

I Have My Own Life: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's 'Roots and Shadows'

Indu Goyal

Head & Associate Professor (Department of English) Allahabad P.G. College
(University of Allahabad) Prayagraj., UP, India

Abstract

Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to English Literature. In the 20th century, women's writing was considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statement. Their novels consist of the latest burning issues related with women as well as those issues that exist in the society since long. They describe the whole world of women with simple stunning frankness. Their write-ups give a glimpse of the unexpected female psyche, which has no accessibility. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife.

Among the modern contemporary women novelists, Shashi Deshpande is a prolific Indian novelist. She is mainly concerned with the journey within her characters, the main protagonists being female characters. Therefore, the repeated theme that we come across in her novels is the agony of existence in a hostile and male-dominated society which is conservative. Starting from her first book 'Roots and Shadows', women weave through a myriad of relationship before ultimately finding the courage to embrace their own identity. The most striking thing in Deshpande's novels is that today women don't want to continue with suppressed and humiliated life. They have the courage to protest and even to take revenge.

This paper throws light on the condition of Deshpande's female characters that they try their level best to compromise, reconcile and carry on their married life. But when water comes over the head, they stand up, protest and do not hesitate to go against their husbands. The method of their protest differs from person to person-sometimes it may be extra marital affairs, going out in search of a job, returning to their parents' home or coming out in search of their own identity. They have made a new path to reconstruct their own self, who is liberated, intelligent and strong enough to perform all that men can do and also to establish that they have their own lives. This is useful in performing alternate meaning and interpretation of the author's intentions and further enables the exploration of textual ambiguity in Deshpande's works.

Shashi Deshpandey's first full-length novel, 'Roots and Shadows' features an educated, middle-class woman protagonist, Indu. Shashi Deshpandey'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.

Shashi Deshpandey 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. The present paper discusses about three main female characters and their girlhood. They are Mini, Akka and Indu.

Mini inculcates in her all the traditional feminine qualities 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 world rarely touched," (122)¹.

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. The novel deals with Indu's attempt to assert herself as an individual. This process brings her into confrontation with her family and society in general. The novel begins with the marriage of Mini, Indu's cousin, which is performed in a traditional way in their ancestral home. It makes Indu think retrospectively about the events which led to her returning home after a gap of eleven years. The eighteen-year-old rebel, who leaves home to live life her own way, returns on being summoned by the old matriarch, Akka, who is on her death bed. Indu is drawn once more into the vortex of the family as Akka makes her the sole beneficiary of all her property. From here the spotlight shifts to all the myriad characters in the novel.

Among the myriad women characters the old tyrannical matriarch Akka is worth special mention. She is rich and childless and decides to stay in her brother's house after her husband's death. She wields absolute control over her brother's household, and her venomous tongue reduces Indu's grandfather Kaka into a tongue-tied, submissive character.

Akka herself is a victim of gender oppression but she perpetuates the same victimization as far as her influence extends. Indu who grows up with no fond feelings toward Akka, learns her story through Narmada Atya, only after her death. Akka was married at twelve and her husband- tall, bulky with coarse features- was well past thirty. On the contrary Akka was small, dainty, and pretty with a round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. She went to her husband's house after six months. By the time she was thirteen, she made two abortive attempts to run away. Her mother-in-law whipped her and kept her starved by locking her up in a room for three days. Then she was sent to her husband's room. She cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, "Lock me up again, lock me up" (77). But as Akka told Narmada that there was no escape from a husband then. She even tells Narmada before the consummation of her marriage: "Now your punishment begins Narmada. You have to pay for all those Saries and jewels" (77).

Through the character of akka, Deshpande successfully portrays the contradictory traits in a woman's character. That Akka was a domineering character is evident from Narmada's narration where she tells Indu about the way she controls her husband. 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 she 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 will never see her again. (71).

Since then Akka learned the technique of domination. She became aware of the Darwin's theory 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 the 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, and content and laid bare 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.

Deshpande makes a strong statement on the arranged marriages, which are outright discriminatory towards women. A husband can have a mistress with impunity for his physical and mental needs, whereas a wife cannot take another man- her act is branded adultery. NeenaArora aptly remarks: "This condemnation is dictated by man's interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration."²

Although Akka has undergone great sufferings at her husband's house, on her return to her father's house after her husband's death, she enforces a rigid code of conduct on women in the household. She insists that a woman should never utter her husband's name, for it means not only disrespect towards him but also shortens his life span. But Indu, an educated upper middle-class woman, resents as to what connection there was "between a man's longevity and his wife's calling him by name? It's as bad as praying to the Tulsi to increase his life span" (35).

Indu, the female protagonist of the novel has an estranged relationship with Akka. Like Mini, Indu too was advised by the elderly women as a child 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 a woman to live and survive. And I [...] 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 (158).

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 shashiDeshpande's novels endure the restrictions of puberty imposed on them. She also focuses on the customs and rituals meant for women which expects them to perform 'fasts' and

'prayers' to earn eternal wifhood 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 husband's life. She is also expected to perform them to secure good fortune. Indu, too, accepts 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 hurt to Old Uncle one day. And he said, 'For a woman, intelligence is always a burden, Indu. We like our women not to think.' (33)

Indu went ahead with her education and went for an intercaste marriage with Jayant, who was of her choice. ShashiDeshpande writes in her essay, "The Writing of a Novel" about Indu:

"Indu sprang out of the claustrophobic world with a courage I admired. She was free. But often to be free is to be lonely. I shared this bleak thought with Indu."³

Several instances prove that all along Indu has been playing the role of a wife to perfection to keep Jayant happy and satisfied. Despite her reluctance, she has to continue the frustrating job of writing for the magazine just to keep Jayant satisfied. She is against working for the magazine as she gets disillusioned by her experience with a so-called social worker, who had received an award for social services. Indu was so much impressed by that "soft spoken, [...] seemingly sincere and dedicated" (18) woman that she wrote an article on her. But then she is shocked after reading an article she received on that woman, as she realises that it was "a story of shameless exploitation of ignorance, poverty and need. A story of ruthlessness and unscrupulousness in the pursuit of fame, power and money, all of which had come now" (18). When she shows the two stories about the same woman to her worldly-wise editor, he rejects the later story knowing fully well that it was true. Appalled by the woman's hypocrisy and the editor's attitude, she tells Jayant about it who, who steeped in his middle-class values merely says: "That's life! What can one person do against the whole system! No point making yourself ridiculous with futile gestures. We need the money, don't we? Don't forget we have a long way to go" (19). Thus she continues to write what suits the magazine and not her own conscience. Gradually, but surely, she realises the absurdity of the existence, as she has to compromise against her conscience with the values of a hypocrite society where success is counted sweetest. But all this was not to go for long. Circumstances bring her to the proverbial crossroads where every individual has to do some introspection sooner or later. Had Akka, her old domineering matriarch not called her, she would not have had time enough to think about her identity and selfhood, which she had effaced just to prove that her marriage was a success. But her belated realisation is manifest in her private conversation with Naren where she bares all. It was the height of hypocrisy she practises just to flaunt that Jayant and she belonged to the smart young set. She tells:

We belong to the smart young set. Do you know what that means? Fresh flowers in the house everyday. Can you believe it, Naren. I've gone and done a course in flower arrangement? The best places, whether you go out to eat or to cut your hair. Freshly

laundered clothes twice a day. Clothes.....yes, we have to keep up with the latest trends.....we don't have friends, but the right contacts and "people one should know". Who entertain us just as often as we entertain them. And when we get together.....oh, you should listen to us Naren. We talk with nostalgia of places abroad. We're gay and whimsical about our own people.....our own country. We are rational, unprejudiced, broad-minded. We discuss. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problem of unemployment, poverty, corruption and family planning. We scorn the corrupt. We despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked----and our hearts bleed (28).

This emotional outburst from Indu proves that she had been exercising extreme control over herself in order to protect her marriage. It is difficult for her to accept her compromise in this matter as she had all along fooled herself that she was different from her Kakis and Atyas. As P. Bhatnagar comments: "It baffled her to realise that she who had considered herself to be so independent, so intelligent, so clever; she who had been so proud of her logical and rational thinking; she who had been all set to reform Indian womanhood had fallen into the trap waiting for her".⁴

Several other incidents in the novel prove Indu's poignant awareness of the inequality Indian women had to reconcile with under compulsion. The drudgery of performing the countless household chores makes their life miserable and when this goes unrecognised, it makes them the more miserable. Indu is disgusted at the sight of strewn plates and littered remnants lying about after the meal. She becomes conscious of the exemplary patience and courage women have shown to clear up the mess after every meal. "And women like Kaki even ate off the same dirty plate their husbands had eaten in earlier. Martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools" (73). Indu, calls the household chores tiresome, boring and frustrating like the job of Sisyphus. Simone de Beauvoir says:

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition; the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out making time. She makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.⁵

She had become aware of the prevailing injustice in society since her childhood. No effort was spared to indoctrinate her to play the role of a meek and submissive daughter, wife and mother. She tells Naren that even her womanhood is thrust upon her brutally and gracelessly, when she is told, "You're a woman now.....you can have babies yourself" (87). She begins to hate herself as "for four days now you are unclean. You cannot touch anyone or anything" (87). That was how she had been introduced into the beautiful world of womanhood.

Indu also bitterly recalls how crudely the idea of her womanhood was thrust upon her. Naren's question as to why she always fought for her womanhood makes her think in retrospect about the day when she was first made aware of it:

"My womanhood....i had never thought of it until the knowledge had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day, I had grown up "You are a woman now," Kaki had told me. "You can have babies yourself?" I, a woman? My mind had flung off the thought with an amazing swiftness. I was only a child. And then, she had gone on to tell me badly, crudely, how I could have a baby. And I who had all the child's unselfconsciousness about my own body, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it." (87).

Simone de Beauvoir expresses something similar when she talks of “the dramatic conflict that harrows the adolescent girl at puberty: she cannot become ‘grown-up’ without accepting her femininity; and she knows already that her sex condemns her to a mutilated and fixed existence, which she faces at this time under the form of impure sickness and a vague sense of guilt. (351).

Right from her childhood, Indu also observes the secondary position occupied by women in the family. It is unthinkable for a woman to have a cup of tea sent to her room. Indu light heartedly mocks the women’s reaction if she were to do something as brazen as that. She laughingly asks her Kaka, “Can you imagine them sending up a cup of tea for me? Women and children should know their places.” (53) The shaven head of a widow, a domestic help, reminds Indu of the plight of all widows—those who shaved their heads to avoid censure and those who didn’t and are treated like out-castes. Looking at widow’s shaven head, Indu says:

The bare skull, with its short hairs, looked somehow not only indecent, but obscene when bared. And I understood why Kaka had, when Atya was widowed, so stoutly resisted the idea of her becoming a shaven widow he had won but at the cost of Atya’s status. She was now a second class citizen in the kingdom of widows. The orthodox would not eat food cooked by her. (130)

Indu is also made deeply aware of her shortcomings as a complete woman in the eyes of all those conventional women who had their own standards for judging people. In the eyes of such a woman, she says:

Nothing about me—my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money—none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren they were still for them the only success a woman could have. I had almost forgotten this breed of women since I had left home. (128)

However, in spite of her obvious feminist stance, in spite of her being highly sensitive to the injustice shown to women, and in spite of being educated and economically independent, Indu realises that she is no different from the women like her Atyas and Kakis. From her outburst to Naren it is obvious that she is disillusioned by her husband Jayant’s materialistic attitude to life. Her husband also resents any display of passion on her part he expects his wife to be demure and coy, without shedding her inhibitions even in the privacy of their bedroom. This is evident from what Indu narrates, “Jayant, so passionate, so ready, sitting up suddenly and saying, ‘no, not now,’ when I had taken the initiative.” (91). Her intimate tete-a-tete with Naren also reveals the pain and humiliation she experiences at being rebuffed in this manner. In a voice choked with emotion, she confides to Naren: “And now I know....it shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. When I’m like that, he turns away from me. I h’ve learnt my passion now. And so I pretend. I’m passive. And unresponsive. I’m still and dead.” (92)

In ShashiDeshpande’s ‘Roots and Shadows’, much critical controversy has been raised about the author’s motives regarding the incestuous relation between Indu and her cousin, Naren. It is Naren to whom she tells every little detail of her married life. Naren who was so natural to her and the easy compatibility that develops between the two, makes her to take the most daring step of surrendering herself to him

not once but twice in the novel. She indulges in the act 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 resolves not to disclose this to Jayant as she thinks it had nothing to do with him. This assertion of herself has sparked off contradictory remarks from the reviewers. P. Bhatnagar laments:

“Indu’s casual and matter-of-fact attitude to what she had done is shocking. Have our morals really gone so low that women commit this sin for nothing, just to prove that they do not lack courage? Is this really representative of the modern Indian woman?”⁶

Another critic, P. Ramamoorthy does not view Indu’s adultery as something negative but as something stemming from the predicament of the compulsive circumstance women like Indu find themselves in. To Indu it is an exercise of autonomy within marriage. He observes:

“This sheds a brilliant light on Indu’s awareness of her autonomy and her realisation that she is a being, and not a dependent on Jayant. The novel gains its feminist stance in Indu’s exploration into herself but it also moves beyond the boundaries of feminism into a perception of the very predicament of the human existence”.⁷

Towards the end of the novel, Indu eventually meets up to her own expectations of an emancipated woman by the way she puts Akka’s wealth to use—spending it on Mini’s wedding and Vithal’s education. She takes this decision at the risk of offending her numerous relatives each of whom has his or her own idea of how the money should be spent. The list includes the dead Naren who had vehemently opposed the idea of Vithal being educated with Akka’s money, and Akka herself who would never have wanted her money to be spent on anyone outside the family. But Indu, after serious introspection decides to act according to her wish without taking into consideration the likes and dislikes of the living and the dead alike. She refuses to take heed of the promise she had made to Naren, telling herself that it is the living who need our loyalty, not the dead.

Towards the end, Indu does achieve her freedom, refusing to let herself be influenced by Kaka, Atya or even Jayant, in doing what she believes is the right thing to do. She who had earlier been cowed down by Jayant’s disapproval of her giving up her job now gathers enough courage to stand by her decision. Jayant who is initially bewildered by her attitude, finally acknowledges her strength which she has never displayed earlier. He even comforts Indu who despairs of not finding a publisher for her book by saying, “I will publish it for you.” (15). For Indu, this assurance by her husband is the ultimate in happiness.

ShashiDeshpande suggests through the character of Indu that there is a greater chance of happiness for women if they learn to conquer their fears and assert themselves. As P. Bhatnagar comments, “ShashiDeshpande 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 ideas and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude.”⁸

The novel ends on a note of hope with the protagonist, Indu, asserting herself as an individual and putting an end to her doubts about herself. That she is able to hold her own in a household full of tradition-bound men and women is proof of her individuality and she has her own life.

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