

# INTRICATE REALM OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION: EXPOSITION OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVEL ROOTS AND SHADOWS

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## Abstract

Gender equality is a human right that entitles all people, regardless of gender, to live in dignity and freedom. Gender equality is an essential prerequisite for comprehensive development and the alleviation of poverty. Women who are empowered play a crucial role in enhancing the health conditions, educational level, and economic efficiency of entire families and communities. Consequently, this leads to improved possibilities for future generations. The Millennium Development Goal also places significant focus on the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women. The acknowledgment of gender equality and women's empowerment as essential pillars for attaining development outcomes has gained widespread acceptance. This paper aims to examine the status of women empowerment and its determinants in India, specifically focusing on Shashi Deshpande's novel *Roots and Shadows*. The objective is to identify and analyze the key factors contributing to the existing inequalities within the novel, with a particular emphasis on the character of Indu. Indu represents the archetype of educated women who actively engage with society, disregarding restrictive social norms.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, Patriarchy, Social norms, Cultural traditions, Freedom

## Introduction

Men and women are two fundamental constituents of a human civilization. It has been observed that in societies where gender equality is purportedly upheld, women are evidently subjected to a lesser degree of equality compared to males. Gender inequality is prevalent in our nation. During the later stages of the Vedic period, there was a notable deprivation of social and religious privileges experienced by women. Over time, the status of women saw a decline to the point where the birth of a female child came to be perceived as a familial

misfortune. Women experience harassment as a result of religious and socio-cultural traditions. Numerous cultural contexts exhibit diverse frameworks of norms and ideas pertaining to gender, although a universally applicable criterion for masculine or feminine roles remains elusive across all societies. The establishment of a gender system is contingent upon the cultural norms inside a given culture, which in turn shapes the social roles of men and women in relation to one another.

The Indian constitution grants equal rights and advantages to both genders; nonetheless, a significant proportion of women in India continue to have limited access to the rights and opportunities given to them. This phenomenon can be attributed to multiple factors. Several significant issues prevalent in Indian society include poverty, illiteracy, and the patriarchal structure. Gender inequality manifests itself in many ways within various cultural contexts. Gender discrimination continues to persist in India. In the context of Indian society, individuals who were born female at birth encounter many forms of gender discrimination throughout their lives. According to Langston University, the concept of gender equality is inherently interconnected with sustainable development and plays a crucial role in the attainment of universal human rights. The overarching goal of achieving gender equality is to establish a societal framework wherein individuals of all genders have equal access to opportunities, rights, and consensus in all domains of existence. The prevailing issues are poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, societal norms, cultural traditions, social attitudes, and a lack of gender awareness. According to Desai's assertion, the provision of equal chances for women will enable their participation in many professional domains on par with males.

In contemporary times, if a woman experiences a slight delay in her progress, it is not attributable to any personal flaws but rather to the historical influence of traditions that have long suppressed her. Consequently, her own thoughts tend to revolve primarily around familial life, and her immediate surroundings do not offer conducive circumstances for her engagement in external endeavours. This article offers a comprehensive overview of Feminist English literature, focusing specifically on Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows*, the debut novel, explores the introspective realm and perspectives of the protagonist, Indu. She has extremist tendencies. Since her early years, Indu had observed the subordinate position that women had inside the family structure.

Deshpande's primary focus lies on the woman, expressing concern and sympathy for her. The author skilfully exposes the challenges faced by women in their pursuit of self-respect and self-identity, shedding light on the various forms of oppression, particularly physical oppression, prevalent in our culture. This literary work provides a narrative of a female protagonist's search to uncover solutions to issues that possess near-universal significance. The work explores the protagonist's endeavour to declare her own autonomy and achieve her liberation.

The central character, Indu, finds herself entangled in a dilemma that arises from the juxtaposition of her familial obligations and her professional pursuits, as well as the tension between her own aspirations and societal expectations. Indu, the journalist, finds herself caught in a dilemma between the need for self-expression and the potential repercussions imposed by societal norms and expectations. The bulk of characters depicted in the novel had limited conceptions of cultural identity, which therefore impede their ability to envision and comprehend political transformations. This work explores the process by which Indu liberates herself from the oppressive confines of traditional norms and attains her personal autonomy. Indu encounters challenges in her pursuit of emotional development, tranquillity, and satisfaction. To progress in this endeavour, she must engage in introspection and exploration, both internally and outside. This process involves not only seeking solutions but also, as a first measure, discerning the origins of her discontentment and psychological unrest. Achieving inner peace and harmony with one's surroundings is contingent upon this condition being met. She states: "Now I felt clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary, uneven edges off myself" (6). Likewise, her conviction persists that the demolition of the home would not extinguish the sentiments, emotions, and fervour that have found refuge within its walls. Despite facing many challenges from diverse sources, these elements of the family would continue to maintain their influence over her.

The quest undertaken by Indu to find a suitable dwelling serves as a symbolic representation of a more profound discontentment inside her marital relationship. The individual harbours deep affection for Jayant, perceiving this emotional connection as an act of complete submission, encompassing both physical and spiritual aspects. Nevertheless, the individual has the belief that Jayant's level of commitment to the relationship is not equivalent to her own. Understandably, she identifies Jayant's indifference as the primary cause of her feelings of uneasiness and discomfort. In addition to this, there is also the matter of expectations. The individual observes that if she does not make an effort to validate the

specific self-image that Jayant unconsciously anticipates her to provide, she inadvertently generates unease and perhaps distances him. This is apparent based on her acquisition of the ability to present a lovely and happily accommodating demeanour towards Jayant. This is further demonstrated by her ability to effectively conceal her emotions, ideas, and personal identity from Jayant. The character of Jayant in the narrative serves as a representation of the societal pressures and unconscious assumptions that are imposed on women, particularly within the context of marriage.

Amar Nath Prasad acknowledges Deshpande for her adept depiction of refined feminine sensibility, as expressed in the following statement:

“Her marathon struggle against the negative forces often engendered by the ruthless and sapless patriarchy; her emerging new ideas and views against the age-old norms of society, her unfettered growth and maternity of personality ever amidst the dominance of conservatism; and herself introspection for a life of reconciliation to make the life perfect and beautiful will always be remembered in the portrayal of characters in the fictions of Indian novelists in English.” (10-11)  
(Prasad)

Deshpande demonstrates her recognition of the prevailing societal tendency to attribute blame only to women in matters of expectations, while refraining from making any major or negative remarks about males, despite their apathy and detachment. Nevertheless, Indu acknowledges that Jayant, despite appearing emotionally detached, lacks the resilience to handle her entire disengagement from him with composure. However, despite Indu's inclination towards rebellion and inquiry during her formative years, her reflection reveals her inclination to adhere to societal expectations of the ideal bride. The explanations she presents may vary, however it is also plausible that they may not diverge significantly. The protagonist experiences a disconcerting revelation, expressing her desire to avoid becoming a woman who loses her individuality within the context of her marriage. In terms of her expectations for Jayant, the primary expectation is on the desire for him to cultivate a capacity for reciprocity comparable to that demonstrated by Indu. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the possibility that her spouse may just lack the ability to provide such a level of affection, although he does express his love for her in his own manner.

There have been other occurrences that have resulted in a temporary suspension of their relationship, particularly from Indu's perspective. One of the most significant elements is to his seeming act of betrayal during her career turmoil. The individual in question expresses her willingness to tender her resignation from the magazine upon realizing that her contributions do not have substantial significance. Rather than engaging in important work, she finds herself inadvertently repeating the self-serving falsehoods propagated by several prominent individuals. This becomes the fundamental basis of her discontentment with her professional trajectory as well. The lack of significant engagement in her activities has started to evoke a sense of discontent in her subconscious mind. However, Jayant lacks an understanding of the nuanced nature of her predicament and, in contrast, advises her to persist with her employment. Moreover, it is imperative to consider the significant matter of fostering a family unit that includes children. It is evident that Jayant has a lack of desire in procreating, as evidenced by their consistent deferral of discussions pertaining to this matter on the grounds of inadequate means to provide optimal care for a kid. Indu exhibits ambivalence towards the specific problem at hand, as she frequently has apprehension over the potential responsibilities that would be placed upon her in such a situation. Additionally, she harbors a sense of discontent, albeit somewhat indistinct, with the notion of being childless.

The transformation of Indian women from being revered as 'pativratas' to their present state reflects a significant shift in their societal roles and identities. The individual possesses an understanding of the internal moral compass, the pursuit of personal growth, the formation of one's sense of self, the recognition of one's uniqueness, and the comprehension of one's position and responsibilities within both the familial and societal contexts. She has adopted a novel persona, that of a seeker on a quest. The novel concludes on a hopeful tone as Indu expresses her intention to reconcile with her spouse and embraces a newfound sense of self-awareness. Deshpande's female heroines demonstrate a strong reliance on the act of returning. The conclusion of *Shadows* presents a reaffirmation of Indu's distinctiveness as an individual. Deshpande employs the metaphor of a tree to convey the idea that Indu has acquired the ability to perceive her existence as a source of potential development and elegance, as well as a deeper understanding of life's significance. Based on a thorough understanding of the situation, Indu makes the decision to reconcile with Jayant. Indu has encountered her authentic identity and has gained an understanding of her origins.

“She need not be ashamed of her body and sexual needs; she has to decide what her job will be; she is capable of taking decisions not only for herself but for others too, and life does not come to an end with individuals, be it Indu or Jayant.” (My Life is My Own, 47)

The advent of contemporary Indian society has witnessed the introduction of new notions such as Western education and financial autonomy, which have had a significant impact on traditional Indian culture and social norms, particularly for women in the contemporary era. Indu, who possessed a high level of education, entered into an intercaste marriage with Jayant. Indu continues to experience a sense of disturbance and articulates her feelings of solitude with the following statement:

“This is my real sorrow that I can never complete in myself until I had met Jayant, I had not known it...that was somewhere outside me, a part of me without which I remained incomplete. Then I met Jayant and lost the ability to be alone.” (34)

Similar to her mother, she becomes estranged from her family in order to question and reject the conventional practise of arranged marriages. Indu possesses a notable aptitude for writing, which manifests in her loud opposition to social capture. However, Jayant fails to acknowledge and appreciate her artistic prowess. He shatters her aspirations for tranquilly and contentment. She desires to construct a portrayal of the contemporary woman who has emancipated herself from the enslavement of patriarchal systems. The individual aspires to attain a state of detachment, yet is unexpectedly confronted with many connections and attachments. The individual's cognitive processes are divided between two contrasting states. On one side, there is a strong emotional attachment to her dwelling, which has become an integral aspect of her existence. On the other hand, she has a sense of confinement akin to that of an imprisoned individual.

## Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande's primary focus revolves around portraying the distress and discord experienced by contemporary, educated Indian women who find themselves entangled between patriarchal norms and traditional values, juxtaposed with their desire for self-expression, uniqueness, and autonomy. The author's literary work *Roots and Shadows* delves on the pursuit of self-actualization by women, beyond their conventional societal roles as

daughters, wives, and mothers. The author has conducted an analysis of some prevalent internal crises that incite the pursuit of peace and stability. Additionally, her gender affords her the opportunity to examine the feminine mind from multiple perspectives.

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