

**Ripples of Excitement with Undercurrent of Tension: A Study of Indu's Predicament in  
Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows***

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***Abstract***

*The paper is an attempt to study the predicament of Indu in her endeavors to realize her ideals of freedom and independence before and after marriage. At the outset, the contribution of women novelists to Indian English fiction is discussed, focusing on Shashi Deshpande. A brief review of the research on Indu is carried out, followed by a detailed study of Indu's emotional journey into her past. Though an educated working woman, Indu is not an exception in terms of subjugation in a patriarchal society. Indu is assertive by nature but her upbringing at the ancestral house has impacted so much that she grows meek and silent. Even after marriage, the shadows of her roots haunt her. She plays the role of a submissive wife, but struggles inside. The stark realities in conjugal life like male chauvinism, lack of freedom and loss of emotional bonding soon disillusion her, and the rosy picture of happy life with chosen partner and children is gone. It is only after her soul-searching, she regains her assertive will, expresses her views freely and implements her decisions independently.*

(Key Words: predicament, subjugation, patriarchal, assertive, independence, conjugal life)

**Introduction**

A substantial contribution to the Indian English fiction came in from the new generation of women novelists like Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Geetha Mehta, Geetha Hariharan, and Uma Vasudev during 1980s and 90s. They "shared the experiences of Indian women in general and transmuted them into fictional form" (Shirwadkar, 1985, p. 200). Their frank treatment of themes like alienation, identity crisis, predicament of sex, feminism, and human relationships is something unique on the Indian literary horizon. They displayed a commendable awareness of the challenges to which women in particular are subjected in the

world of patriarchy. Their fiction, implicitly or explicitly, was a projection of the Indian milieu as “the modern Indian novel is the organic product of a particular environment in a particular society in a given time” (Mukherjee, 1971, p. 18).

Shashi Deshpande emerged as a leading novelist, portraying a realistic picture of the educated middle class women through her writings. “She is concerned with the women’s question in terms of marital relationships, familial bonds and the trauma of violence on the female body in most of her writings” (Reddy, 1995, p. 48). She deals with the feminine voices struggling to communicate and question the validity of the patriarchal values in the Indian society. She is more drawn to the predicament of the modern women who are sandwiched between traditional values and progressive thoughts. “Women’s struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande’s major concern as a creative writer ...” (Amur, 1982, p. 8).

### **Review of Literature**

*Roots and Shadows* is Deshpande’s first novel which is woven round Indu, an educated middle class woman who struggles to find her true ‘self’ after marriage. Though ample research is available on this novel, only a few researchers have studied and written exclusively on Indu. Among those who have attempted an analysis of the novel, Shuchi concludes that Indu weaves the fabric of her own intricate relationship with her husband and goes back with the positive renewal of life (2016). Ramani feels that Indu becomes assertive after her self-realization and tries to create space for her to lead an independent life (2016). Devi interprets that Indu has followed shadows like Naren until her self-realization and at last found her actual roots in the marital life and ancestral family (2013).

### **Study of Indu’s Predicament**

Staunch rebellion and meek acceptance characterize Deshpande’s heroines as they are ‘middle of the road kind’ (Mala, 1991, p. 52). The problem of Indu, the well-educated protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* is two-fold. The first one is that she is subjected to male subjugation at a place where she hopes to obtain freedom and independence while the second one is that she is unable to find her true ‘self’.

Even after her self-choice marriage with Jayant, Indu’s ideals of freedom and independence are not fulfilled. She finds herself as an entrapped bird flying from one cage to

another. Though a working journalist and a budding writer, Indu becomes a victim of the patrilineal setup. Hailing from a traditional middle class family, Indu sounds like “those families in the advertisements. Happy, smiling, healthy and in color” (*Roots and Shadows*, 1992, p. 25) but in reality, her life is a sad tale of mental oppression. Jayant is shocked to find passion in Indu. Indu’s initiative for sex “puts him off” (RS 83).

Indu often toys with the idea of leaving Jayant and living by herself and whereby, she feels that she can regain her true ‘self’. She works it out into a short story, but she is unable to find the ending of it. Though she dislikes complete surrender to Jayant, she feels chained to her present status. She does not look different from the other conventional women in the ancestral house, who think that “the greatest calamity is life without a husband” (RS 33). She confesses to Atya that she does everything he likes. She sheds off her “I” and loses “her identity in her husband’s”. “Self-surrender” and “self-abnegation” are tragic and foolish for Indu, but when she does it for Jayant, it appears in a different angle as she does it with a kind of half-willingness. The paradox of Indu’s attitude to her husband is clear when she says: “So, that’s all I am Naren. Not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife. But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it” (RS 83).

Indu stays away from the ancestral house for ten years. But each day of these ten years, she wakes up to the same sounds. She is unable to eschew the impact of traditional lives she observed in the old house. She confesses: “We flatter ourselves that we’ve escaped the compulsions of the past; but we’re still pinioned to it by little things.” (RS 34). Since Indu’s past is still working on her, she pretends to be an ideal wife at the expense of her individuality. As she herself says, she is “just a mouthing, grimacing puppet”.

Another reason why Indu submits herself to Jayant is that she does not want conflict in marriage, and she is afraid of facing the world independently. She says: “The hideout ghost of my own cowardice confronted me”, and “I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure” (RS 159). Since her childhood, Indu has longed for success in everything she does. She is “a part of a success-oriented society” (RS 55) and wants to show her marriage with a self-chosen partner as a success to the ancestral family. Hence, she keeps on lying, even to herself, “compromising, shedding bits of myself along the way” (RS 159).

Indu is such “an idealist”, and to run counter to her convictions is “a kind of self-flagellation” (RS 17) for her. Yet she continues in the job for Jayant’s sake. She has no proper consciousness to assert her will and give up such a job. Jayant’s response, when she asks his permission to resign, is totally dissatisfying to Indu. He says: “That’s life. What can one person do against the whole system. No point making a spectacle of yourself with futile gestures. We need the money, don’t we? Don’t forget, we have a long way to go” (RS 17). The way he pooh-poohs her views is devastating to Indu’s ideal of enjoying freedom and equal status in the marital life. Unable to do anything against her husband, she goes back to her work hating the work and herself, and “feeling trapped, seeing myself endlessly chained to the long dusty road that lay ahead of me” (RS 118).

Endurance seems to be the best quality for Indu that she can exercise then to appear like a successful wife in the worldly sense of the term. With “the gift of silence” (RS 33) and “an immense capacity for deception” (RS 38) taught by marriage, she begins to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wants to see, and to tell him nothing but what he wants to hear. She hides her responses and emotions “as if they were bits of garbage” (RS 38). She thinks of even compromising with what Jayant will give instead of craving for a response that would match hers. Her marital life with Jayant makes Indu quail “at the thought of becoming a mother for fear of being disillusioned” (RS 38) once again. That marriage will bring her much-desired independence has proved incorrect. Therefore, she is not ready to find herself once again incorrect in life by pinning her hopes on children. She declares: “I will have no children that is not wholly welcome” (RS 38).

Indu understands that her embitterment in her conjugal life is largely rooted in the gender discrimination perpetuated by the male-centered society. Hence, feeling “an immense hatred” for womanhood, she says: “I felt hedged in, limited by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me” (RS 79). She seems to have a desire to fight against womanhood itself. The compromising aspect of Indu’s character has its roots in the life at the ancestral house. She is unable to get rid of the shadows of her roots in the traditional brought-up.

Indu is left as a baby by her father Govind with the ancestral family which is dominated by Akka, a symbol of matriarchal figure. A gap of two generations between Akka and Indu stands them on two different levels of outlook towards the world. Akka, who is a symbol of tradition in the quick-changing Hindu society appears to Indu, who is a woman of modern and liberated

thought, as a relic from the past and as an antagonist. Akka is so orthodox in her outlook that she finds it wrong for a girl from a decent family to learn music.

Akkadominates the ancestral house which seems to have become an entrapment for women. They are not expected to converse with boys, and even to have a cup of tea brought by others. Old uncle puts in: “For a woman, intelligence is always a burden, Indu. We like our women not to think” (RS 33). Women should know their places on par with children. As a child, Indu is taught to be “obedient and unquestioning”, “meek and submissive” ... and “accept everything, even defeat, with grace”, because she is a girl and “it is the only way ... for a female to live and survive” (RS 158).

However, Indu is different in her views and thoughts. At the old house, she has never been “the way a girl was expected to be, helping the women with small old chores from a very young age, waiting on her father and brothers and being generally docile” (RS 122). She is very brave to confront Akka. She defiantly says when asked by Akka to promise not to talk with boys: “I won’t” ... “I haven’t done anything wrong. Nothing I need be ashamed of” (RS 74), showing her different outlook. For Indu, the elaborate rituals observed by Hindus for a birth, a marriage and a death look meaningless. Indu dislikes the house where “the women had no choice but to submit, to accept” as if they have been “born without wills” or “their will atrophied through a life time of disuse” (RS 6).

Indu leaves her 10-year-old life behind, swearing that she will never come back, and walks out of the house to marry Jayant, a man of her own choice, much against the wishes of Akka. When she receives Akka’s summons to see her at once, she considers it as “a welcome reprieve” (RS 18) from her psychological struggle and returns like “a child who had come with her problem and pains” (RS 106). During her three-week stay at the house, she has a number of enlightening encounters with the members of the family. It is a time of questioning, of rethinking her life, her journalistic career, her marriage and her illusion of independence in married life. Her self-digging gives rise to the birth of a new Indu. The “turmoil and distaste” in her mind slowly begin to seep out of her, leaving her a full of conviction unknown hitherto.

Disillusioned with the kind of life she has led with Jayant, and the kind of life she has observed in the family, Indu’s mind “keeps harping upon the theme of detachment and loneliness” (RS 108) for some time. Her feelings may be genuine as she is suffering from her attachment to the family and Jayant. However, acknowledging the fact in Old Uncle’s words –

“Attachment ... It’s the law of life”, and “in spite of the hurt, the suffering, the humiliations, you go on getting involved. That’s the human predicament” (RS 109) – Indu decides not to hanker after detachment and realizes that “detachment ... it was for the dead, not the living” (RS 186).

At the end, Indu overcomes her bitterness and also her views of detachment and stands out “sharp and clear” (RS 143) with her understanding of life. She says: “I would be most emphatically myself. Indu” (RS 143). She also understands that it is “a chimera” to think that she has found “total understanding” and “perfect communication” in marriage. She positively thinks of Old Uncle’s words - “The whole world is made up of interdependent parts” - and resultantly her illusion of thinking of herself free twice in her life gets shattered. She realizes that “no one can be completely free. Freedom has to be relative” (RS 14). She is decided to find “measures of freedom” within the rules and circles by asserting her ‘self’. She understands that “one’s own self” is “the ultimate truth” and “that’s what really matters” (RS 165) at the end. The old assertive nature of Indu is back after her introspection.

Indu makes up her mind to go home, confront the reality and build her future in the light of her new understanding. She knows where home lies now and says emphatically: “yes, home. The one I lived in with Jayant. That was my only home” (RS 186). She is determined not to tell Jayant about her relation with Naren, but there are other things, she would tell him: “That I was resigning from my job. That I would at least do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing”. She will inform him of her decision but not rely on his permission as she did in the past. “Maybe Jayant would understand ... Maybe he wouldn’t. But even so ...” (RS 187) she is determined to abide by her decisions.

Though Indu has spoken many a time as a rebel in a traditional set-up, she now realizes what she really is. Indu says frankly: “it’s not in me, the material of which revolutionaries are made. I no longer have any desire to mould people, to change them, to reform society. There is only one thing I know I can do ... I can write” ... “the kind of things that are acceptable, popular and easily sold” (RS 15). All the way, Indu is excited to revolt and break up but the undercurrent of tension disables her.

### **Conclusion**

In line with Shuchi and Ramani, it is concluded that self-analysis has enabled Indu to find her true ‘self’ and hence, she is determined to dismantle the wall of silence and assert herself. Unlike Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu is shown to have put her decisions into practice.

She keeps Jayant's matter for herself; she gives up her job without waiting for Jayant's permission and begins writing a book according to her views. Confusion and conflict pervade Indu's life in the early years of her marriage. But when she understands the labyrinths of life through introspection, she is able to assert her independence and individuality even in married life. Deshpande successfully portrayed the transitional Indian society, focusing on the prevailing incompatibility between traditional values and modern times and its inescapable impact on the educated middleclass women. She criticizes the hypocritical values of the patriarchal system for perpetuating male subjugation on women.

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