

Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*: Articulation of Feminine Voice

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Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and shadows* explore and expose the struggle of the protagonist, Indu, an educated middle-class woman, in a male-dominated tradition bound society. Indu symbolizes the New Woman, who is educated and who lives in close association with society brushing aside all its narrow conventions. The novel also deals with the unfulfilled desires and unhappy marriages of women in a large Maharashtrian Brahmin household. It is apparently the story of the triumph and tragedy of a family that is bound up in its conditioned patriarchal self. It tells the story not of an individual but of the institution of marriage, which is threatened by the forces of change and faces dissolution.

The novel presents a typical facet of deprived womanhood through the character of Akka, who is the youngest sister of Indu's grandfather. Akka returns to her parental home as a rich widow after the death of her husband and starts looking after her nephews and nieces with the care and attention of a truly compassionate mother. She becomes the presiding deity of the family who confers peace and security on her willing subjects but deals ruthlessly with the rebellious and the recalcitrant. Akka's authoritative nature never allows people to peep into her life and understands her.

Indu, a sensitive, educated and liberated woman, questions and challenges Akka's authority and considers Akka a callous and domineering woman. She hates and challenges Akka's domination. She thinks that "there was only one thing she wanted and that was to dominate." (68). Except Indu all other people admire Akka - always a symbol of leadership - who assures happiness to everybody. Indu revolts against Akka and decolonizes herself by marrying Jayant, who is of a different caste and speaks a different language. Akka, however, remains unmoved by such spasmodic protests and refuses to slacken her grip as long as she lives. When she falls critically ill, she realizes that her end is near, and she expresses a desire to see Indu. One receiving the news of Akka's illness Indu comes back to the family only to find that Akka is dying. Akka feels that Indu is the right heiress and wills her entire property including the house in her name. Deshpande highlights the matrilineal aspects of tradition as property is handed over by Akka to her grandniece, Indu. Indu notices that even in the face of death there is a quiet dignity about her. "There was," Indu recalls after Akka's death, "a triumphant gleam in them [Akka's eyes]. I could almost see her thoughts..... I made you come home, didn't I? I brought you back, didn't I?" (20).

Indu comes to know about the pathetic story of Akka after her death through Narmada- atya, daughter of Indu's grandfather, that "Akka had a terrible past hidden away in the vaults of the family narrative; a past of marital rape as a thirteen-year-old wife, of betrayal, and of her revenge on a dying husband¹. At the age of twelve her marriage was performed with a man thirty years old. It is said in Manu Samhita that a man of thirty may marry a girl of twelve and a man of twenty-four may marry a girl of eight. This highlights the fact that irrational practices are still observed in our society and a woman is not allowed to be independent. At every stage she should be under the domination of someone: her father, her husband, or her son. Marriage is considered

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Transference of the dominion over her from her parents to her husband. Her marriage as a child stifled Akka and expounded to her the real trauma of being a girl. Her soul of a child withered as

she had to tolerate the bestial sexual advances of her husband. Narmada-Atya narrates how the panic-stricken Akka struggled hard to escape her husband's brutality:

She was just 12 when she was married. And he was well past 30. Remember him still. He was a tall, bulky man with large, coarse features. And shewas small and dainty, really pretty with her round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. Six months after her marriage, she "grew up" and went to her husband's home what she had to endure there, no one knows. She never told anyone. Our grandfather, her father, was a man who kept himself aloof. No one could approach him easily. And her mother, our grand-mother, died when she was a child. But I heard that twice she tried to run away a girl of 13. Her mother-in-law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days. Starved her as when it meant so much more to me than it would have done at any time before. At that moment, an understanding of what Akka was and why she lived the way she did, why she behaved the way she did, was somehow necessary to me When Atya told me the story. I absorbed only the words, the story and not the essences of Akka herself. That seeped into me later, minute drop by minute drop, so slowly, so imperceptibly that I never knew I had absorbed it.² (76)

As a married woman Akka was expected to bear children but she had many miscarriages due to "the kind of life she led" (77). Her mother-in-law made 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, masochism, or mental slavery, often leading to her physical decay and death. The social ethos which has been contributing to the continuity of woman suppression sees to it that unacknowledged martyrdom becomes a part of a housewife's existence. She is expected to subordinate her own needs for those of her family. She is supposed to bear her exploitation and suffering with willing fortitude. Akka too had to endure and submit to the insults, injuries, and humiliations with stoic patience and never complain. She faced another shock after twenty years of married life when her husband became obsessed with a woman which further deteriorated Akka's life. It was the fear of his mother which restricted him from bringing the woman to his house.

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Akka is the very embodiment of the old order, so highly orthodox that even when she is on her death bed she refuses to move to a hospital. As she puts it, "God knows what caste the nurses areOr the doctors. I couldn't drink a drip of water there" (24). Her early marriage, her miserable life with her mother-in-law, her childlessness and her husband's obsession with other women, and her widowhood are the various blows that Akka receives in her life.

The psychological injuries she receives affect her attitude to life. She imposes strict rules as to how a girl should talk, dress, and behave. She reprimands Indu severely for daring to talk to a boy in the lone corner of a library. It is known fact in the house that she put her foot down when Naren's mother wanted to learn music, saying,

What - learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers
Like those women? Are we that kind of a family? Isn't it enough for
you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two aarti songs?
What more does a girl from a decent family need to know? (55)

In spite of being a victim of gender oppression, she imposes the same victimization on all the women in the family. Indu, who grows up with no fond feelings towards Akka, comes to know her story through Narmada- atya, much later. Narmada- atya's narration evokes the reader's pity and focuses attention on the plight of all those innocent victims of child marriage who were forced to undergo inhuman treatment, bound as they were by the shackles of marriage.

Through the character of Akka, Deshpande successfully portrays the contradictory traits in a woman's character. Akka emerged as a dominant woman as is evident from Narmada's narration, where she tells Indu about the way she controlled her husband after he suffered a stroke which left him totally paralyzed. He lived for two years in that condition and Akka took care of him excellently. Displaying her sati-dharma. But she got back at him for all that she had endured earlier by not allowing his mistress, whom he adored, to meet him. She even took a vicious pleasure in informing him that she threw his mistress out when she had come to meet him. Narmada, who was just a child then, was moved to tears by the grief experienced by Akka's husband on hearing it from his wife. Earlier Akka had been feeble, fragile, and timid and so he had saddled her, but after the stroke he was dependent on the mercy of Akka, but she was not ready to succumb to his demands, she declared, "Listen to me. It's my turn now. I've listened to often 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"(78). Later that night Narmada found Akka in tears and learned from her that no night passed when she did not cry after getting married.

Through the portrayal of Akka's marriage, Deshpande makes a strong statement on the so-called arranged marriages. It is really shocking that parents are so callous in the case of the marriage of their daughter that they care little for her likes and dislikes, and impose marriage on her by spending huge amounts of money just to add up the label of a wife to her irrespective of her mental agony. As a result, she has to suffer in the hell of an unhappy marriage throughout her life. Whereas a husband who finds his wife incompatible has at least the option of finding for

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himself another woman to satisfy his need, a wife in a similar situation has no option but to lead a loveless life. Narmada's narration also highlights the tragedy of the mistress, who had given Akka's husband the best years of her life but was doomed to face humiliation. As Neena Arora remarks,

Man considers it normal behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and the physical levels outside marriage, while it is ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case a woman indulges in it even though accidentally. At the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not even involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts persecuting her. This condemnation is dictated by man's interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration.³

Akka's return to her father's house after the death of her husband marks a new epoch in the entire family where she enforces a rigid code of conduct on women. She dictates the terms and conditions as to how a wife should remain submissive to her husband throughout her life. She even tells Indu that a woman; should never utter her husband's name as it would shorten his lifespan and it also showed disrespect. Indu reacts vehemently to such talk and exclaims, "What connection can there be between a man's laogeivity and his wife's calling him by name? It's as bad as praying to the tulsi to increase his life span" (35).

For them on Akka became more adamant in her views. 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 that the powerful always ruled over the weak. Deshpande's narratives bear the authenticity of woman's signature. She rejects the masculine dialect and the masculine perception of virtue, relationships, and content and lays bare before us the subversive role of tradition in perpetuating the secondary role of women, and emphasizes 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 a "ruthless, dominating, bigoted and inconsiderate" (22) tyrant and becomes the epitome of obduracy.

Indu views and reviews the concepts of self, sin, faith, love, etc. She has visions and revisions of her ideal of detachment and freedom and tries to achieve them. She tries to see and listen to the voice of conscience but at every step many hurdles come in her way as she is guided and guarded by the traditional norms of her family and by her own inhibitions as she has an estranged relationship with Akka. Like her cousin Padmini (called 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 had her own dreams and resolves not to become their replica, She recalls.

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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, ever defeat with grace because you are a girl, they said. It is the only way, they said, for a female 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. (174)

The story begins with Indu's arrival at the family during Akka's illness. It is a very large family encompassing three generations. Akka had, before her death, fixed the marriage of Padmini without consulting the girl. She had also earmarked a portion of her wealth for this purpose. After Akka's death, Padmini's parents and brothers are worried as to whether Indu would honour Akka's wishes to meet the expenses of Padmini meet the expenses of Padmini's marriage. Indu honours her wishes, although she tries to persuade Padmini to marry Naren instead of the person chosen by Akka. But Padmini and her parents are not prepared for it. Indu broods over the fate of women in a large family and deeply resents the fact that in traditional Hindu joint families, women are nothing more than puppets, without any identity, voice, or name. But her revolutionary idealism finds no place in the family. Even Padmini refuses to romanticize her marriage which for her is an arrangement arrived at for her own good by the elders whose wisdom must be accepted find never questioned; "To her, it was marriage that mattered, not the man" (4). Indu tries to argue with Padmini but is deeply perplexed by her response: "But Mini.... Marriage is..... it means living with a man. You have to listen to him, endure his habits, his smell, his touch, his likes, his dislikes. You have to sleep with him, bear him children. Can you do all that with this man?" (137). At this Padmini meekly submits as if she is in a cage and it is beyond her reach to come out of her cage:

What choice have I, Indu? She asked me..... Millions of girls had asked this question millions of times in the country. Surely it was time they stopped asking it? What choice have I? Surely it is this, can choose, that differentiates me from animals. But years of blindfolding can obscure your vision so that you no more see the choices. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so that you can no more move out of your cage of no-choices. (137-138).

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 his own parents. After his wife's death, he left his motherless daughter at the disposal of his family. Indu is shocked to find the rigidity in her father's attitude which made him neglect his duties as a father. She gauges her father as a callous person: "how else could he have parted with me, a fifteen-days-old motherless baby, to the family he hated and despised? He had not even come to see me until I was more than a year. But that, perhaps, was because I was a girl. If I had been a son"(179).

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Indu resents her womanhood as she was made conscious of her femininity by the elder women of her family. The onset of puberty perplexed her and made her conscious of her own body. In order to assert her right to an independent existence, she longs to escape from the burden and independence of womanhood. She fears her becoming a mother and scorns her introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. She fights against her own womanhood so much that she says,

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 am 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, baldly, 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. 'And don't forget,' she had ended, 'for four days now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything.' And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean. (86-87).

Almost all the female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels endure the restrictions of puberty imposed on them. Deshpande also focuses on the customs and rituals meant for women which expect them to observe fast and perform puja to earn eternal wifedom as well as peace and harmony for their family. Indu observes the women of her family involved in various rituals to ensure longevity of their husband's life. She too agrees that life without a husband is a curse, but she does not believe in the superstitious rituals to save oneself from widowhood. She is always accused of questioning the established norms and of trying to be 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" (36).

Indu moves ahead with her education and opts for an inter-caste marriage with Jayant, a man of her choice, fleeing the familial trap of tradition and religiosity, she lands herself in another world, a world of almost pathological middle-class compulsions to be upwardly mobile in a materialistic society. Shashi Deshpande in her essay "The writing of a Novel" writes about

Indu as follows: “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.”⁴ Even Indu realizes, “ We flatter ourselves that we’ve escaped the compulsions of the past; but we are still pinioned to it by little things”(34).

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In her march towards emancipation and self-hood, 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 is defined and defiled by society. “The true woman,” Simone de Beauvoir remarks, “is an artificial product that civilization makes, as formerly eunuchs were made. She presumed instincts for coquetry, docility, are indoctrinated, as is phallic pride in man”⁵.

Indu moulds herself to satiate Jayant and prevents herself from retaliating, as it will certify her marriage as a failure. But very soon she realizes that she has surrendered before Jayant not for love but to make the conflict in her mind subside and to show her family that her marital life has been a success. She continues to lie to her husband. Indu foresees but decides to hide the frictions of her marital life from her family. She analyzes 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, compromising, shedding bits of 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. (174-175)

Indu concludes that as life partners they are always expected to overlook each other’s vices and appreciate their virtues. Indu accepts that she throttled her desires not because of Jayant’s pressure but because it was her own decision with which she had given up her identity and individuality. Soon she realizes, “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 had stared me in the face... without wants there is no ‘I’ ” (54).

Shashi Deshpande in her talk “The Indian Woman - stereotypes, Images and Realities “ states, “The good woman - whether she’s the wife, mother, sister or daughter-in-law doesn’t matter - is always so selfless that she negates herself to the point of extinction.”⁶ Indu as an educated, upper middle-class woman resents such traditional practices but like the protagonists of Deshpande’s other novels, especially *Jaya* (That Long Silence) and *Saru* (The Dark Holds No Terror), she is caught in the web woven by age old customs and traditions, Though her education and exposure encourage her to break free from the clutches of tradition, she eventually finds that she is no different from the women who circumambulate the tulsi plant and who believe that a woman’s fortune lies in dying before her husband dies. She draws this conclusion about herself from the fact that she love her husband enough to want him by her side all the time, forever. Her husband, Jayant, inspite of his seemingly western style of living, is no different from the average Indian male. In spirit he compares Indu with her grand-aunt: “Perhaps you are like her....Aren’t you? Isn’t that why she chose you...only a great-niece, really... from among

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all the family” (6). He expects his wife to be passive and submissive. Any display of passion or desire on her behalf shocks him.

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 ideals and conflicting selves. This is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude.

Indu's predicament is representative of the large predicament of women in contemporary India, where the new social and economic forces have shaken the age-old cultural modes. The break-up of the joint family, the nucleus of Indian cultural life, is the immediate and visible symbol of this imminent change. This breaking up has affected relationships at various levels, especially relationship at the husband-wife level. In the old family pattern, as Shashi Deshpande has put it, “the two met only briefly in the darkness of the night” (132).

So there was hardly any occasion for conflict. But with husband and wife constantly thrown together in the present pattern and with the wife sharing in many of the responsibilities which were earlier supposed to be only his, there have arisen the problems of incompatibility and mall adjustment and expectations and despair. Society continues to be male dominated and attitudes towards women continue to be the same. Women, on their part, are becoming more and more conscious of the various emancipation movements. The way an intelligent and sensitive person like Indu, who was so very choosy in her affections, is made by the writer to resolve her doubts and uncertainties is very alarming. She commits adultery to come to terms with her married life. She feels at ease in the company of Naren, her cousin.

It is Naren, to whom she tells every detail of her married life. Naren is so natural to her that ease and compatibility develops between the two. This brief moment of sympathy Indu slips into a relationship with Naren and there is no feeling of guilt despite of this adulterous lapse. Instead, Indu learns to take a rational stand where her marriage with Jayanth is concerned. She realizes that “the romance which inhabits the minds of women enslaves them and that as an individual, she has a right to her own body.”⁷ 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. (167-168)

Indu's value laden-laden mindset undergoes a change after her encounter with Naren. Physical relationship outside marriage often becomes a defining moment in a woman's life, a moment what one comes to term with one's own sexuality, so often suppressed. She realizes that there are other dishonesties than an accidental physical contact. She takes a firm decision not to disclose this to Jayant. This assertion of herself has sparked off contradictory remarks from the reviewers. O.P. Bhatnagar laments,

Indu's casual and matter-of-fact attitude to what she has done is shocking. Have our morals really gone so low that women commit this sin for

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nothing, just to prove that they do not lack courage? Is this really representative of modern Indian women?⁸

Another critic, P. Ramamoorthi, does not view Indu's adultery as something negative but as something stemming from the predicament of the compulsive circumstances woman 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 realization 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.⁹

This highlights the point that in our society a man can take sexual liberties with impunity and if a woman is indulged in the same, she is looked upon with shock and horror and branded an adulterous. Here Deshpande tries to enlighten the readers out of their complacency by making them recognize the double standards being practiced in a patriarchal social set-up.

The novel also deals seriously with the issue of arranged marriages in the middle-class families. With the marriage of Akke in the past and with the marriage of Mini in the present as the background, Indu speaks against the traditional mode of sterling marriages when she sees Mini being pushed into an incompatible marriage by her elders. She bursts, "You're leaving out that great incalculable in human emotions" (108). Shashi Deshpande specifies in the essay mentioned above, "love leads to the certainty of marriage. But marriage invariably takes you back to the world of women, of trying to please of the fear of not-pleasing, of surrender, of self-abnegation".¹⁰

And Indu wonders at the meek and submissive attitude of the womenfolk of the house whose only source of happiness was the freedom they enjoy in the kitchen:

The women had no choice but to submit, to accept...have they been born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a life time of disuse? And yet Mini, who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength. (6)

With Mini's marriage it is clear that an arranged marriage is not a marriage of two souls:

Behind the façade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue? (3)

Marriage subjugates and enslaves a woman. It leads her to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose."¹¹ Women get their happiness at the cost of their freedom. Such a sacrifice on the part of a woman is too high, for the kind of self-contentment and security that marriage offers a woman drains her soul of its

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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."¹²

In this novel Deshpande unmasks the hypocrisy and dualism in society and lets her readers ponder over the matter. Naren is looked down upon and is not considered a suitable match for Padmini; instead, they volunteer to pay a huge dowry to someone who is not actually independent.

At this point of time, Indu realizes that she should listen to the voice of her conscience and be faithful to it as a clear conscience is the softest pillow one can rest on. To Indu the concept of a successful marriage is a hoax. And she insists that nothing should be judged and a perfect understanding is based on appreciating one's strengths and understanding one's

weaknesses; “Don’t judge me. Don’t criticize me. Just appreciate me. See only my virtues, not my vices. My strengths, not my weaknesses” (126).

Bhawana Dwivedi remarks,

Deshpande brings out the problem of marriage as an evil social practice because right from the beginning to the end it is the history of a woman’s suppression, a long-drawn-out drama to the end it is the history of a woman’s suppression, a long-drawn-out drama of negotiation in which she feels uncertain of her position. This is a deal in which the poor woman is literally bracketed with an animal, for she cannot exercise her reasoning or intelligence and express her genuine individual concerns.¹³

Ramamoorthi observes,

The novel ends with affirmation of the individuality of Indu and also the principle of life which is endless. Through the image of the tree, Deshpande suggests that Indu has learnt to see not only her life full of possibilities for growth and grace... but the very meaning of Life itself. It is with this total understanding that Indu decides to go back to Jayant... at the end of the novel Indu realizes that Akka is not a sadist. Indu has confronted her real self and she knows her roots; she need not be ashamed of her body and sexual needs; she has to decide what her job will be; she is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but for others too, and life does not come to end with individuals, be it Indu or Jayant.¹⁴

This realization makes Indu decide to go back to her husband.

Now I would go back and see if that home could stand the scorching touch of honesty. Nevertheless I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me. For that was not important. 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 my job. That I would at last do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing. (205)

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Thus in this novel Deshpande tries to break the stereotype of eternally suffering Indian womanhood. She suggests that it is only by breaking the age old customs can Indian women from victimization to self-assertion. Her heroines try to come out from the culturally determined ideas of marriage and wifehood. Thus *Roots and Shadows* is undoubtedly a feminist text.

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