the protagonists' quest for freedom. (Friedan)

This clearly throws light upon the dilemma of a woman novelist writing in contemporary India. The protagonist of the novel, Indu, herself is a sensitive, educated, and ambitious young woman who daringly questions fulfillment in her own way. Her search for freedom decides the course of her actions, morality, and deep trust in her ambition to reach freedom and gratification. Right from her childhood, Indu had realized that she was holding the secondary place in her family. Due to the patriarchal set up of the society, the condition of every woman is bound to be pathetic. In *Roots and Shadows*, the dominant culture and the marginalized culture are expressed in the shape of suppression of the latter by the former. She is often asked to obey the commands of the males. What has been said above clearly depicts the condition of Indu in the following words:

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 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 (158). (Pathak)

Intergenerational Conflicts

Indu always faces her comparison with her cousin Padmini who comes very close to the obedient girl. Akka approves of Mini as she is ready to marry the boy of her choice. Indu really feels frustrated to see the women of the family in such a horrible situation as none of them are allowed to lead a life of their own. She feels sorry about it that woman is nothing but merely a puppet in the hands of men. Old fashioned families have no space for women. She is stunned to know that subdued girls like Mini consider husbands as

"A definite article "permanent", and "forever" (126- 127).

But, Indu refuses to accept all dictatorship of patriarchy and goes for choice marriage. The moment she saw Jayant for the first time, she knew he was the man for her. And she had only proposed to him and married. The moment Indu got married, she was very optimistic. She thought that she would enjoy a free life with Jayant, free from all conservative things of the society. However, she repented her decision later. Her quest for freedom suffers a great set

back:

I told myself, I loved him. As if that justified everything. As if the word took away the taint from the deed and remembering how I had surrendered to him, step by step. I realise now, that it was not for love, as I had been telling myself, but because I did not want conflict. 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, compromising, shedding bits of myself along the way (158-159).

In the opinion of Batty, She deems herself a sinner, a deception, which gradually turns into a source of agony for her. The idea of leaving Jayant also sounds better now:

"Sometimes I wonder if I will leave him. The only way in which I can be, myself, my whole self again". (97)

Women's Identity in Transition

It is true that she hardly left with any choice. The tragedy of her life lies in the fact that she feels totally aloof. Her isolation reminds of what Meursault says in *The Outsider*:

'Mother died today or may be yesterday. I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: 'mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours Sincerely'. That doesn't mean anything (9). (Camus)

She realizes that one should follow the voice of one's own conscience and be true to one-self. At last, she experiences that true freedom is in having the strength to do what one wants to do and the firmness to adhere to it. Thus, her interpretation about herself as a sinner and deceiver became the very reason for her agony. She suddenly realized that she had succumbed to Jayant not because she loved him, but only because she did not want to face any conflict, so that her family should feel that her marriage was happier. So she kept lying and adjusted even with the worst situations. She had the notion that Jayant would not be able to bear rejection, for he did not want detachment and non-involvement. This made Indu feel that there was nothing wrong in her need of Jayant, for it did not make her any less a human being. She needed to stop pretending and show her whole self—her weakness and her strength, her virtues and her vices—if she was to bring harmony into her married life.

Amar Nath Prasad glorifies Deshpande for her portrayal of fine feminine sensibility in the following words:

Her marathon struggle against the negative forces often engendered by the

ruthless and sapless patriarchy; her emerging new ideas and views against the age-old norms of society, her unfettered growth and maternity of personality ever* amidst the dominance of conservation and her self- introspection for a life of reconciliation to make the life perfect and beautiful will always be remembered in the portrayal of characters of the fictions of Indian novelists in English.” (10-11) (Prasad)

In order to seek some emotional support and relief she surrenders before Naren:

“As a woman I felt hedged in by my sex. I resented my womanhood as it closed so many doors to me” (87).

Tradition and Change

As for as Indu's professional life is concerned, she is compelled there too to submit to the tortures of the editor. Though she is supporting her family financially even the no appreciation is being given to her by Jayant. He is least bothered about her being and talent. He never praises her skills. The quest for freedom and self, keep on haunting her. She has become a split personality. Her one side is asking her to surrender and the other to rebel. Indu crosses all limits as Elain Showalter says:

“the female phase which is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward , freed from the dependence of opposition, a search for identity” (13). (Showalter)

It shows that once the Indian woman was hailed as 'pativratas', and so on but now she is a changed person. She is aware of the strivings of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality, her place and role in family and society. She has a new image, an image of a quester. The novel ends on an optimistic note: Indu plans to go back to her husband and feels everything about herself. It seems that to Deshpande's women protagonists going back is indispensable. Shadows ends with an affirmation of the individuality of Indu. Through the image of the tree, Deshpande suggests that Indu has learned to see not only her life full of possibilities of growth and grace but the very meaning of life itself. It is with this total understanding that Indu decides to go back to Jayant. Indu faced her real self and knew her roots;

“She is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but for others too, and life does not come to an end with individuals, be it Indu or Jayant” (My Life is My own (47).

Conclusion

She gets separated from the family to challenge and shun the traditional exercise of running marriages. Indu is a writer; this talent of creativity makes her vocal against social capture, but Jayant does not appreciate her skill. He dashes her hopes to the ground of peace and

happiness. She wants to establish such a picture of modern woman who is no longer a slave to patriarchy. She dreams to achieve the state of detachment; however, surprise of surprises, she finds herself connected and attached in many ways. Her mind breaks up between two extremes: on the one hand, she is so attached to her house, which becomes part and parcel of life, while on the other, she is like a caged person.

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