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Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Feminism is one of the important issues in India now. So it has its dominance in literature. The women writers advocate for the socio-cultural freedom as Deshpande demands the same by sketching the character of Indu. Indu is a woman who is very much identical to the writer's ideology and thought.

Introduction

The worldly wise Indu in the novel *Roots and Shadows* who has considerable expertise in dealing with tricky problems like love, sex, marriage, settlement and individuality in interpersonal relation and who comes face to face with the real situations in the society resembles Sarita in her inner struggle and Jaya in her fond longings to put her pains in her writings. The existence of 'other' in her living world takes away most of her freedom that would leave her all alone to herself which reminds us her "loneliness of hostel life" (29). She wants to transform this 'savage' cruelty into a solitude that characterizes positivity, but attaining itself is a tough task. Indu realizes the inevitable patriarchal structure and code which defines women as incomplete without their men. Sartre observes the relations between individuals as a continuous and perpetual failure. Even if Jayant and herself are yoked together, the literal togetherness cannot bring her complete happiness which she only fantasizes. She says "This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself" (31). The irresistible longings within her "I want to be loved, I want to be happy" (13) have now stilled. Once she expresses her fillings to Naren "I am still and dead" (192). Freedom presupposes inter-dependence. All her illusions to be completely free have to be dissolved with this concept in her mind that all things are connected. That, when such is the case of man's finitude and ignorance, it is beyond her means to mould people and change their pattern. She can do one thing that's she could write, an endeavor to fight against womanhood. It too proves to be a perilous task as pressures from all sides come closing in on her. She has to compromise with things what Jayant prefers and the things "that are acceptable, popular and easily sold" (15) contrary to her likings. Indu takes up the battle for a meaningful existence of her own, to assert her individuality in the backdrop of ruthless male chauvinism. Quoting O.P. Bhatnagar, Sarbjit K. Sandhu in his book *Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande* says "the novel deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with the male world and the society in general" (27).

Indu leaves home at the height of the hostility between herself and Akka, the old patriarch and no one is willing to relent. To Indu's mind Akka is "ruthless, dominating, bigoted and inconsiderate" (22). "A rich childless widow" who migrates to her brother's home and takes control over her brother's children and "She had the last laugh" (22) on Indu. After getting married to a person of her choice against the wishes of her father and other family members she flees home and virtually remains obscured for long ten years. She comes back to attend Akka's funeral rituals to whom she considers no distant relation what Jayant led her to believe.

Indu has her own distinct pattern of living and she follows it scrupulously like any devout woman in her religious zeal. She is educated, intelligent and has a head for a capability of understanding. She can smell rot, behind the 'deceptive façade' (59) and can see human passions like envy, bitterness, malice, meanness, greed and anger at a very close range.

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Everybody in the family is caught unaware of a change that is in the offing and the crucial role is to be played by Indu. Her tenacity and single minded purpose of behavior, her logical and rational thinking have made her to live like a fiercely independent woman. Indu is revealed through freedom, a constantly renewed obligation not only to discover the world but also to remake herself. The changing scenario after her marriage to Jayant demands such necessity of choice. Interrogation and judgment put nothingness at the very center of her being. In regard to love she remains skeptical. She said “A woman who loves her husband too much, too passionately. And is ashamed of it” (192). So Indu suffers from internal cleavage between two contrary things of intense involvement. It is almost a deep concern for her to choose either – to conform to the tradition bound society and make her husband happy or to attend to her own freedom and comfort setting aside all imposition. In the matter of choice, she disunites with her own being since it is the distinct characteristic of human consciousness. Such existential choice has detached herself from herself.

Though gifted with free choice, Indu falls short of transmuting her expectations into desired results. Under such circumstances her communal nature is down played: Her beliefs and values she holds steadfastly have lost their credibility. Though not swayed away entirely by love, she is to show that there is not a slightest crack between her and Jayant. Even if she knows it is pretence, a gimmick, she carries this burden of inauthenticity for the most of her life’s time which limits her freedom and lands her in anguish. It is a tragedy that she never becomes free from the tradition bound society. She abhors womanhood which denies her freedom and the concept of being complete in her. The thought of her womanhood is imposed on her crudely by the elder women of her family:

“You’re a woman now. Kaki had told me. You can have babies yourself” (79).

She muses “And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean” (79). Indu, who is outright in her conviction and contemplates to use her freedom in a most natural way with infinite possibilities is saddened with a thought that “Yes, it was true. I felt hedged in, limited by my sex” (79). Gender discrimination in general accounts for a clash of ideas and actions in which it is a defeat of her own sex, it is a defeat of mother right in which the great strength seems to slip away. Indu feels as outcast. The surging revolt within her is a sign of predicament for all self-respecting women in general.

Carrying the indignation she returns to her ancestral home, a symbol of affinity and warmth in all Deshpande’s novels. She returns with a hope to find out the roots, a source, a safe anchorage to fall back on but she finds shadows instead which are not to be relied on. In face of rivalries, conflicting interests, it is almost an impossibility to stick to the place. It is better to go ahead with her own life, her career, her love and her own future. After having enlightening deliberations with the elder members of her family, she chalks out plan for their future and herself would go back to reshape her own family. Like Akka she herself longs to see the family “as an entity, beautiful and living” (59). At her ancestral family her hope is disintegrated in a thick o’ malice and meanness’.

Such fair perception would be put to test at her home.

The character of Indu is projected against a group of women belonging to older generation that respect traditions. The writer has very artistically juxtaposed two categories of

woman in the Indian set up – one group represented by Akka, Narmada, Sumitra, Kaki, Sunanda Atya and the other represented by Indu alone. To the earlier, the broad sweep of interest is nothing “but to get married, to bear children to have sons and then grand children” (128). The ideal woman is the one who evades her subjectivity and independent identity: “A woman who sheds her ‘I’, who loses identity in her husband” (54). They are so popularly accustomed to the established system of such social structure and practices that they take their husbands for ‘lord’ or ‘owner’. Such women are obliged to provide all affordable services for their husbands’ needs and desires.

Indu remains mindfully detached from these taboos, for, she is analytical and enquiring. She stands to listen the voice of her conscience and then revolts. But her struggle ends in half the way and her voice was not heard to the farthest end. She begins to feel the full impact of the convention and tradition in practice in the social context. She fears a social stigma when things are not done in conformity with her cultural roles. Sensitive to situations and being highly educated, she aspires for a life of independence. But Akka stands on her way. She used to dictate moral conduct and sexual behavior and activities. In patriarchy, it is a division of women one from the other. She used to teach her ‘respectability’ and ‘deviance’ in their respective meanings. When Indu studied in the college, Akka did not permit her to meet boys and develop kinship with them. She kept her under strict surveillance. She is sad because her liberty was truncated. She feels injured but she never remains suppressed. She married Jayant and such choice was necessitated by situation at home. She knows that the world she lives in is irrational, alien and indifferent. She resolves to choose an independent life and can be ruthless to achieve success in life. But her prognosis goes wrong. The presence of Jayant in her life is an intrusion. She lately realized. To be complete in her remains a myth, an illusion. There is an inevitable clash of actions and choices between herself and Jayant. Old uncle’s words are still ringing in her ears: “Freedom has to be relative” (14). This is the human predicament that human choice meets its failure of necessity: “Jayant and I ... I wish I could say we have achieved complete happiness. But I cannot fantasise” (14). The demand on her part for being loved has become “an exercise in futility” (13). She speaks about her own incompleteness: “This is my real sorrow. That I can never be complete in myself” (31). She begins to realize the fundamentally unknowable world: “a part of me without which I remained incomplete” (31).

Indu acts as a ‘mutilated male’ who has lost her soul. Biological inferiority makes her inferior in her capacity, her ability to reason and ability to make decision. She stands midway between resistance and submission as a typical characteristic of contemporary Indian women. Indu, who ridicules the idea of not calling husband’s name and has a cynical disdain for such popular culture, she herself meekly follows the hearsay. She wants Jayant to share her feelings and in turn obediently waits for her approval in every matter, since his disagreement may shatter her peace of mind. Radical feminist like Shulamith Firestone speaks patriarchy as the sex-class system in which man continues to stake a claim on his ownership and controls woman’s reproductive capacity. These twin reasons account for a woman being dependent on man, both physically and psychologically. The metaphorical expressions for gender extolling male as norm, whole and powerful and reducing female as deviant,

unfinished, mutilated has made Indu aware of the malevolent structure of male supremacy and male dominance in the patriarchal society. Under the influence of male chauvinism the wider world of Indu becomes small and contracted. During her long discourse with Naren in chapter-5 Indu becomes conscious of hitherto unlearned lessons about her own sex: "Yes it was true. I felt hedged in, limited by my sex. I resented my womanhood because it closed so many doors to me" (79). When her role is immutable, it is better to live with gleeful countenance. She begins to learn the unknowable that if inauthenticity exists anywhere, it does exist in a married life. Indu is exposed to this potential evil in human conditions. Artificiality and deception can eclipse a woman's true self and individuality. Rejecting the family and drawing a magic circle around Jayant and herself, she feels lonely. She expresses most poignantly "I am alone" (34).

In the given situations, she learns to be flexible and withstand pressure allowing herself exposed to affectations and hypocrisy. Like every other woman, she is ready to give up her identity for the sake of gaining completeness. However, such thoughts scare and terrorize her. It is the absurd existence that scares and terrorizes her. Dread comes out of the difference between authentic knowledge of her life and the inauthentic knowledge of her life that is thrust upon her. She plays her part a being-for-itself who is perpetually tormented by conflicting forces influencing her and continually moves from 'is' to 'is not' rendering her ineffectual. She suffers from situational paradox. When she is not happy with Jayant there is little reason for her to long for him for attaining completeness. But she craves for his company for achieving completeness. On the other hand, she does not really want a sort of completeness that depends on another person's help. It is a peculiar obsession we find in the character of Indu.

Deshpande shows extra-marital sexual feelings through the character of Indu. Her proud declaration "I am essentially monogamous, for me it is one man and one man alone" (89). Not being happy with Jayant, she thinks, she is removed from rightful domain. Her laxity in matter of sex is confirmed as she offers twice to Naren's desires. Her ambivalent attitude has made her a woman of inauthenticity as she regards her act as a matter of adultery, a sin, a digression from the standard of Indian womanhood and on the other hand, she looks upon it as not sinful. However, the deliberate involvement in lying continues to torment her all through her life because it is not in conformity with her being-in-herself.

To Indu, the concept of love is false. It begets qualities like humbleness that in the long run, enslaves a woman. It is a trap for a woman where there are few routes to escape. It is a system in the patriarchal mode of existence. Still then, she continues to show such uprightness from her childhood days. She does not allow herself either to submit or surrender. But marriage after her own choice hurts her sensibility, blights her vision, and curbs her instincts. She feels awful to learn that Jayant like any other husband with a chauvinistic zeal wants her to submit who falls under expropriating class which Indu finds it more difficult to bargain for. However, she concedes like any other coy mistress to her husband's for fear of being blamed that her choice in choosing Jayant was wrong. She frantically keeps the truth away from others. Facing the truth all by herself, she undergoes tumultuous experience. She expects too much from Jayant which he possibly cannot deliver. She is a woman who like the

mythical phoenix will rise each time from her own ashes in order to be buried in the same ashes. The idea of finding a real man in Jayant is just an illusion and far from reality. Thus, the idea of love has "a small crack in the perfection" (91). After having a harrowing experience of reality of life, her sense of certainty, confidence and assurance begin to vanish. Her struggle to understand the life has plunged her into an abysmal depth. Indu complains about Jayant's lack of sensibilities and feelings when she speaks out her feelings to Jayant, he dismisses it as rubbish, 'nonsense' and nothing else. Lack of understanding between man and wife has caused failure in their married life. For Indu it is a misadventure to understand the life in reality. All her struggle aimed at this understanding ends in smoke. When no favours are received, she looks upon marriage as a trap: "A trap? Or a cage? a cage with two trapped animals glorying hatred at each other" (67). The internal cleavage from which Indu suffers could not keep her at peace. In spite of all doubting and questioning and notwithstanding her life being built upon a foundation of trickery and deception, she wants to go back to Jayant with a hope to find out roots instead of shadows.

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