

# **Roots and Shadows – A Feminist Study**

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**Abstract:** *Feminism recognises the inadequacy of male-created ideologies and struggles for the spiritual, economic, social and racial equality of women sexually colonised and biologically subjugated. An expression of the mute and stifled female voice denied an equal freedom of self-expression, feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalisation of women.*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Feminism recognises the inadequacy of male-created ideologies and struggles for the spiritual, economic, social and racial equality of women sexually colonised and biologically subjugated. An expression of the mute and stifled female voice denied an equal freedom of self-expression, feminism is a concept emerging as a protest against male domination and the marginalisation of women. Sarah Grimke observes:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind... (Letters on the Equality of the Sexes 10 ff).

Feminism strives to undo this tilted and distorted image of woman whose cries for freedom and equality have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, a male culture. Thus denied the freedom to act and choose on their own, women remained solely inside the field of vision, mere illusion to be dreamt and cherished. A woman is a woman, and a woman she must remain but not a 'man's shadow-self', 'an appendage', 'an auxiliary' and the 'unwanted and neglected other'. A woman is held to represent the 'otherness' of man, his negative. The development of Feminist thought at the outset of this century has brought about a perceptive change in our outlook towards women. Now, women are one with man and not their 'otherness'.

Men have taken up the cudgels for women. No longer are they callous to their sexual and gender exploitation. Gandhiji gave a new direction and dimension to the Feminist movement in India and freed women from passivity and servility. Raja Rammohan Roy and Pdt. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar did no less. The ideal of Ardhagini enshrined in Indian culture renders man as the complement of woman, her other half. Together, they make a whole. Prakriti and Purusha are one. Man and woman are one in the concept of Ardhanariswara. Traditionally, India is a male-dominated culture. Indian woman 'covered with many thick, slack layers of prejudice, convention and ignorance' has hardly any autonomous existence. "Our country belongs to its men"(143), Observes Aunt Lila in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*. The woman's voice is an insurgent, subaltern voice. The Indian woman today is no longer a Damayanti. She is a Damini or a Nora or a Joan of Arc. Social reformers championing the cause of woman like Raja Rammohan Roy, Pdt. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi gave a new direction to the Women's Lib in India. Thus feminism has now emerged as a new way of life, free of the "dependence syndrome" [Nahal in Singh (ed.) *Feminism* 1991: 17]. A new perspective has dawned on the Indian social horizon with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman's role in the society and re-assert her self-identity. This paper intends to study the incarceration of the self of Indu and her assays to get out of this 'encagement and entrapment' by asserting her feminity through self-realization and self-discovery.

Elaine Showalter posits three phases in the growth of feminist tradition: "limitation, protest and self-discovery" (Literature 13). Shashi Deshpande's novels are directly related to all these phases. They encapsulate her artistic vision of feminity as alienation. In her novels, she explores and exposes the long-smothered wail of the incarcerated psyche,

imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity. Here we have Roots and Shadows explores the inner self of Indu, who symbolises the New Women who are educated and who live in close association with society brushing aside all narrow social conventions. They have the freedom to talk about anything they like and are also free to think of their own caged selves besides politics, corruption and what not. Married to Jayant Indu freely moves with Naren and uses such words like "kiss", "rape", "deflowered", 'orgasm' (78) etc. in her conversation with him. Indu says:

We're gay and whimsical about our own people, our own country. We are rational, unprejudiced, broadminded. We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption, family planning. We scorn the corrupt, we despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked.... And our hearts bleed, Naren, for Vietnam, for the blacks, for the Harijans.... But frankly, we care a damn. Not one goddam about anything but our own precious selves, our own precious walled-in lives (25).

Through the character of Indu, Deshpande is portraying the inner struggle of an artist to express herself, to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potentiality, i.e. creative writing. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service-life but her husband, Jayant, is not one with her. He is a barrier to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that one person like Indu can do nothing against the whole system by wielding her pen:

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 (17).

Look at the diametrically opposite temperaments of the husband and the wife. One is sympathetic to the ills of the society, the 'system' as Deshpande puts it, whereas the other is nonchalant. One is a writer in quest of an artistic selfhood while the other is a philistine, in pursuit of materialistic happiness. Despite these temperamental differences, Indu is quite submissive. Hence, she had not asked him, "To go where?". Instead she had silently gone back to her work, hating it and hating herself. Her self-alienation increases as she becomes aware of the contradiction between her desire to conform to a cultural ideal of feminine passivity and her ambition to be a creative writer. Thus Indu perceives herself as a shadow of the female self, a negative, an object. Miller observes that "when one is an object, not a subject, all of one's own psychical and sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently" (Towards a New Psychology of Women 63). But why doesn't Indu ask Jayant? It is because, she is hedged in, she is incarcerated, unable to "go on" (18) through the ordeal of life and "feeling trapped" (Ibid.), seeing herself "endlessly chained" (Ibid.) to the long dusty road that lay ahead of her. But with Akka's summons she heaves a sigh of relief:

It had been a welcome reprieve. A chance to get away. To avoid thinking about what was happening to me to Jayant and me... and our life together (18).

A woman's role is not only confined to the centripetal needs of the family in which she lives but also to its centrifugal needs. It is here that a woman has to be more than her domestic role as a submissive housewife. She has to become a 'society lady' as Shobha De would put it. But there also, she is a meek and yielding creature. Centuries of tradition have made her so and she takes pride in such suffering. But we do not find Indu expressing such pride in her suffering. She cannot bear with the suffering she had to face in the 4 family and hence she breaks away from it and marries Jayant. In the family-she was an incomplete being, without a sense of the wholeness of personality. But with Jayant she feels a sense of completion and wholeness This is an instance of total disorientation and isolation from which Indu too suffers. Often, we find in the novel references to her 'loneliness', suggested through the image of 'dust and barrenness' (10) and 'dark room' (21):

Then we are out. It is dusty, a totally barren place. The glare and the heat are both fierce. I am alone now and move along people I don't know. ...I had rejected the family, tried to draw a magic circle around Jayant and myself. I had pulled in my boundaries.... 'I am alone' (10).

And again her disorientation finds expression when she says: "Our own people? Who are they? Where do I draw the boundary?" (11).

Indu reckons her roots in breaking away from the family but she ultimately discovers that these family-bonds are the root of one's being and keep on dogging one like shadows. In fact these roots are the shadows. Shadows that one can't flee from:

We flatter ourselves that we've escaped the compulsions of the past; but we're still pinioned to it by little things (34).

Even the trifles and trivia which dog her like shadows, uproot her from her social moorings.

As a woman, Indu is hardly left with any choice. Her life is so acutely circumscribed that she cannot make quick decisions and hence fails to arrive at concrete determinations:

Inner strength... I thought of the words as I looked down on Mini's bowed head. A woman's life, they had told me, contained no choices. And all my life, specially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The women had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered... have they been born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? (06)

Indu recognises her displacement and marginalisation as a woman, a process of ego dissolution begins. She finds herself merging into others, experiencing a loss of boundaries. The authoritative and dominating male has not only suppressed the female voice for articulation but also brought silence, dullness and repulsion to the houses these women live in:

The house was silent, as if tired of its pretence of liveliness. A few women who had been left behind, and who had been carrying on an interminable argument in the kitchen, their voices, rising and falling monotonously, were now hustled out by an authoritative male voice (06)

Jayant betrays her hopes for harmony and integration, for peace and happiness. He fails to be her 'alter ego'. Neither is he 'a sheltering tree', to protect her in weal and woe. Instead she finds that she has relinquished her identity by surrendering before Jayant's masculinity, by becoming his wife. Willingly she yields to the demands of marriage and moulds herself upto the dictates of her husband. But she never blames him for it is men who 'tear' and woman who 'bear'. Indu exists and yet does not exist. There are women in our society who hate the rearing of a child. They are simply sex objects who produce children and leave them to their hapless lot. Indu is one such woman who does not believe in mothering. She is a woman who 'bears' and not the one who 'rears'. In an act of unreflecting defiance against patriarchy, she believes that a woman should deprive herself of the satisfaction that comes from not only bearing a child but also playing a major role in his/her personal development. In this sense she is an anti-radical feminis. She says:

Having children ... it isn't something you should think and plan about. You should just have them. And yes ... end up like Sunandaty. Pure, female animal (115).

Probably she believes that a female's job is only to reproduce and breed and to take care of the offspring's growth and development is the look-out of the male. This seems to be a blot on her femininity. A fluid character as she is, Indu, willingly bears all and acts up to the expectations of her husband :

Always what he wants, what he would like, what would please him. And I can't blame him. It is not he who has pressurized me into this. It is the way I want it to be.... Have I become fluid with no shape, no form of my own (54).

Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman. It leads her to "aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (De Beauvoir 1974: 500). Women pay for their happiness at the cost of their freedom. De Beauvoir emphasized that such a sacrifice on the part of a woman is too high for anyone since the kind of self-contentment and security that marriage offers woman drains her soul of its 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... (De Beauvoir 1974: 502).

Indu, true to her feminine virtues, plays the role of an ideal housewife but the role of a wife restricts, rather circumscribes her self. development firstly by taking away her freedom of thought and expression and secondly by denying her the scope of giving free play to her artistic (creative) potentiality. Regarding a woman's role-playing, Rosemarie Tong observes:

Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and/or psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing (Tong 1993: 208).

Jaya is discontented with this pre-ordained role of a woman. She has so many choices but for a married woman like her, she is left with a few or practically no choice save what her husband wills and desires. She cannot unburden herself.

Her feminine instinct is curbed and suppressed. Despite all these, she is reluctant to admit failure and drags on with her marital life which encloses and imprisons her true self. She confesses to Naren:

As a woman I felt hedged in by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me (87).

Even in her professional life too, she has to curtail her freedom and submit to the dictates of the editor. She cannot give up her job which fails to be self-satisfactory. Jayant wants her to compromise with the profession of a writer. But could she compromise? The uncompromising Indu surrenders at times before Jayant just for show only. She is the very embodiment of the feminist principle which is an uncompromising pledge, and an antidote to exploitation and oppression of women. This uncompromising stance that Indu assumes is ventilated through her dialogic imagination. Woman like Indu are alienated from the product upon which they work their body. Tong further observes:

A woman may say that she diets, exercises, and dresses for herself, but in reality she is probably shaping and adorning her flesh for men. A woman has little or no say about when, where, how or by whom her body will be used (Feminist Thought 187).

Whatever Indu does, it is only to please Jayant, and to please him is her way of life:

Indu's problematic of "becoming" expresses Deshpande's feminist polemics against sexual and gender roles imposed upon women in a patriarchal malist culture. Such 'relative identity', or rather the 'received role models' distort and problematize her self-perception. Such a world reduces women like Indu to a mere thing or a mind-less body. With her peremptory and subjugating voice, her feminine instinct for articulation is suppressed. Ever ready to please Jayant, Indu acquiesces to his wills and desires and does everything to reflect his image. Indu gradually realises that she doesn't exist for her but for Jayant, that archetypal male, imperialistic and subjugating. She feels in her a sense of existential angst and insecurity. Look at a fear-stricken and lacerated woman railing at her family and the malist world where a girl is "never claimed" but is "set apart from the others" (81)

This is my family. These are my people. And yet... I hate them. I despise them. They're mean and petty and trivial and despicable. I had always told myself... I won't be like them. I won't live like them. And I thought I've got away. But to what, Naren?... Are we doomed to living meaningless futile lives? Is there no escape? I'm afraid, Naren. ... I'm afraid... (160)

Indu ultimately realises that she has been chasing shadows, leaving her roots far behind in the family and in Jayant. Naren with whom she develops an adulterous relationship is a mere shadow to her. Naren has no permanent place in her memory. Hence she decides to go back to Jayant who she feels is totally innocent. It is she who is to blame for the marital discord in their lives. She has created a hell out of a heaven. She, the narcissist who "had locked herself in a cage and thrown away the keys" (85), forgotten the roots, feeding on only dreams and shadows. She has failed in love not Jayant. She has escaped from the familial responsibilities of the home, chasing after oneirodynamic and uncrystallising shadows. She realises that marriage had stunted and hampered her individuality for she saw it as a 'trap' and not a bond and that the home where the family is housed, she saw it as a 'cage'. Now she realises that all those were mere illusions and not reality and all the struggles of her life was an act of futility:

But what of my love for Jayant, that had been a restricting bond, tormenting me, which I had so futilely struggled against? Restricting bond? Was it not I who made it so? Torment? Had I not created my own torment? Perhaps it was true.... There was only one thing I wanted now and that was to go home... the one I lived with Jayant. That was my only home.... I would put all this behind me and go back to Jayant.... I knew I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me... 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 from my job. That I would do the kind of writing I had always dreamt of doing (187).

Thus Indu's uncompromising and paradoxical feminine self that frantically longed for self-expression for the articulation of her feminine voice, finally finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Shadows disappear from her vision and she sees the clear light of day with the realization and discovery of her authentic female self. Thus "in the end, comes the realization 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. That alone can bring harmony in life" (Bhatnagar, op. cit.).

The meek, docile and humble Indu finally emerges as a bold, challenging, conscious and rebellious woman. She resigns her job, thus defying the male authority, hierarchy and the irony of a woman's masked existence. Her self-discovery is the frightening vision of the feminine self's struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval, to lead a meaningful life with her husband Jayant. Her 'home-coming' is ironical since the home she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace and consolation. It is Akka's house which makes her realize many things and offers ample opportunities to know herself, her inner life. It is here that she is able to discover her roots an independent woman and a writer and what the shadows are a daughter, a mother and a commercial writer. She begins to see life in a new light. Have a fresh look at Akka's house:

Yes, the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past I had to move away from. Now, I felt clear, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary uneven edges of me (204).

Indu now, feels a sense of hope for life, for existence. She negates the ideas of non-existence. She says:

No, there is no such thing. To accept it will be to deny the miracle of life itself. If not this stump, there is another. Other airs I felt as if I was watching life itself endless, limitless, formless and full of grace (202).

All mothers need children not to abandon her (the child) to her fate but to nurse her. Unless a woman's 'maternal instinct' is satisfied, she will become increasingly frustrated and forlorn. Indu should accept the role of an ideal mother, if she at all has a 'maternal instinct' and should not renounce, in the name of 'liberation', all that female biology has to offer. Perhaps, Indu wants to assert herself and hence believes that since motherhood is a patriarchal institution, each woman has to deny herself, even temporarily, the experience of mothering, so that the patriarchal institution is destroyed once and for all. Such is Indu's feminist vision which "has recoiled from female biology" (Rich 1979 : 31). But as women struggle to elude patriarchal oppression in order to assert their femininity, they gradually become alienated from the socio-familial milieu for "femininity is itself alienating" (Foreman 1977: 151).

The greatest crime for Indu is that she is born a girl. She feels that womanhood is a curse: "I had committed a great crime by being born a girl" (126). Being a female Indu "could neither assert, nor demand or proclaim" (132). She "doesn't fit into the world" (102). Then where does she belong? She doesn't know: "Where do I belong?" (Ibid.). It is this search for roots that moves her to affirm her identity through the assertion of her feminine self:

assert yourself. Don't suppress it. Let it grow and flourish, never mind how many things it destroys in the bargain (132).

The novel ends with a note of affirmation. Indu asserts her individuality as a woman and also as a partaker in the endless cycle of life. She lives to see life with the possibilities of growth. Thus she has discovered the meaning of life in her journey to individuation. Through the character of Indu, Deshpande has registered her awareness of the arrest to feminine development brought about by an economic system given to sheer materialistic happiness and inhabited by philistines like Jayant, and a patriarchal family-structure which produce in women dependency, insecurity, lack of autonomy, and an incomplete sense of their identity.

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