

Indu in Dilemma: A Critical Analysis Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*

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*Though no writer in India can get away from the idea of social commitment or social responsibility, committed writing has always seemed to me to have dubious literary values. However, after 25 years of writing, I cannot close my eyes to the fact that my own writing comes out of a deep involvement with the society I live in, especially with women. My novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society, and above all their relationships with others. To me, my novels are always explorations; each time in the process of writing, I find myself confronted by discoveries which make me rethink the ideas I started off with. In all my novels, from *Roots and Shadows* to *The Binding Vine*, I have rejected stereotypes and questioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women, even the self-image of women, in this country. In a way, through my writing, I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country.*

I

Roots and Shadows is the first novel of the famous Indian woman novelist, Shashi Deshpande, though it was published after *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *If I Die Today* (1982). This novel is often regarded as a feminist novel. However, I prefer to see it as something more revealing and meaningful in terms of women's emancipation. Shashi Deshpande's major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern educated Indian women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and self-expression, individuality and independence for the women on the other. Her fiction explores the search of the woman to fulfill herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother. She has examined a variety of common domestic crisis which triggers off the search for peace and stability. Deshpande's concern and sympathy are primarily for the woman. While revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity for herself, the author subtly bares the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression, experienced by women in our society. This novel is an account of a woman's journey for fetching out answers to some questions that are almost universal in nature. The novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and to realize her freedom. At this point it is important to determine the nature and context of the questions and issues Deshpande raises in the novel, primarily by means of the introspective analysis through which the main protagonist, Indu, passes. The relationship, family structure and the social background of the novel provide an appropriate and very credible stage upon which the action unfolds.

II

Indu, the protagonist, is caught up in a conflict between her family and the professional roles, between individual aspiration and social demands. Indu, the journalist, is torn between self-expression and social stigma. The majority of characters in the novel have restricted notions of cultural identity with which their vision of political changes is burdened. In this novel we come to learn how Indu is able to free herself from the stultifying traditional constraints and achieve her individuality. For Indu it is difficult to move towards emotional growth, peace and fulfillment; she must necessarily seek within and without herself not only to look for answers but also as a first step to identify the source of her disappointment and mental turmoil. Only then can she hope to be at peace with herself and with her world. She states: '*Now I felt clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary, uneven edges off myself*' (6). And similarly her belief that even if the house is demolished, the feelings, the emotions, the passions which the house has sheltered

would not cease to exist. These aspects of the family would keep on holding her in spite of all assaults coming from different directions. We do get from this novel a strong sense of the ambivalence that Indu feels towards both her family and the house which has sheltered her. This brings us to the other main issues confronting her. Where does her home lie? When she was young, she left the house full of resentment and rebellion, determined to prove for herself and the family that this was not her home. It is a rejection of the family in the most emphatic terms possible. This particular phase of her life gives her enough experience to know the world which exists outside the four walls. However, in the course of introspection and self-analysis she comes to realize that there is indeed a comfort in living as part of the family, whatever its level or quality, and that the house she ran away from is still the one she thinks of everyday for the first few moments. It takes her no efforts to fall into the rhythm of life at her family's house despite the number of years she has been away from it. She does also realize that her efforts at making a family, a home consisting of just Jayant and herself, are not really succeeding. Her endeavor to draw a magic circle around the two of them is meaningless because she can neither keep the world away nor can she find the happiness and contentment in just this one relationship. She discovers that a nuclear family misses out on a number of different relationships which a large family such as the one she grew up in provides. She thinks, that, maybe, her home has always been with her family. Indu's search for a home is symbolic of a deeper dissatisfaction with her marriage. She loves Jayant and to her this love means surrendering herself body and soul to him. However, she feels that Jayant is not committed to this relationship to the same degree as she is, and, understandably enough, she finds Jayant's indifference the main source of her anxiety and distress.

III

Alongside with it, there is also the issue of expectations. She finds that unless she tries to confirm that image of herself which Jayant subconsciously expects her to project, she ends up causing discomfort to him, even alienating him. This is evident from the way she has learnt to put up a charming, cheerfully complaisant face to Jayant. This is also evident from the way she has learnt to screen her passions, her thoughts and herself from Jayant. Her husband, Jayant, symbolizes the burden of the unconscious expectations that a society places upon a woman, especially when she is married. Deshpande shows her appreciation of the fact that in respect of expectations it is a woman who is solely blamed, though nothing substantial or adverse is said against a man in spite of all his indifference and detachment. However, Indu does realize that despite his visible detachment, Jayant is not strong enough to endure with equanimity her complete withdrawal from him. Nevertheless, in spite of Indu's rebellious and questioning nature throughout her childhood, her introspection shows her that she is trying to conform to the image of the ideal wife. Her reasons might be different, but then again they might not be so. This is a disquieting realization to her, and she does not want to turn into a woman who submerges her own self in her husband's. As far as her expectations from Jayant go, the central expectation remains a wish that he would learn to give as much as Indu does. She, however, realizes that, maybe, her husband is just incapable of giving that much and that he does love her in his own strange way. There have been other incidents that lead to a hiatus in their relationship, at least in so far as Indu is concerned.

One of the most important aspects is his seeming betrayal at the time of her professional crisis. She offers to resign from her magazine when she finds she is not doing anything meaningful; instead, she is only perpetuating the self-serving lies of various influential people. This is at the core of her dissatisfaction with her career as well. The fact that she is not really doing anything

meaningful has begun to rankle in her subconsciously. However, Jayant does not understand the delicacy of her situation and, to the contrary, advises her to continue with her job. Besides, there is also the crucial issue of nurturing a family with children. Jayant, it is obvious, is not interested in having children, and in the course of every discussion on this topic postpones it by saying that they do not have enough resources to look after a child properly. It is true that Indu herself is ambivalent about this particular issue, for she often feels scared of the responsibility that would devolve upon her in that contingency; and still she, even if vaguely, resents this attitude of not having any child at all. Nevertheless, the very strain of maintaining a façade before Jayant on this problem in the course of their life together is emotionally exhausting. It is not at all palatable for her honest, forthright nature to continue with this pretence or any other kind of pretence for a certain measure of time. This naturally leads to another layer of resentment and anger in her.

Yet another theme that frequently recurs in this novel is that of freedom, independence and detachment. Since her childhood Indu has rebelled against the rigid dictates of the family matriarch, Akka. She gets a taste of what society expects from a woman through the way the various people in the family try to mould her to the well-established cast of traditional household. She is made to feel like a criminal for being inquisitive and intelligent, for being willful, passionate about things and a non-conformist. Her only support is her old uncle, Kaka and her aunt, Atya. However, she is too young to value their advice at that time, and so yearns for freedom. She herself says: *.....But twice in my life I had thought I was free. Once when I left home as a young girl. And the second time, when, once again I left the family and returned to Jayant. Both times I found out how wrong I was. New bonds replace the old: that is all (36).* In an effort to counter the pain of disillusionment, she tries to take the path of independence and detachment. However, these paths do not provide her with happiness either. She eventually realizes that what Old uncle has been trying to tell her all these years is the only solution. To find happiness in little things, finding a measure of freedom within the obligations of duty, and finding that there is no shame in being dependent on people, these are the only possible solutions to this eternal cycle. In the words of Old uncle, 'The whole world is made up of interdependent parts....'

IV

The other important consideration is the role Naren plays in her inner journey. Naren has been Indu's childhood friend, and she shares a very high level of comfort with him. Naren's is a probing personality but one which does not overtly judge Indu. Talking with him is a kind of catharsis which is indeed very important for Indu. Had she not had to face herself and her actions under Naren's influence, she would, most likely, have taken even longer to reach a stage where there is a hope for her future life. Naren does also epitomize the role of an outsider in the family. Though old uncle's grandson and thus technically a part of the family, he has been made to feel an outsider since his childhood. And by virtue of being much different from others Indu too has never felt easy belonging to the family. The relationship they share is one of allies against the family and specially Akka. As an adult Naren makes Indu realize her own desires as far as her marriage and Jayant are concerned. With Naren to compare with, she finds herself in a better position to be able to see Jayant's strengths as well as his weaknesses. She comes to realize that the fault does not lie with Jayant alone. She does also bear a responsibility towards their marriage. Her desire for detachment is also put into perspective since she sees that if she does become detached, she is likely to end up being like Naren, and she does also realize that this is not what she wants. Naren is also the person who brings to Indu's attention the fact that she has been resenting being born a woman, and not a man. This is so because she's been trying to move

out in ways that are contrary to her inner nature. Since she does not realize it earlier, the whole thing has resulted in emotional conflict and alienation.

Though she does succumb to an extra --marital affair with Naren, she feels that what the two of them have done is not love. It might be termed an infatuation, besides camaraderie and understanding, but in the final analysis that still comes up short of the love she and Jayant have. In the end, Indu does come to a piece of sorts. She realizes that her home, her destination, her point of final arrival is Jayant and Jayant alone. She needs to shed off her complexes and not let her love for him become a restrictive bond. She also needs to do away with a large part of the façade she has built up around Jayant and to inject honesty and authenticity into their relationship. She comes away with a better understanding of her family and of what is really important for a meaningful domestic life. She is on way to forgiving or at least understanding what has actually driven Akka to be the kind of woman she has been. Indu understands herself better during this period of introspection and self- analysis. She has recognized that her morals would not suffer on the altar of her profession and that she would devote herself to the kind of writing she has always dreamed of doing. Looking from a broader perspective, in the end the realization comes that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is the right thing to do and the determination and the tenacity to adhere to it, which alone can bring harmony in life.

Shashi Deshpande is not a feminist in an aggressive and militant sense, for she does not make any assault on the male or masculine world. She has been maintaining and developing a very balanced kind of vision, a vision that is positive and creative and sustaining in nature. She does not believe in any kind of visible or invisible war between the sexes, and her whole attitude rests upon the fact that home is where one starts from, and that the happiest kind of home is one which rests upon liberal or liberalized domesticity. It is this kind of domesticity that holds the key to Shashi Deshpande's image of a perfect household, and it is essentially for this very reason that Indu has been made to realize this truth after so many turns and twists in her life.

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