



## Challenging Patriarchy: The Journey from Submission to Self-Assertion in *Roots and Shadows*

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### Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian novelist, writes about the predicament of women in contemporary Indian society. Her fiction depicts human bonding and interpersonal relationships which forms the central thematic concerns of her oeuvre. The present paper aims to analyze the dilemmas, conflicts and psychological distress faced by women characters, especially the protagonist Indu in her renowned novel *Roots and Shadows*, a feminist text that interrogates the deeply entrenched structures of patriarchy within the Indian society. Indu's challenge to patriarchy is both personal and ideological and her failed marriage to Jayant exposes the incompatibility between modern womanhood and traditional marital expectations. Shashi Deshpande, as a novelist rooted in Indian tradition, portray her characters to strike a balance between traditional values and modern concerns. This research paper explores how the dismantling patriarchy requires women folk to confront both external structure and their own internalized conditioning.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Sexuality, Traumas, Feminine Sensibility, Womanhood, Resistance

*Roots and Shadows* is a multi-dimensional novel that recounts the story of Indu, an educated, middle-class woman who, like the protagonists in Deshpande's other works, confronts the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity within a male-dominated Indian society. The novel not only traces Indu's quest for identity and freedom but also interrogates the subjugated status of women in Indian culture. Indu's attempts at

asserting herself ultimately place her in situations where she must face the displeasure and resistance of her own family. G. S. Amur observes, "Woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as a human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer..." (10). This observation holds particularly true for *Roots and Shadows*. The

narrative opens with the traditional marriage of Mini, Indu's cousin, performed in the ancestral home. This event prompts Indu to reflect on her past and to reconsider the circumstances that compel her to return home after an absence of eleven years.

From childhood, Indu yearns for independence and freedom from the oppressive constraints of tradition. In her pursuit of autonomy, she rejects many of the age-old customs and dogmas of society. As a motherless child raised in a joint family, she receives care and protection from Old Uncle, Kaka, Atya, and other elders who shield her from familial tensions and disruptions. Nevertheless, Indu perceives Akka, the senior authority figure in the household, as the primary obstacle to her independence. She harbors resentment toward Akka's rigid and insular outlook and rebels against the patriarchal structure of the family, where women are denied agency and compelled to accept their predetermined roles. From beginning, it was imposed upon her that she was a female and therefore had to conform to the patterns and behaviours expected of women, as she states:

"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, even defeat, with grace because you are a girl, they had said. It is the only way, they said, for a female to live and survive" (Deshpande 158).

Throughout the novel, Indu's character is presented in sharp contrast to the other women in her family – such as Akka, Atya, and Mini. While these women unquestioningly accept oppression as their destiny, Indu resists and challenges these traditional and patriarchal expectations. The exaggerated importance attached to virginity and womanhood further fuels her rebellion. As she matures and attains puberty, her mother's anxieties and the family's

pressure regarding her marriage begin to encroach upon her personal freedom. Indu vividly recalls how crudely the notion of womanhood was thrust upon her:

"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, 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, badly, 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 cannot touch anyone or anything'" (Deshpande 79).

Simone de Beauvoir articulates a similar predicament when she observes that "the dramatic conflict that harrows the adolescent girl at puberty; she cannot become 'grown up' without accepting her femininity; and she knows already that her sex condemns her to a mutilated and fixed existence, which she faces at this time under the form of impure sickness and a vague sense of guilt" (351). Indu begins to resist the very idea of her womanhood. She detests the overt femininity that permeates the girls' hostel in which she resides, and the notion that her body is inherently "unclean" continues to trouble her. Gradually, she develops an aversion toward the natural biological functions of the female body, particularly those associated with motherhood, and nurtures a strong resistance to the idea of childbirth. A vague yet persistent sense of guilt also takes root within her, as she comes to believe that her femininity restricts her freedom and forecloses numerous opportunities available to men.

The novel portrays two distinct categories of women. The first comprises the

traditional women – Akka, Atya, Kaki, Sumitra, Sunanda, and others – who remain silent in the face of oppression and accept their suffering as an inevitable part of their destiny. Indu belongs to the second category: women who are assertive and resistant to patriarchal constraints. Mini too is vocal, though she lacks the willpower to challenge societal norms effectively. The women of the older generation regard tradition as a virtue and place unwavering faith in age-old conventions and practices.

Indu rebels against Akka's authority, particularly concerning matters such as education, love, and marriage. Rejecting conventional gender roles, she seeks fulfillment through education and professional engagement. She initially works as a journalist for a women's magazine but eventually resigns and joins another publication. She explains her decision in the following words:

"Women, women, women.... I got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of narcissism. And as if we have locked ourselves in a cage and thrown away the key. I couldn't go on" (Deshpande 78).

She attempts to create a new environment in which figures like Akka and others can no longer impose their will upon her. Choosing a partner of her own, she marries Jayant and leaves her parental home. Her first encounter with Jayant surprises her, for he offers her a sense of safety and emotional certainty. Indu believes that her marriage to Jayant will fulfil her longing to belong, to be desired, and to be cared for. What matters most to her is the freedom to express her authentic self to the world. In pursuit of this autonomy, she disregards Akka's ominous warnings, particularly her disapproval of inter-caste marriages. However, Indu's initial hope soon turns into disappointment.

Indu leaves her natal home and enters another household in the hope of achieving

independence and completeness, but she soon realises the consequences of her impulsive decision. She confesses: "Jayant and I... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasise. I think of the cries that had filled me earlier. I want to be loved. I want to be happy. The cries are now stilled." (Deshpande 13). Her marriage to Jayant suppresses both her femininity and her basic human needs. She finds herself dissatisfied with her husband, emotionally as well as physically. Her love for Jayant forces her into a state of uncritical submission, compelling her to accept whatever he desires or decides.

What begins as a love marriage gradually degenerates into a purely physiological arrangement, leaving Indu with a sense that she has violated the purity of her own body. She feels robbed of both fulfilment and happiness. The irony of her situation lies in the fact that, although she is deeply unhappy with Jayant, she is also unable to envision a life without him. She articulates her sense of incompleteness when she states:

"This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself. Until I had met Jayant, I had not known it... that there was, somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone" (Deshpande 31).

Bound within her marriage to Jayant, Indu realises that her life has become meaningless and devoid of genuine purpose. She begins to question her futile efforts to please him, asking herself, "Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own?" (Deshpande 49). She resolves never to live the life of the so-called "ideal woman," exemplified by her aunts and other tradition-bound women, who possess neither independence nor individual identity. Her marriage to Jayant ultimately leads her to reject the very notion of the ideal woman that society upholds. She ridicules the traditional rituals performed by her female relatives, which

are intended to ensure the safety and longevity of their men. She vows never to engage in such self-effacing practices that define her role solely in relation to a male. However, through introspective reflection, she gradually realises that she is not significantly different from her other relatives, as she begins to adapt her behaviour to conform to her husband's expectations. Unwittingly, she aligns herself with the orthodox women whose rituals she once scorned.

After marriage, Indu—who had considered herself complete, independent, and proud of her analytical and rational faculties—finds herself transformed into a traditionally submissive woman, whose identity is largely contingent upon her husband. Marriage, she discovers, has introduced her to deception and the performance of a façade. Her desire to assert herself has paradoxically led her from devotion to duplicity. Conversely, Jayant, despite his seemingly westernized lifestyle, behaves in many ways like a conventional Indian husband. Indu senses a certain shame in total commitment and begins to question the cost of absolute submission:

It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. When I'm like that, he turns away from me. I've learnt my lesson now. And so, I pretend. I'm passive and unresponsive (Deshpande 83)

As a result, Indu represses her sexual desires in order to maintain the status quo in her marriage. Jayant deliberately desexualizes her by rejecting her sexual identity, subtly shaping her sense of self according to his own whims. She struggles to articulate and cope with the resulting sexual confusion. Deeply in love with her husband, she experiences shame for the intensity of her affection, perceiving it as both dangerous and frightening. She fears that her complete surrender is transforming her into a traditional wife, silently conforming to her husband's desires and fancies.

At one point, she contemplates leaving Jayant—not due to a lack of love, but precisely because her love is so overpowering and humiliating. This realization makes her feel like an anachronism, caught between desire and selfhood. She hopes to reclaim her autonomy by rejecting him and living independently, stating: "Sometimes I wonder if I will leave him one day and live by myself. The only way, in which I can be myself, my whole self again" (Deshpande 88–89). Yet, despite these thoughts, she remains trapped in her marriage, unable to perceive it as a failure.

Indu opposes the notion that women are inherently inferior to men. Yet, she gradually realises that she has surrendered herself to Jayant, step by step, primarily to avoid conflict. Her commitment to Jayant and to her marriage is motivated less by love than by a desire to conceal her perceived failure. She seeks to present to society the image of a contented marital life, resorting to deception by maintaining a façade of happiness—a performance that ultimately overshadows her true personality.

For her, love becomes a source of disillusionment: she perceives it as a fraud, a practical joke, a trap, and a mechanism that renders women vulnerable. In contrast, sexual desire, maternal instinct, self-respect, and self-interest appear real and rational to her. The suppression of her ambition to become a creative writer constitutes perhaps her most significant personal loss, sacrificed in order to preserve the illusion of a harmonious marriage.

At a critical crossroads in her life, when her sense of security, confidence, and certainty begins to wither, she gets the opportunity to return to her parental home and reflect on her past relationships. She recognizes that Akka's life exemplifies how women, under the pressures of a joint family, often adopt a shroud of silence. Through Atya, Indu learns about the silenced and suppressed aspects of Akka's

existence, realising that she had previously failed to analyze Akka's true personality. She now understands how, under the guise of child marriage, women like Akka are subjected to neglect and maltreatment.

The events of Akka's life underscore broader issues concerning the treatment of women in Indian society. Indu becomes acutely aware of the suffering women endure under patriarchal oppression and humiliation, particularly in the event of a husband's death. Widowhood imposes a heavy burden, and any deviation from prescribed norms is regarded as blasphemous. Widows are often forced to have their heads tonsured, ostracized from family rituals, and excluded from auspicious ceremonies, effectively reducing their social status to that of outcasts. Indu's rejection of familial and societal constraints represents a conscious attempt to liberate herself from the confining structures of womanhood. She recognizes how female bonds have been subordinated to male authority, remarking: "Years of blind folding can obscure your vision so much that you no more see the choices. Years of shackling can hamper your movement so much that you can no more move out of your cage of no choices" (Deshpande 125). The experiences of other women in the novel highlight the limitations and inadequacies in Indu's conception of what it means to be a complete woman. These women possess a mode of perception that differs fundamentally from Indu's standards. The following reflection of Indu on Akka further clarifies this distinction:

Nothing about me...my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money, none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren...they were still for them the only successes a woman could have I had almost forgotten this breed of women since I had left home (Deshpande 116).

Sexuality emerges as a primary source of tension between Indu and Jayant. Indu's vitality and assertiveness in sexual matters shocks Jayant, who perceives it as unwomanly. By rejecting her passion, he attempts to subdue her femininity, denying her the fulfillment of her sexual instincts. Confronted with this repression, Indu seeks alternative avenues for self-expression and fulfillment, which lead her to engage in an extramarital affair with her cousin, Naren. The character of Naren serves as a foil to Jayant, highlighting the stark contrast between the two men. Indu's relationship with Naren must be understood in the context of her frustrations and unfulfilled desires within her marriage. Unlike her dynamic but suppressed relationship with Jayant, her connection with Naren is marked by boldness and unconditional assertion. Reflecting on her encounter with Naren, she observes:

"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" (Deshpande 152).

This episode in the novel has invited a range of divergent critical responses. P. Ramamoorthy remarks:

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 human existence. (34)

However, P. Bhatnagar offers a contrasting interpretation of this episode. She contends that Indu's actions would be unacceptable within an orthodox family

structure. Bhatnagar questions: "Indu's casual and matter-of-fact attitude to what she had done is shocking. Have our morals really gone so low that women commit this sin for nothing, just to prove that they do not lack courage? Is this really representative of the modern Indian woman?" (125-129).

Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of this episode aims to expose the double standards prevalent in Indian society, where men are free to pursue sexual relationships even after marriage, while a woman's sexual vitality within her own marital relationship is deemed unwomanly. As Neena Arora observes:

Man considers it as 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 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 prosecuting her. This condemnation is dictated by man's interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration (61).

Moved by Naren's neutrality, Indu feels that she might attain a sense of completeness and freedom by adopting a similar detachment. Her thoughts repeatedly return to this theme, as she wonders whether she will ever achieve a state of total placidity, free from passions and emotions. In her relationship with Naren, Indu experiences a newfound sense of freedom. She is able to articulate her traumas openly, discussing both her successes and failures without reservation. The autonomy she perceives in Naren's presence allows her to express emotions that had long remained latent.

Initially, she had rejected Naren's advances, asserting her essential monogamy, yet she ultimately offers herself to him twice, experiencing profound ecstasy. While she does

not regard this act of intimacy as sinful or criminal, the following day she reflects deeply on the magnitude of her actions. She scrutinizes each incident that led to her involvement with him, contemplating issues of sin, faith, and infidelity. She states:

"Apart from wronging Jayant? I winced at the thought. But had I not wronged Jayant even before this? By pretending, by giving him a spurious coin instead of the genuine kind. I had cheated him of my true self. That, I thought, is dishonorable, dishonest, much more than this, what I have done with Naren" (Deshpande 171).

Thus, Naren-episode not only provides Indu with a sexual outlet but also with an opportunity to recover her self-worth as a vibrant, emotionally alive human being. (Atrey, Mukta and Viney Kirpal (54). Words like love and affection become meaningless to her. She, now understands the true meaning of freedom and fulfillment. She begins to assess her position in her parental home. The responsibilities, fears and frustrations fail to dishearten her. The anguish and anger that had overshadowed her earlier, diminishes. She changes into an assertive woman with a new consciousness of freedom. Through Naren's teaching of detachment, she becomes able to reconstruct her scattered self. She becomes conscious of her wants, "I knew in that instant what it was that my life had lacked. It was the quality of courage". (Deshpande 150).

Ultimately, she feels that there is nothing shameful in feelings for Jayant. It does not reduce her dignity as a woman. The whole world is made of the parasites, people are interrelated. She wants to display her real self to Jayant instead of the fake one she has been showing to him in the past. There is a sense of honor and liability in the acts Indu performs now. She remarks:

Here, in this house, in this family was a role waiting for me. A role that I could,

perhaps, act out more successfully than the one I had tried until now. For had I not, so very often, felt myself just a mouthing grimacing puppet, dully saying the lines I had to, feeling, actually, nothing? had I not felt myself flat, one-dimensional just a blurred figure merging into the background. "Whereas here, I would stand out, sharp and clear (Deshpande 143).

Indu's perception towards *Akka* also gets changed. She realises that *Akka* was confident about her capacity to handle the family disputes and to fulfill the responsibilities. That is why, she chose Indu as guardian of her assets. *Akka's* decision of making Indu the custodian of her property leads to disputes among her relatives. They have a lot of expectations and greed but their credentials are doubtful. As Indu reflects:

There are strong and the weak. And the strong have to dominate the weak. It's inevitable. And *Akka* thought I was one of the strong ones. That is why she put the burden on me. And now, it is an obligation. I have to carry the burden. And to do that, I have to be hard. If I'm soft, I'll just cave in. (Deshpande 159).

Indu's reflection on her relationships reveals that she has often pursued illusions in search of pleasure, while the root of her conflicts lies in tradition. In order to maintain a balance between tradition and modernity, she consistently protests against orthodox tendencies and strives to preserve her individuality. However, fear of patriarchal pressures at times renders her aggressive. She realizes that unless she confronts and eradicates these deeply ingrained traditional roots—the primary source of her anxieties—she cannot attain true completeness. Determined to confront her fears with courage, she resolves to eliminate the doubts and complications that have constrained her. Through this process, Indu gains a renewed perspective on life. She

recognizes the value of her existence and comes to understand that her love for Jayant is not a restrictive force but a unifying bond essential for familial harmony. She modifies her attitude, resolving to reveal her true self to Jayant—her strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices alike. This transformation clarifies her position within her family, enabling her to perform her duties sincerely toward herself and her relatives.

Financial independence also plays a significant role in reshaping her identity. Money, she understands, can help bridge the gap created by gendered power dynamics in the family. She arranges Mini's marriage to a young and suitable man, rather than the aged match chosen by *Akka*, and seeks to support the elderly to prevent any criticism of her discretion as a guardian. Indu also recognizes the importance of educating women. Now equipped with wealth, intelligence, and freedom, she is positioned to transcend traditional feminine limitations and effect meaningful change in others.

Simultaneously, she acknowledges the importance of compromise and reconciliation in life. Feeling love for Jayant yet determined to assert her autonomy, she returns to him on her own terms, striving to rebuild a life grounded in honesty and transparency. She retains her freedom while pledging to prioritise her inner voice. Commenting on Indu's decision to pursue writing independently and to avoid relying on *Akka's* money for personal motives, Usha Tambe observes: "*The important point is that she is making independent decisions*" (12).

Indu's experiences teach her that listening to one's conscience and remaining faithful to it is paramount. True freedom within marriage, she realises, is achievable only when one acts according to one's convictions and follows them sincerely. This approach brings harmony and peace, allowing her to assert her individuality through both compromise and reconciliation—essential qualities for a balanced

life. Shashi Deshpande, through Indu, projects the challenges faced by modern Indian women navigating a transforming social landscape. Indu's embrace of progressive norms and her pursuit of personal freedom, aligned with the development of her personality, ultimately enable her emergence as a rational and self-aware human being. As S. P. Swain aptly summarizes:

The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her job, defying male authority, patriarchal hierarchy and discards the irony of a woman's masked existence. Her self-discovery is the frightening vision of the self's struggle for harmony and sanity. She is able to discover her roots as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer (98).

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