

Roots and Shadows: A Quest for Identity and Self Assertion

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to study the quest for the self in the character of Indu and her efforts to come out of the “engagement and entrapment”. It also presents he attempts to confirm her feminity through “self – realization” and “self – discovery”. The protagonist Indu is fixed between tradition and modernity, between illusion and reality, between mask and the face. She tries her best to discover her true self, in spite of woman’s internal and external quest for an authentic selfhood and an understanding of the problems of life. In “*Roots and Shadows*”, one can find the exploration of the inner self of Indu.

At some point of life, Indu feels that by breaking away from the family, she could trace and identify her roots. In her process of the inner quest, she finally explores that these family bonds are the root of one’s being and keep on reflecting like shadows. In reality, these roots are shadows - “shadows” that one cannot escape from. In her inner quest, she realizes her “displacement“ and “marginalization” as a woman. This exploration helps her to affirm her identity through “the assertion of her feminine self.” The present paper ends with a note of affirmation of her individuality as a woman.

KEYWORDS:- Roots , Shadows, Quest, Self –Identity, Individuality, Assertion.

Introduction:-

We can say that feminism in India has taken a new way of life, free of the “dependence syndrome”.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to study the quest of the self of Indu and her efforts to come out of the ‘engagement and entrapment’. She wants to explore and confirm her feminity through ‘self realization’ and ‘self discovery’. The works of Shashi Despande involves her artistic vision of feminity as alienation. In her works, she tries to expose the veil of psyche imprisoned within the walls of domesticity. We can see Indu the protagonist fixed between tradition and modernity,, between illusion and reality and between mask and the face. She leaves (disowns) a ritualistic and tradition bound life in order to fathom her true self.

In spite of (although concerned with a) woman’s internal / external quest for an authentic selfhood and an understanding of the problems of life, the protagonist Indu tries to retain her individuality even in adverse circumstances. She tried to preserve and retain her ‘self’ against disintegrating forces that endanger her identity as a woman. The woman figured in her novels present an ‘incomplete’ self, a partial being. There is a need for someone to

shelter her, be her father, brother or husband. At one point in the novel, Indu says: “This is my real sorrow, that I can never be complete in myself.”¹ In the novels of Shashi Deshpande, we find a quest of refuge which is well explicitly depicted through the image of the house in ‘Roots and Shadows’.

In ‘Roots and Shadows’ we find the exploration of the inner self of Indu. She presents the symbol of new women who live in traditional and conventional society. Indu, as a woman, can think freely about her own selves besides politics, corruption and other male forces.

Indu though married with Jayant, freely moves with Naren and uses words like ‘kiss’, ‘rape’, ‘deflowered’, ‘orgasm’ etc in her talks with him. As a woman and as an artist she is struggling to express herself. She also struggles to search her real self through her inner and instinctive potentiality in creative writing.

In spite of the temperamental differences between husband and Indu, she keeps herself quite submissive. The self alienation of Indu arises as she becomes aware of the contradiction between her own self and the outer reality. She looks upon herself as a shadow of ‘the female self’. Indu, at times, feels that she is ‘endlessly chained’ to the long dusty road that lay ahead of her. A woman has to play more than her domestic role as a submissive house wife. Indu fails to find ‘wholeness’ and ‘the integration’ of her personality. She felt an ‘unusual feeling of total dis-orientation’. It is well explicit in her own words:

“.... for some reason I was an outsider. The waves of sorrow, sympathy and comradeship rippled all around me, but left me untouched.”² (p.30 Roots & Shadows)

There are instance of total disorientation and isolation from which Indu suffers. We often find references to her ‘loneliness’ suggested through the image of ‘dust and barrenness’ and ‘dark room’.

Indu thinks that by breaking away from the family, she could trace her roots. However, in her quest, she ultimately discovers that these family bonds are the root of one’s being and keep on reflecting like shadows. In reality, these roots are shadows. Shadows that one can’t escape from:

“we flatter ourselves that we’ve escaped the compulsions of the past; but we’re still pinioned to it by little things.”³ (34 Roots and Shadows)

Even the small troubles which follow her like shadows uproot her from her social boundings. In her inner quest for the self, she realizes her ‘displacement’ and ‘marginalisation’ as a woman. A process of ego dissolution begins. Women like Indu can neither express themselves nor choose for themselves. They can neither love nor hate. She learns to be content with ‘the gift of the silence’ (33 Roots & Shadows) that marriage had taught them. In silence, Indu craves for love almost frantically.

“Jayant and I I wish I could say but cannot 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. Neither love nor happiness come to us for the asking.”⁴ (p.13 Roots and Shadows)

Indu as a woman is allowed no direct influence upon her husband, neither upon the future nor upon the world. She has to reach out beyond herself towards the social milieu only through her husband. Jayant as a husband is ‘impervious’ and ‘indifferent’ to her emotional urges and drives. This is very much evident in the words of Indu:

“but my marriage had taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal Jayant nothing but what he wanted to hear. I hid my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage”⁵ (38)

In such a situation, Indu feels quite isolated from Jayant. Jayant deceives her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. He fails to be her ‘alter ego’. He is not a ‘sheltering tree’ to protect her at times of difficulty. She yields to the necessity of marriage and modules herself to the likes of her husband. She surrenders since she wants to avoid any “conflict”. She sticks close with Jayant and her marriage because she was “afraid of failure”. She wanted to show to the family and the world that she led a successful married life and so she had put a mask of an obedient wife. She feels a sense of existential insecurity.

Indu, finally feels that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots in the family and in Jayant. She develops an extramarital (adulterous) relationship with Naren. This new relation proves to be mere shadows to her. She has no permanent place for Naren. Hence, she decides to turn towards Jayant, who is innocent. She herself is to be blamed for the moral problems in their lives.

Gradually Indu realizes that she had forgotten the roots of her own family life and was “feeding only on dreams and shadows”. She also felt that she had escaped from the familial responsibilities of home chased after “uncrystallising shadows” to some extent and for some time she felt that marriage had “hampered” her individuality because she saw it from different angle. She saw it as a “trap” and not as “a bond”. She looked at her own home as “a cage”. However, towards the end of the novel she relieved that all those were mere illusions and not reality and the struggle for her life was an act of futility. Her feelings are explicitly stated in her own words:

“there was only one thing I wanted now and that was to go home the one I lived with Jayant. That was my only home. I would put all these behind me and go back to Jayant. I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me. That had nothing to do with the two of us and our life together. But there were other things I had to tell him. That I was resigning from my job. That I would do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing.”⁶ (p.17 Roots and Shadows)

Thus, Indu’s self desperately longed for self expression of her feminine voice. She finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear and she sees the clear light of day with realization. Indu now feels a sense of hope for life, for existence. She says : “no there is no such thing, to accept it will be to deny the miracle of life itself

... .. if not this tree, these will be others. Other trees will grow, other flowers will blossom, other fragrances will pervade.”⁷

However towards the end of the novel we find a note of affirmation. Indu asserts her individuality as a woman. She also asserts her role as a performer in the endless cycle of life. Thus, she has explored the meaning of life in her journey to individuation. Through this character Deshpande has registered her awareness of control of feminine development by patriarchal family structure which produce in women dependency, insecurity and an incomplete feeling of their identity.

This paper is a humble attempt to explore the roots and removes the shadows of myth from the eyes of the protagonist.

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