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## **Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*: A Tragic Story of Strained Marital Relationships**

**Ms. M. Kavitha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Padmini Bernard Fenn<sup>2</sup>**

1. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sree Sakthi Engineering College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.
2. Associate Professor, Department of English, G.R.D. College of Science and Commerce, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

### **Abstract**

Shashi Deshpande is basically concerned with the theme of human relationships in general, and husband-wife relationships in particular. She has dealt graphically with problems that confront a middle class educated woman in the patriarchal Hindu society. But here is not the radical and militant kind of feminism which sees the male as the matrix of all menace. Woman is denied a place and status equal to her male-counterparts. She is an Indian feminist, whose novels are rooted in Indian soil and context. She is not happy with the middle – class Indian women, who are pathetic and tragic lot. She has raised her voice of protest against the patriarchal attitude towards women in a contemporary male-centric society. This paper attempts to define Shashi

Deshpande's work *Roots and Shadows* as feministic discourse in the female world and a story of strained marital relationships.

### **Keywords**

Shashi Deshpande; *Roots and Shadows*; Marital Relationships.

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The novel *Roots and Shadows* projects the inner world and thoughts of Indu. She is a revolutionary woman. She is seen to be acting against dominance right from her childhood at her ancestral home. She hates obedience and passivity. After the death of her mother, she was brought up by her aunts as her father left home. According to Simone De Beauvoir, the relation of a man to a woman is the most natural relation of a human being to another human being.

As a human being in Indian society, woman is made to submit herself to the authority of a man- father, husband, brother or son. She is treated as a commodity and property which can be owned, controlled and disposed of by her male counterpart. Woman does not want her to be treated as a private property or a breeding machine.

A woman is caught in the trap of gender-discrimination before her marriage and that of marriage after her marriage. Marriage plays the role of a social institution in the life of an Indian woman. Because getting a husband is one of the most important undertakings for her social dignity, which frees from her restraints and restrictions imposed on her parental home in the name of gender-distinction. But after her wedding, she hands herself over to a new master, her husband. It is a turning point in the life of a woman. She accepts marriage and the role of a wife with a hope of winning her freedom and asserting her individuality. However, the tragedy lies in the fact that she sets herself free from one cage only to be caught in another. Unfortunately, she has been an obstacle in her way of being a free and independent individual. This

clearly highlights a woman's sexual hunger. She feels utterly humiliated at the thought of being used as an object. This is her unavoidable tragedy.

The very womanhood seems to be a kind of shame, a kind of curse for a woman. A woman, to a large extent has been her own enemy; she herself has been responsible for her own tragedy. She does not allow herself to develop in Indian patriarchy. Joan Gallos remarks:

Development for men has meant increased autonomy and separation from others as a means of strengthening identity, empowering the self, starting a satisfactory life course . . . for women, attachments and relationships play a central role in both identity formation and concepts of development maturity . . . coloring how women see themselves, their lives, their careers and their ongoing responsibility to those around them. (Gallos 32)

A woman herself is an architect of her own destiny. It is necessary for the woman to use the strength of her mind, her potential to deal with her pain, agony and anguish. Though caught in the trap of gender-distinction, she has to be her own support and guardian. Stoller defines gender identity:

Gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even as a man who fantasies being a woman. (42)

Marriage even today has retained its traditional form in one way or the other. It is of greater benefit to a woman than to a man. For her, it is the only means of her integration into her community. However, it is also the beginning of her greater sacrifices in the form of her name, person, self, identity, freedom, dreams and aspirations. She, as we find in the case of Padmini, in *Roots and Shadows*, is more eager for it than a man, because she considers marriage a

passport of complete happiness and freedom. But she comes to her senses when she realizes that it is something that enslaves her. Simone de Beauvoir writes: “The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness – there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness – but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine” (Beauvoir 496). She is thought to be incapable of making her living on her own. She is trained to prefer marriage to a career, and to accept her husband who, as per conventions and traditions, is above her in each and every respect.

Deshpande is essentially concerned about the issues and problems related to marital relationships. She attempts to find out basic causes responsible for the unhappy and failed marriages. The tragedy of marriage, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is that it mutilates the woman and dooms her to repetition and routine, and that

It is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim. Just as he wants her to be at once warm and cool in bed, he requires her to be wholly his and yet no burden; he wishes her to establish in a fixed place on earth and to leave him free, to assume the monotonous daily round and not to bore him, to be always at hand and never importunate; he wants to have her all to himself and not to belong to her; to live as one of a couple and to remain alone. Thus she is betrayed from the day he marries her. (Beauvoir 496)

Nature has really played a trick on women by making them tolerate everything in the name of gender-distinction and marriage. It has also played a trick on them by making them to seek pleasure only through men. It is but natural for her to aspire for natural companionship, physical, mental and emotional satisfaction, social status and respect and also material comforts, but she is far away from the realization of her dreams and aspirations.

*Roots and Shadows* is an exploration of Indu's urge for the realization of her inner self, the assertion of her individuality and liberty with reference to her relationship with Jayant, her husband, and the members of her ancestral family. Being a girl child, she was taught to be meek, obedient, docile, submissive and unquestioning in her childhood. Suppressed in Indian patriarchy, Indu, the protagonist of the novel, rebels against Akka, the head of a matriarchal family, who represents age-old and orthodox beliefs and conventions, and marries Jayant, a man from different caste, but of her own choice, with the hope to escape from her caged existence in her conventional and orthodox ancestral family with its rigid values and beliefs. In her quest for freedom and happiness, she leaves her parental home with a very simple dream that her marriage would help her to realize her need to belong, to be wanted, to be needed, and to be loved. She seeks marriage as an alternative to the restrictions imposed on her in the name of gender-distinction in her ancestral family.

After her marriage, she surrenders and submits herself whole-heartedly to her husband in the name of love. In marrying Jayant, she initially feels that she enters into an independent and free world of her dreams. She feels:

I had thought I had found my alter ego in Jayant. I had felt that in marrying him, I had become complete. I had felt incomplete, not as a woman, but as a person. And in Jayant, I had thought I had found the other part of my whole self, not only that but total understanding, perfect communication. And then, I had realized this was an illusion. I had felt cheated. (Deshpande 114-115).

But very soon, in the absence of a perfect understanding between them, she realizes that her husband is a typical Indian husband and he wants her to live according to his views and ideas, dreams and aspirations. She feels deceived and disillusioned in her marital life. She begins to taste the bitter fruits of marriage, a trap. She strongly believes: "Behind the façade of romanticism,

sentiment and tradition, what was marriage, after all, but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue” (Deshpande 3).

Indu and her life moves around her husband. She has killed her feelings, emotions, dreams and aspirations, and even her ambition of being a creative writer. She changes, shapes and moulds herself according to her husband’s desires and needs. She faces her husband and her marital life silently. She learns that ‘silence’ and ‘submissiveness’ are the gifts of marriage. Jayant, a practical, authoritative, and dominating male, not only suppresses the female voice of expression in his wife, but makes her life dull and mechanical. The woman in Indu can neither express herself nor choose for herself on her own. She can neither love nor hate but pretend to be happy. Her marriage strengthens her capacity for pretence and deceptions. She knows that she can shatter her husband with withdrawals and rejections. But she hides her emotions and pretends to be pleasant. Though, she prefers detachment, she never gets what she wants. She puts on a mask of a meek and submissive wife. She says:

But my marriage had taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see, to say to him nothing but what he wanted to hear. I hid my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage. (Deshpande 38)

Indu contemptuously calls every Indian woman as a martyr, a heroine, just a stupid fool carrying a world of darkness in herself, a pure female animal, a subordinate creature of a new world filled with ignorance, prejudice and superstition, or a typical breed only interested in getting married, bearing children, having sons and then grandchildren. She is not the only woman who suffers a lot in her marital life. Vithal’s mother is a meek, silent and suffering

wife who has been a victim of the sadistic anger of her husband. Indu learns from Old Uncle:

Vithal's father . . . a grim man who rarely spoke and never smiled, there was a streak of cruelty in him that came out in his relations with his meek, silent wife. The boy, as a child, had been a frequent spectator of scenes in which the father had worked out his sadistic anger on the mother for the merest trifles. (Deshpande 138)

Unable to bear physical cruelty and mental torture, she leaves her marital home, her husband and son.

Indu is terribly shocked to hear the tragic and pathetic story of Akka's marital life. She remembers what Atya said:

She was just twelve when she got married. And he was well past thirty . . . Six months after her marriage, she 'grew up' and went to her husband's home. What she had to endure there, no one knows. She never told anyone . . . But I heard that twice she tried to run away . . . a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days, and starved her as well, and then, sent her back to her husband's room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, 'Lock me up again, lock me up'. But there was no escape from a husband then . . . He had a weakness for women . . . And Akka could never give birth to a living child . . . But every time she had a miscarriage, her mother-in-law blamed her for it and made life hell for her". (Deshpande 69-70)

The novel speaks a lot about the tragedy of a married woman due to her physical and sexual harassment, mental torture and exploitation, inhuman and beastlike treatment.

Shashi Deshpande is basically concerned with the theme of human relationships in general, and husband-wife relationships in particular.

According to Deshpande, a woman is trained to play a secondary and inferior role in a man-woman relationship. She is denied a place and status equal to her male-counterpart. Deshpande, an Indian feminist, whose novels are rooted in Indian soil and context, is not happy with middle-class Indian women, who are a pathetic and tragic lot. She has raised her voice of protest against the patriarchal attitude towards women in contemporary male-centric Indian society.

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