

**WOMEN'S SELFHOOD QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHASHI
DESHPANDE'S *ROOTS AND SHADOWS***

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Abstract:

This paper examines women's quest for selfhood and identity in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*. It focuses on the inner struggle of Indu, a modern, educated woman caught between tradition and modernity. The study highlights how women in Indian English fiction move from being passive objects to active subjects. Deshpande portrays women who strive to assert individuality while negotiating familial and social constraints. The novel reflects middle-class women's frustration arising from emotional, social, and economic dependence. Indu's journey reveals the limitations of marriage as a means of liberation. The paper analyses her awareness of gender injustice within domestic and social spaces. It also contrasts orthodox and modern women through characters like Akka and Indu. The study draws upon feminist perspectives by Friedan, Beauvoir, and Showalter. Ultimately, the paper underscores self-realisation as essential for women's freedom and harmony in life.

Keywords: Women's, selfhood, Identity, Tradition and modernity, Female, autonomy, Middle-class women

In olden days, women were suppressed by male-dominated society. They had no courage to revolt, but in the modern age, the independence movement brought Indian women out of their sheltered and protected existence. It propelled them into the political and social arena, and they too began to experience a position equal to that of men. Women in recent novels are no longer treated as objects; instead, they

have become the subjects of these novels. Today, novelists depict women with both their negative and positive attributes. We can see women in all their colours: the power of women, the deviousness of women, the helplessness of women, and the courage of women. Modern novelists portray women who aspire, attempt, and strive to be their true selves (Meera, *Woman in Indian English Fiction*, p. 138).

Indian Fiction in English has a formidable line of women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Attia Hosain, Anita Desai, etc. They write about Indian women, their conflicts, and their predicaments against the background of contemporary society. While doing so, they analyse socio-cultural modes, women's images, and their roles in society. They deal with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realise her freedom. Shashi Deshpande is one of the novelists who voices similar concerns. In all her novels, she depicts how her heroines bring themselves into confrontation with the family, the male world, and society in general. Deshpande realises that freedom lies in having the courage to do what one believes is right and the determination and tenacity to adhere to it—this alone can bring harmony in life. Deshpande's protagonists are women struggling to find their own identity and, in spite of challenges and hostilities, remain uncrushed. Urmila in *The Binding Vine*, for example, declares: "I am not going to break" (19).

Deshpande's novels are more or less fictionalizations of personal experience. Most of them present the typical life of a middle-class housewife. Deshpande's main concern is the urge to find oneself, to create a space for oneself to grow independently. One striking feature of her novels is the recurrence of the theme that a woman should definitely have her own identity—"a room of her own." The predicament of women—especially those who are educated and belong to the middle class—has been most prominently dealt with. Many of her characters are frustrated either sexually or professionally. According to Betty Friedan:

"For a woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfilment—autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality, self-actualisation—is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Women's sexual problems, in this sense, are by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfil her potentialities as a human being—potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfilment ignores." (*The Feminine Mystique*, p. 282)

Friedan also holds the view that women should have equal positions with men. However, it is the misfortune of our society that even after being educated, women remain insecure because they do not have financial independence.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are generally educated women who struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. Her fiction is shorn of undue romantic embellishments and portrays women who, after a long and bitter struggle, overcome this syndrome and free themselves from stultifying traditional constraints, enabling them to cherish a spontaneous attitude towards life. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu in *Roots and Shadows*, Sumi and Aru in *A Matter of Time*, Jaya in *That Long Silence*, and Madhu in *Small Remedies* are some examples of such struggling women. These characters categorically exhibit the belief that women should have assertive and definite roles in their lives. Yet, their economic and intellectual emancipation does not negate their responsibility to nurture various relationships imposed by society and biological nature. They maintain that women should not be confined to the relations they bear to men, but at the same time, these relations should not be denied to them. A woman can enjoy various relationships—as wife, mother, friend, or companion—and still learn to be herself without requiring the sheltering presence of a man. Thus, they exhibit an energy that erases conditioning and frees them from psychic fears resulting from centuries of bondage.

Roots and Shadows explores the inner struggle of Indu, who represents a group of modern, educated women active in society and dealing with critical issues such as love, sex, marriage, settlement, and individuality. Indu achieves selfhood without negating family or society. It can be observed that she is not a feminist in the initial stage but becomes one later. As Elaine Showalter calls it:

“The female phase,” which is a phase of self-discovery—a turning inward, free from the dependence of opposition, and a search for identity. (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 13)

The second stage is a kind of enlightened reintegration into society, where she finds her own voice and is no longer “other-directed.” In this novel, Indu belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family headed by Akka, the mother-surrogate figure. She returns to her ancestral house and discovers her roots—as an independent woman and writer—and her shadows—as a daughter, a wife, and a commercial writer. She rebels

against Akka's conventional world, rigid values, and marries Jayant. Later, however, she realises the futility of her decision:

“Jayant and I... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness.
But I cannot fantasize.”

(Deshpande, *Roots and Shadows*, p. 14)

In order to attain freedom, she seeks marriage as an alternative to the bondage of her parental family. She hopes that assuming the role of a wife will help her gain identity. Her baffled longing to achieve complete personhood is explicitly expressed:

“This is my real sorrow—that I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not known it... that was somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone.”

(p. 34)

This emotional outburst proves that Indu has exercised extreme control over herself to justify her marriage. It is difficult for her to accept the compromises involved. As P. Bhatnagar comments:

“It baffled her to realise that she, who had considered herself so independent, so intelligent, and so clever—she who had been proud of her logical and rational thinking and who had been all set to reform Indian womanhood—had fallen into the trap waiting for her.”

(Bhatnagar, *Indian Women Novelists*, p. 21)

Throughout the novel, several instances prove that Indu is conscious of the unfairness prevailing in society with regard to women. She highlights everyday incidents that are usually taken for granted, forcing readers to reconsider them. Men are often unaware of the drudgery involved in household chores regularly performed by women. One such scene is graphically described:

“I went into the house avoiding the hall, ugly now with all the aftermath of an eaten meal. It disgusted me to see the strewn plates, the scattered remnants. And yet, for a whole lifetime, women patiently cleared up the mess with their

bare hands after each meal... Martyrs, heroines, or just stupid fools.”
(p. 73)

Domestic chores, as Indu observes, can be tiresome, boring, and frustrating. Simone de Beauvoir echoes this view in *The Second Sex*:

“Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its
endless repetition...”
(Beauvoir, p. 470)

Indu represents the new generation—aware, questioning, and determined. The novel gains its feminist stance through Indu’s assertion of autonomy and her awareness that she exists as an individual, not merely as Jayant’s dependent. She frees herself from guilt and humiliation and makes firm decisions regarding her life and career.

Ultimately, *Roots and Shadows* presents the predicament of modern Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. Indu’s journey reflects the struggle for selfhood, autonomy, and meaningful existence within the constraints of family and society.

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